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Preface for Users of Global Medieval Life and Culture

Two concepts have dominated the twenty-first century: globalization and the information explosion facilitated by the Internet. When we decided to present a new history of the medieval world—also called the Middle Ages—we knew these modern principles could help guide us to new insights into the past. In these volumes, globalization shapes the content that we have chosen to cover, and the electronic age has guided our organization. In addition, the features are carefully considered to make these volumes engaging and pedagogically useful.

Global Content

The medieval age was a European concept. From about the fourteenth century, Europeans defined the 1,000 years from the fall of the Roman Empire to the Renaissance as the “middle,” separating the classical world from the “modern” one. Practically from the time of this designation, scholars have argued about whether this periodization makes sense, but scholarly arguments have not substantially changed the designation. Textbooks and curricula have kept the period as a separate entity, and we study the medieval world that extends from about 400 to 1400 C.E. with undiminished fascination.

Scholars of medieval Europe have shown that, during this formative period, many of the ideas and institutions developed that shape our modern world. The rise of democratic institutions, a prosperous middle class, and a vibrant Christianity are just a few of the developments that marked medieval Europe. These are some of the reasons that have kept the field of study vibrant. But what of the world?

Scholarship has disproved the Eurocentric analysis that defined the period of the Middle Ages. Exciting innovations took place all over the world during this pivotal millennium. Religious movements such as the rise of Islam and the spread of Buddhism irrevocably shaped much of the world, innovations in transportation allowed people to settle islands throughout the Pacific, and agricultural improvements stimulated empires in South America.

Furthermore, these societies did not develop in isolation. Most people remember Marco Polo’s visit to the China of the Yuan Dynasty, but his voyage was not an exception. People, goods, and ideas spread all across the Eurasian land mass and down into Africa. This encyclopedia traces the global connections that fueled the worldwide developments of the Middle Ages.
To emphasize the global quality of this reference work, we have organized the volumes by regions. Volume 1 covers Europe and the Americas. We begin with Europe because this was the region that first defined the medieval world. At first glance, linking Europe with the Americas (which were not colonized until after the Middle Ages) might seem to join the most disparate of regions. However, we do so to remind us that Vikings crossed the North Atlantic in the Middle Ages to discover this rich new land, which was already inhabited by prosperous indigenous peoples. The organization of this first volume demonstrates that Europe never developed in isolation!

Volume 2 considers the Middle East and Africa. These regions saw the growth of Islam and the vibrant interactions that took place in the diverse continent of Africa. Volume 3 takes on the enormous task of focusing on South Asia, East Asia, and Oceania.

This organization forces us to compromise on some content. Because we are not taking a chronological approach, we must collapse 1,000 years of history in regions that had many diverse developments. We partially address this issue in the Historical Overviews at the beginning of each section. These essays will point readers to the varied historical events of the regions.

However, we gain modern insights through our on Global Ties essays within each section. These essays offer a great contrast with other medieval works because they show the significance of global connections throughout this millennium. Readers will learn that globalization was not invented in the twenty-first century. Indeed, the great developments of the past flourished because people from diverse cultures communicated with each other. Perhaps this was the greatest contribution of the Middle Ages, and this encyclopedia highlights it.

### Organization for the Internet Age

The Internet brings an astonishing amount of information to us with a quick search. If we Google Marco Polo, castles, or windmills, we are given an immediate array of information more quickly than we could have imagined a mere decade ago. However, as teachers too readily realize when reading the results of such searches, this is not enough. The very volume of information sometimes makes it hard to see how these disparate elements of the past fit together and how they compare with other elements. We have organized this encyclopedia to address these issues.

Each volume contains two or three regions of the world, and each region includes seven in-depth essays that cover the following topics:

1. Historical Overview
2. Religion
3. Economy
4. The Arts
5. Society
6. Science and Technology
7. Global Ties

These essays provide coherent descriptions of each part of the world. They allow readers readily to compare developments in different regions, so one can
really understand how the economy in Africa differed from mercantile patterns in China. In-depth essays like this not only provide clear information but model historical writing. But there is more.

Like other good encyclopedias, we have A–Z entries offering in-depth information on many topics—from the general (food, money, law) to the specific (people, events, and places). All the essays indicate the A–Z entries in bold, much as an online essay might have hyperlinks to more detailed information, so readers can immediately see what topics offer more in-depth information and how each fits in with the larger narrative. In the same way, readers who begin with the A–Z entries know that they can see how their topic fits in a larger picture by consulting the in-depth essays. Finally, this integration of essays with A–Z entries provides an easy way to do cross-cultural comparisons. Readers can compare roles of women in Islam and Asia, then see how women fit in the larger context of society by consulting the two larger essays.

This is a reference work that builds on the rapid information accessible online while doing what books do best: offer a thoughtful integration of knowledge. We have enhanced what we hope is a useful organization by adding a number of special features designed to help the readers learn as much as possible about the medieval millennium.

**Features**

- **Primary Documents.** In this information age it is easy to forget that historians find out about the past primarily by reading the written voices left by the ancients. To keep this recognition of the interpretive nature of the past, we have included primary documents for all regions of the world. These short works are designed to engage readers by bringing the past to life, and all have head notes and cross-references to help readers put the documents in context.
- **Chronologies.** The chronologies will help readers quickly identify key events in a particular region during the medieval period.
- **Maps.** History and geography are inextricably linked, and no more so than in a global encyclopedia. The maps throughout the text will help readers locate the medieval world in space as well as time.
- **Illustrations.** All the illustrations are chosen to be historical evidence not ornamentation. All are drawn from medieval sources to show the Middle Ages as the people at the time saw themselves. The captions encourage readers to analyze the content of the images.
- **Complete Index.** The key to gathering information in the twenty-first century is the ability to rapidly locate topics of interest. We have recognized this with the A–Z entries linked to the essays and the extensive cross-referencing. However, nothing can replace a good index, so we have made sure there is a complete and cumulative index that links the information among the volumes.
- **Bibliographies.** Each of the long essays contains a list of recommended readings. These readings will not only offer more information to those interested in following up on the topic but also will serve as further information for the A–Z entries highlighted within the essays. This approach furthers our desire to integrate the information we are presenting.
- **Appendices.** The appendixes provide basic factual information, such as important regional dynasties or time period designations.
The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Global Medieval Life and Culture has been a satisfying project to present. In over 30 years of research and study of the Middle Ages, we have never lost the thrill of exploring a culture that’s so different from our own, yet was formative in creating who we have become. Furthermore, we are delighted to present this age in its global context, because then as now (indeed throughout history) globalization has shaped the growth of culture. In this information age, it is good to remember that we have always lived linked together on spaceship earth. We all hope readers will share our enthusiasm for this millennium.
EUROPE

Joyce E. Salisbury
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### Chronology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>476</td>
<td>Overthrow of Romulus Augustus, last Roman emperor in the West; this is the traditional date for the fall of the western Roman Empire</td>
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<tr>
<td>485–511</td>
<td>Clovis, king of the Franks, converts to Christianity, thereby establishing a long-standing alliance between the Frankish kings and the popes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>527–565</td>
<td>Justinian and Theodora rule the Byzantine Empire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>711</td>
<td>Muslims conquer most of the Iberian Peninsula</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>732</td>
<td>Battle of Tours is fought in what is today southwestern France—the Frankish leader Charles Martel halts the expansion of Islam into western Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>768–814</td>
<td>Charlemagne, the king of the Franks and (after 800) emperor of the Romans, politically unites western Europe for the first time since the fall of the western Roman Empire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 790</td>
<td>Viking raiders from Scandinavia begin raids on northern and western Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>800</td>
<td>Frankish king Charlemagne is crowned emperor of the Romans by Pope Leo III in Rome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 830</td>
<td>Vikings found settlements in Kiev, which will later become the state of Russia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>843</td>
<td>Treaty of Verdun divides Charlemagne’s kingdom among his grandsons and roughly establishes the early divisions of Europe into France, Germany, and Italy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 858–867</td>
<td>Cyril and Methodius make missionary journeys northward from Byzantium to convert the Slavs of eastern Europe; their efforts result in creation of the Cyrillic alphabet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>886</td>
<td>Viking seize control of portions of northern and eastern England, establishing there the “Danelaw”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>988</td>
<td>Kievan Rus, descendents of Vikings, convert to Christianity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1016</td>
<td>Canute, king of Norway, Denmark, and England, converts to Christianity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1054</td>
<td>Schism (split) in the Christian Church establishes the Roman Catholic Church in the West and the Greek Orthodox Church in the East</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1066</td>
<td>William, duke of Normandy, conquers England, thereby establishing a French/Norman dynasty in England; this is the last time England is conquered by foreign invaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1071</td>
<td>Byzantine emperor calls for help from the rulers of western Europe following the disastrous defeat of a Byzantine army by the Turks at Manzikert</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1081–1115 Reign of Byzantine Emperor Alexius I Comnenus
1095 Pope Urban II calls First Crusade to recover Jerusalem from the Turks
1099 Crusaders capture Jerusalem and establish the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem
1145–1149 Second Crusade, led by Louis VII of France and Conrad III of Germany, is unsuccessful, leading eventually to the fall of Jerusalem
1171 Muslim ruler Saladin conquers Egypt, thus threatening the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem and leading to calls in Europe for a new Crusade
1187 Saladin defeats the Franks at the Battle of Hattin and reconquers Jerusalem for Islam
1189–1192 Third Crusade, known as the Kings’ Crusade because it was led by Richard I of England and Philip II of France, tries unsuccessfully to wrest Jerusalem from Saladin
1204 City of Constantinople is sacked by Crusaders
1215 King John is forced by his barons to sign Magna Carta, the document that establishes that kings of England are not above the law
1237–1241 Mongols conquer Russia
1254–1324 Venetian traders Marco Polo and his family visit the Mongol court in China to trade
1261 Constantinople is retaken from Crusaders by Byzantines
1304–1374 Life of Petrarch, the first great thinker of the Italian Renaissance
1337–1453 Hundred Years’ War is fought between France and England; the intermittent warfare draws in other European states and helps to bring about the eventual end of the medieval feudal order
1348–1350 Outbreak of the bubonic plague, known as the Black Death, claims one-third to one-half of the population of Europe
1360 Treaty of Bretigny temporarily halts the Hundred Years’ War by granting Edward III the French province of Gascony in full sovereignty in return for his renunciation of the French Crown
1367 Plague erupts again in Europe though is less violent than outbreak of 1348–1350
1369 Hundred Years’ War resumes with the French regaining most of the territory lost earlier in the war by 1380
1389–1415 Although no formal peace is made, a series of truces temporarily ends the Hundred Years’ War
1399 Henry IV overthrows his cousin Richard II as king of England
1415 Henry V of England revives the Hundred Years’ War by invading France and winning a major victory at the Battle of Agincourt
1417 Council of Constance ends a papal schism that had existed since 1378 and had seen as many as three popes in existence at one time; the papacy now moves back to Rome
1420 Treaty of Troyes technically ends the war between France and England by recognizing Henry V as heir to Charles VI of France; because Charles’s son, the future Charles VII, continues to press his claim to the French throne, the war
continues; Henry V seals the treaty by marrying Catherine of Valois, daughter
of Charles VI
1422 Death of Henry V passes the throne of England and France on to his infant son,
Henry VI
1429 Emergence of Joan of Arc, a 19-year-old girl who rallies the French forces to
break the English siege of Orleans and thus make possible the coronation of
Charles VII as king of France, achievements that turn the tide of the Hundred
Years’ War and lead to an eventual French victory
1430 Joan of Arc is captured by the Burgundians and sold to the English
1431 Joan of Arc is burned to death by the English in Rouen, France, for witchcraft
and heresy; Charles VII of France makes no attempt to free her
1453 Ottoman conquest of Constantinople ends the Byzantine Empire and making
possible future Muslim penetration into southeastern Europe; like his French
grandfather Charles VI, Henry VI of England suffers periods of insanity
1455 Wars of the Roses, a dispute over the Crown between two branches of the
English royal family, begins with the Battle of St. Albans
1461 Edward IV of York supplants Henry VI of Lancaster on the English throne
1470–1471 Henry VI is restored to the English throne
1470 Ferdinand of Aragon and his wife Isabella of Castile become joint rulers of
Spain
1471 Edward IV resumes the English throne; Henry VI is murdered in the Tower of
London
1483 Richard III deposes his nephew Edward V and assumes the English throne;
Edward and his younger brother are presumed murdered by their uncle
1485 Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond, defeats and kills Richard III at the Battle of
Bosworth Field; Richmond becomes Henry VII, first king of the House of
Tudor
1492 Ferdinand and Isabella conquer Granada, the last Muslim kingdom in Spain;
Christopher Columbus sets sail from Spain; Ferdinand and Isabella expel the
Jews from Spain
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Europe and the Mediterranean, c. 1200
The Crusades, 1096–1204 (borders shown c. 1200)
The Crusades, 1218–1270 (borders shown c. 1200)
Vikings in the North, A.D. 985–c. 1020
Spread of the Bubonic Plague, 1346–53
Europe, c. 1300
France during the Hundred Years War, c. 1429
Overview and Topical Essays

1. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Once there was a time when philosophers actually did debate how many angels could dance on a head of a pin or whether the bodies of cannibals would arise on judgment day. Once biology "texts"—bestiaries—included fabulous creatures such as manticores and unicorns. During this period, called the "Middle Ages," people looked at the world very differently from today, yet during this age people planted the seeds of many of our modern institutions and ideas.

The "Middle Ages" or "medieval period" extends 1,000 years from about 400 to about 1400 C.E. This long period was first identified by thinkers in Renaissance Italy in about 1300, who believed they had developed an approach to study that would recreate the accomplishments of ancient Greece and Rome. Renaissance means "rebirth," and these "humanists" were sure their approach was significantly different from that which had gone before. Therefore, they dismissed the years intervening between the Greco/Roman civilization and their own "reborn" culture as a wasted dead end in the "middle" of these two great civilizations. It was this same dismissive attitude that caused many to discount the medieval period as the "Dark Ages," in which knowledge and accomplishments were overshadowed by violence and ignorance.

Since the Renaissance, historians have reconsidered this analysis and found it wrong. The 1,000 years between the fall of the Roman Empire and the Renaissance were stunningly vibrant in all fields: Artists and architects created beautiful and complex cathedrals, technological advances transformed ancient methods of work, innovative social institutions were developed, and sophisticated religious ideas and institutions spread. The appellation Dark Ages began to recede from usage—first to apply only to the few centuries right after the fall of Rome then not to be relevant at all. Even more recently, historians have recognized that western Europe—the geographical location that first gained the designation "Middle Ages"—was never that isolated from the rest of the world. This global view shapes current understandings (and the structure of this encyclopedia).

This essay will give the historical overview of the events that dominated Europe during this millennium and will serve as a background for the other essays and entries of this volume. Before I begin, however, I should say a few words about the rather arbitrary dates that frame the medieval period. The starting point is the fall of the Roman Empire in the West, but there is no
consensus on what date that is because there was no definitive fall, only a slow transformation revealed only by historical hindsight. During the fourth century, the empire was split into East and West, and converted to Christianity, yielding one set of changes. During the seventh century, Islam divided the Mediterranean world marking another dramatic turning point. In fact, many historians prefer to set out these few centuries—from about the fourth through the seventh—by the designation “late antique,” emphasizing the continuity from the ancient world. Most historians continue to take 476 C.E. as a date to mark the beginning of the Middle Ages—on this date the last Roman emperor in the West died. This makes a convenient beginning point for our discussion.

The end point of the Middle Ages is even more difficult to identify. The earliest Renaissance thinkers emerged in Florence in early 1300, when most of Europe continued to be dominated by medieval culture. It took centuries for Renaissance ideas to spread northward and change European ideas. A convenient turning date for historians is 1453. This was the year when two pivotal things happened. Constantinople fell to the Turks, ending the Christian empire in the east and definitively launching the age of gunpowder that could demolish the great protective walls that had dominated medieval cities. Second, the Hundred Years’ War between France and England ended, ending the last war between feudal nobles and beginning an era dominated by national armies.

With these rough designations in mind, let us review the main historical events that dominated this medieval millennium. I have divided the essay into the three eras that traditionally mark this period: The early Middle Ages from the fall of the Roman Empire to the year 1000, the expansionist high point from 1000 to 1300, and the late medieval decline from about 1300 to about 1450.

The Early Middle Ages

“The harsh nature of war! The malevolent fate of all things! How proud kingdoms fall, suddenly in ruins! Blissful housetops that held up for long ages now lie torched, consumed beneath a huge devastation” (Radegund, 95). This poem by a sixth-century German nun named Radegund poignantly captures the violence of the early Middle Ages. Here she describes the invasion of her homeland by another Germanic leader who killed her family and forced her to marry him. Violence marked the birth of this new culture we know as medieval.

The Middle Ages began as Germanic tribes in the north and east of Europe invaded the western part of the Roman Empire and established kingdoms in the transformed empire. The main kingdoms included the Anglo-Saxon ones in Britain, the Visigothic in Spain, the Ostrogothic (and later Lombard) in Italy, and the Franks in Gaul (France and southern Germany.) All the kingdoms struggled with similar problems: How would they blend the Christian, Roman, and Germanic cultures of their territories? How would they bring order and law to the violent clans that inhabited their lands? How would they establish centralized monarchies with people who were used to decentralized control? The experience of Radegund reveals the warfare and general violence that accompanied all these struggles.

During the turbulent period between about 400 and 800, Germanic tribes settled in regions already inhabited by Christian Romans. For example, the Visigoths in Spain took over about one-third of the estates of the Romans leaving
the others intact. The Germans also tended to stay away from cities, leaving them to be run by Christian Roman leaders. Nevertheless, such distribution left many problems unresolved. The first was differing religions: Most of the Germanic tribes—such as the Vandals, Visigoths, and Ostrogoths—were Arian Christians, who held on to their own versions of scripture as they established their own churches and worship. The Ostrogothic king Theodoric established a tolerant coexistence between Arians and Catholics, while the Vandals on the other extreme persecuted Catholics fiercely. The resolution of religious differences only came about as Arian Germans slowly converted to Catholic Christianity.

German rulers also faced problems governing peoples with differing traditions of law. Romans were used to written law codes with a long tradition of jurisprudence, while tribes had their own traditions of Germanic law based on oral traditions of the clans. In the early Middle Ages, German kings began to record their own law codes and medieval law arose as a combination of Roman and Germanic.

The first truly successful synthesis between Roman, German, and Christian cultures came about in Gaul, in the kingdom of the Franks. The first important Frankish king was Clovis of the Merovingian family. Clovis ruthlessly united many of the clans and recognized the importance of the Catholic Church as a unifying force. He converted to Christianity and began a long-standing alliance between Franks and the popes in Italy. Clovis’s ruthless son Clothar had caused the destruction that Radegund had so lamented. The Merovingian dynasty lasted 200 years, but during that time real power lay in the hands of the “mayor of the palace”—a sort of prime minister who ran the kingdom in the name of the king. By the beginning of the eighth century, one family—the Carolingians—dominated the office of Mayor of the Palace. A new dynasty was in the making.

The most famous of the early Carolingians was Charles Martel (called “the Hammer” for his military exploits). Charles Martel led the victorious force against the Muslims who had crossed the Pyrenees into the Frankish kingdom in 732. After this great victory, the Carolingians were well placed to expand their influence. Charles Martel’s son, Pepin the Short, received the endorsement of the pope to take the title of king of the Franks, and the Carolingian dynasty began.

The greatest of the Carolingians was Charlemagne (Charles the Great). Charlemagne represented the high point of the early Middle Ages. He conquered neighboring tribes and united all of northern Europe into an empire. He was crowned emperor of the Franks in Rome, which once again established an emperor in the West and created a precedent of a Holy Roman Emperor that would last until World War I. He fostered learning to such a degree that his reign has been called the “Carolingian Renaissance.” It appeared that all the problems created by the early Germanic invasions had been resolved and that Europe was unified.

In England, a comparable king arose who was able to unify the kingdoms of that island. Alfred the Great (r. 871–901) is the only English king who has been called “The Great” in memory of his military victories and his support of learning and culture in his realm. However, these victories of relative peace and scholarship were not to last.

Charlemagne’s grandsons engaged in civil war and ended up dividing the great empire into three kingdoms: roughly, France, Germany, and Italy. Furthermore, the kingdoms confronted pressure from new invaders: Muslims from the south attacked coastal areas, Magyars (Hungarians) from the East
swept into the European plains, and most serious, Scandinavian Vikings from
the north raided and established their own kingdoms in England, Normandy
in France, Sicily, and Russia. Decentralization and violence once again de-
cended on northern Europe. Only the structures of manorialism kept the
farmlands producing, and feudal law linked fighting men in bonds of loyalty.

During the early Middle Ages, the eastern part of the old Roman empire,
called the “Byzantine Empire,” escaped much of the destruction. The great wall
that surrounded the city of Byzantium kept invaders at bay, and in the fifth cen-
tury, inhabitants of the city watched from the safety of their wall as smoke rose
from villages set aflame by the Germanic tribes and Huns surging westward.

The rulers of the Byzantine Empire considered themselves the heirs to the
Roman Empire, so they continued to rule by Roman law, and indeed, the Em-
peror Justinian in the sixth century ordered a famous codification of Roman
law—the Corpus Iuris Civilis (The Body of Civil Law)—compiled. In this form,
Roman law survived and was revived in western Europe. The rulers were
Christian, and the emperors took an active role in leading the church through
controversies concerning doctrine and policies.

At the same time, the Byzantine Empire took a different direction from the
western kingdoms. The emperors and administration began to use Greek as
the official language (instead of Latin as in the West), and this served to split
the two sides of the Mediterranean into two cultural entities. The two branches
of the Christian church also began to separate: The emperors continued to exert
leadership over the Greek-speaking Eastern Church, while popes in the West
claimed religious sovereignty. These religious separations led to controversy
that finally caused the two branches to split in 1054—from then on the Christian
world was split into the Catholic West and the Greek Orthodox East.

In spite of pressure from the Islamic lands that surrounded it, the ninth-
century Byzantine Empire entered into its “Golden Age.” The imperial gov-
ernment was centralized and ordered, trade enriched the courtly coffers and
the Orthodox Church expanded. On its northern borders, the Byzantine Em-
pire faced tribes of Slavs—Serbs, Coats, Avars, Bulgars, and so on—who had
settled there. The Orthodox Church sent missionaries—Cyril and Methodius—
north to convert the Slavs, and they were profoundly successful. As part of
their missionary work, they created an alphabet based on Greek letters to re-
cord the Slavic languages, and this “Cyrilic alphabet” (named after the mis-
sionary) remains the alphabet in Russia and many of the other Slavic lands.
The cultural influence of the Byzantine Empire had a lasting impact on the
modern nations in these lands north of the great city.

By the year 1000, the Byzantine Empire in the east and the western king-
doms had completed their transformations into medieval territories. Now,
both were poised for the expansion and new challenges that we have come to
call the High Middle Ages.

**The High Middle Ages**

After the year 1000, medieval society began to expand in all respects. Agricul-
tural advances spurred population growth, and commerce quickened in thriving
cities. Western Europeans expanded eastward establishing new settlements
in the northeast. Intellectual life also flourished with the new prosperity of the
age, and philosophers, poets, and artists created works that still inspire us today (see “Economy,” “The Arts,” and “Science and Technology” sections).

The church, too, grew more centralized, and popes frequently began to exert their authority over secular matters. Church leaders called for crusades against Islam, luring many western Europeans far from their homelands. The church’s growing role in secular life ignited criticism from some people who felt that it had forgotten its true purpose. In the face of such criticism, religious leaders responded by both reforming some church policies and repressing those who complained (see “Religion” section).

While all these expansions took place in economic, religious, intellectual, and social life, kings and nobles struggled to establish political structures that would keep pace with the dynamic changes that were afoot. In Europe, men and women were bound to their superiors in contractual ties that we have come to call a feudal system. As a law issued by a ninth-century French king ruled: “We will that each free man in our kingdom shall choose a lord. . . . We command moreover that no man shall leave his lord” (Cheyney, 18). Such laws bound members of the ruling classes to one another, and other laws bound peasants to their land to serve their lords. These personal ties were intended to bring order to the warlike ruling classes of society, but the system had built-in instabilities because it evolved locally in response to local situations and varied enormously from place to place.

The heart of the feudal system was military service in exchange for land and the peasants to work it. This unit of land was called a “fief,” and noble families, called “vassals,” jealously guarded and tried to expand their fiefs over time, building great defensive castles to maintain their power. By the eleventh century, kings were in a position to try to reestablish control over provinces that had drifted away during the turbulent tenth century, even while nobles tried to maintain and even increase their own power. The conflicts between monarch and aristocrats transformed the political map of Europe.

In England, the establishment of royal control was facilitated in 1066, when William I the Conqueror became king after the Norman Conquest of that land. By conquering the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, William was able to redistribute the land to his vassals and introduce a tight feudal system with a good deal of centralized control. William introduced the Norman dynasty that lasted from 1066 to 1154. Henry I (r. 1100–1135), grandson of William the Conqueror, was an able administrator who further expanded royal control. In 1154, a separate branch of the family introduced the Plantagenet dynasty into England.

Henry II (r. 1154–1189) was the first of the Plantagenets to rule and was a stunningly able administrator, although he was less able to control his unruly family. He further centralized control by careful financial and legal management, and Henry II’s marriage to Eleanor of Aquitaine brought many lands in France under the control of the English kings. John’s (Henry’s son) highhanded treatment of the nobles ended when the nobles forced him to sign the Magna Carta in 1215, which is considered one of the precedents of constitutional law, and reestablished the principle that the kings were not above the law.

Another central institution that arose in medieval England (and to a lesser degree on the continent) was Parliament. The English king Edward I (r. 1272–1307) brought wealthy merchants to his parliamentary council, and this body with its expanded representation was called the “Model Parliament.” Its participants
arranged themselves in two houses—commoners and lords—which would become the basis of the two houses of the modern parliament.

Spanish kings faced a different set of challenges as they slowly sought to establish control over their lands. The central issue for medieval Spain was to reconquer the land from the Muslims who in the early eighth century had taken all but the northwest corner of the Iberian Peninsula. Three kingdoms emerged that slowly led the southward push: Aragon, Castille-Leon, and Navarre. These kingdoms sometimes presented a united front to the Muslims and other times fought each other. In the twelfth century, Portugal emerged as a separate kingdom. In 1085, King Alfonso VI retook the important city in the central plateau, which formed the central capital for the continued Reconquest that dominated the medieval centuries.

The French kings also had a long struggle to establish centralized control over their land. The Carolingian dynasty had died out in France, and in 987, French nobles selected a new, very weak, king to head the land. Hugh Capet, lord of the land surrounding Paris, began the Capetian dynasty that lasted throughout the Middle Ages. Hugh and his descendants slowly worked within the feudal system to reestablish their control over one province at a time. The most famous of the Capetians was Louis IX (r. 1226–1270), the only French king to be named a saint.

By the end of the thirteenth century, the French monarchy was the best governed and wealthiest in Europe. It was a power to be reckoned with, but there were clouds on the horizon. England continued to hold and contest lands in France, and the popes seemed to exert a great deal of power in France. These difficulties would explode in the next century.

The eastern lands of the old Carolingian empire spread from Germany eastward into the Slavic lands. Early in the tenth century, the last direct descendant of Charlemagne died. The German dukes (like their French counterparts) in 919 elected one of their number—Henry of Saxony—to be king. The most powerful of this Saxon dynasty was Otto I (r. 936–973). Otto restored the title of emperor, and from this time forward, an emperor would be proclaimed in German lands. Later this unit would be called the “Holy Roman Empire.” However, it is one thing to claim a far-flung empire and quite another to exert consistent control over it. The Saxon dynasty (sometimes called the “Ottonian dynasty”) and its successors, the Salian dynasty (r. 1024–1125) and the Hohenstaufen dynasty (r. 1138–1268), faced three main challenges: powerful German princes who resisted centralized control, a strong Papacy that wanted sovereignty (see “Religion” section), and the difficulties in ruling Italy and Germany.

Italian city-states had maintained a tradition of sovereignty and urban life from the ancient world. Nobles in the cities successfully pitted emperors and popes against each other as they worked to maintain a level of urban independence that was greater than anywhere else in western Europe. Merchants in these cities grew rich in trade and would come into their own during the Renaissance. In the Middle Ages, however, they ensured that German emperors would not be able to unify their empires.

The rule of the Hohenstaufen emperor Frederick II (r. 1215–1250) effectively ended any chance of a unified German monarchy. Frederick was a brilliant ruler and patron of the arts, who had been raised in Sicily and had come to love the diverse Muslim and Christian cultures that existed in that sunny land.
His policy was to confer upon the German princes and nobility virtual sovereignty within their own territories while he lived and ruled the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies in the south.

After Frederick died, the German princes wanted to preserve the freedoms they had acquired under Frederick and elected a man they considered a weak prince—Rudolph of Habsburg—as emperor. This long-lived dynasty would come into its own during the Renaissance and beyond as it survived as the only medieval dynasty to fall after World War I in the twentieth century. Through the Middle Ages, however, the illusion of the Holy Roman Empire as a political unit persisted more in the minds of people than in an effective unit.

While the West grew and expanded after the beginning of the eleventh century, Byzantium struggled. In the eleventh century, Islam had strengthened and the Byzantine emperors looked to the West for help. Emperor Alexis I Comnenus sent a call for mercenary soldiers, but he got more than he bargained for. This appeal led to the series of crusades that established Western crusader states in the Holy Land and lasted sporadically for 200 years until the Muslims retook the crusader outposts (see “Religion” section). The Fourth Crusade in 1204 took the city of Constantinople itself, and Western Christians raided and killed their Eastern counterparts. Western crusaders held the city until 1261, when the Byzantine rulers reestablished their reign.

However, the Byzantine rulers never really recovered from the looting of Constantinople in 1204. Its territory was continually shrinking, and internal disorders regularly interfered with trade and centralized control. Yet Byzantium’s great walls and the prestige and intellectual achievements of the Byzantine scholars continued to hold disasters at bay until the fifteenth century.

The Fourteenth Century: Disasters in Christendom

By 1300, the expansion of Europe had reached its limit. People had begun to cultivate marginal, less fertile lands, and the agricultural prosperity that had supported the flowering of medieval culture had begun to seem fragile. In 1315, the weather deteriorated, and years of cold, wet summers introduced famine to the land (see “Economy” section). Some years later, in 1348, a plague raged through the land ravishing the weakened population. This plague, that was called the “Black Death,” was probably bubonic plague, but historians suggest that other diseases might have also combined to cause widespread death—up to one-half of the population may have succumbed. The deaths from famine and disease served as the backdrop to political changes that served to bring down the medieval order.

One of the first casualties of the early fourteenth-century disasters was the manorial system, in which serfs worked on the land, owing their labor to lords. The disabling shortage of labor that accompanied the population decline caused desperate lords to increase their customary—and already excessive—labor requirements in an effort to farm their lands. Peasants reacted against these demands and revolted in most areas of Europe. Urban residents also experienced their own struggles as declining population led to a reduced demand for goods and falling prices (see “Economy” section). All these revolts were eventually suppressed, but never again would western European nobles be able to exert medieval rights of serfdom in which owners owned people’s labors. Serfdom would remain in eastern Europe and Russia for centuries more.
Another hallmark of the medieval order in western Europe was a unified Christendom, in which one pope was able to rule over religious and even at times secular policy (see “Religion” section). In the beginning of the fourteenth century, in a dispute over taxation, the French kings challenged papal power. The French king Philip IV (r. 1285–1314) ordered his troops to arrest Pope Boniface VIII (r. 1294–1303). Although the pope was quickly freed by his supporters, the elderly pope died soon afterward as a result of the rough treatment he had received. Philip IV was able to capitalize on the violence against the churchman; he brought pressure on the college of cardinals—which had elected popes since 1059—and they elected a French cardinal as pope.

The king persuaded this new pope—Clement V (r. 1304–1314)—to rule from Avignon, on the east bank of the Rhône River, where the French influence was strong. For 72 years after the election of Clement V, the popes ruled from Avignon. Many Christians objected to this “Babylonian captivity” as the Italian Petrarch (1304–1374) called it. Some people believed this shocking breach of tradition contributed to the subsequent plague, famine, and violence that accompanied the pope’s residence in Avignon, and they urged the popes to resume ruling from Rome. The Avignon popes also expanded their administration and increased their collection of ecclesiastical taxes.

An influential mystic, Catherine of Siena (1347–1380) wrote a series of letters to Pope Gregory XI (r. 1370–1378) urging him to return to Rome, and in 1376 she traveled to Avignon to urge him in person. He was persuaded and returned to Rome, where he died shortly thereafter. The problems in church leadership only escalated: The college of cardinals was pressured by the Roman people to choose an Italian pope (instead of a French one), and the fearful cardinals elected Pope Urban VI (r. 1378–1389). Urban immediately began to take steps to reduce the French influence, so the French cardinals declared his election void (because of the coercion by the Romans) and returned to Avignon. There they elected a Frenchman: Pope Clement VII (r. 1378–1394). Now there were two popes, initiating what has been called the “Great Schism” of the church.

Most people chose to follow one pope over the other based on political rather than religious motivations, and each pope denounced the other as the anti-Christ. As each pope died, their supporting cardinals elected another pope, so the Great Schism lasted from 1378 to 1417. As the Black Death and famine brought destruction through Europe, many lost faith in the papacy to bring a moral authority to the troubled times. Many wondered how unity could be restored?

Some church theorists suggested that a general council of bishops might be able to restore the order and reform the abuses of the church. These men—called “conciliarists”—wanted to convert the church to a kind of constitutional monarchy in which the power of the popes would be limited. The first test of the Conciliar movement came at the Council of Pisa, convened in 1409. This Council asserted its supremacy by deposing the two reigning popes and electing a new one. However, the two previous popes did not step down, so now three popes reigned. Finally, a second Council was called. Some four-hundred churchmen assembled at the Council of Constance, which met from 1414 to 1418. This august body deposed all three popes and elected a Roman cardinal, Martin V (r. 1417–1431). The Great Schism was finally over, and the Western church was once more united under a single head. However, never again did
the popes have the power that the medieval popes had, and church councils
gathered periodically to address changes in the church.

As if famine, plague, revolts, and religious controversy weren’t enough,
England and France entered into the Hundred Years’ War—a century-long
conflict that became the closing chapter in an age in which long-standing tra-
ditions and social contracts crumbled. The issue that triggered the conflict was
the succession to the throne of France—the Capetians’ good luck in producing
male heirs finally ran out in 1328, when the last Capetian died. The nearest
male relative was King Edward III of England, son of a Capetian king’s daugh-
ter. The French court claimed that a king could not inherit a crown from a
woman, so Philip VI of Valois, a first cousin of the previous ruler, became king.
Edward at first did not dispute this decision but soon found cause to do so.

There were two other reasons for the monarchs to clash: The French king sought
an excuse to interfere in the lucrative wool trade between England and Flanders,
and the French king wanted to claim sovereignty over the lands in France that
England had held for so long. The war was long, and as it took place on French
soil, it was devastating to the French countryside. The English had striking suc-
cesses with new weapons and tactics that showed the old medieval knights mov-
ing toward obsolescence. Foot soldiers with long bows had stunning successes
against mounted knights, and toward the end of the conflict, gunpowder was in-
troduced on the battlefield, definitively signaling the direction of future warfare.

Nationalism also appeared as a new force. No longer did soldiers fight for
the personal tie between them and their lord, which was the basis of the feu-
dal ties. Now, increasingly, soldiers fought for France or England. This nascent
spirit of nationalism perhaps explains the success of Joan of Arc, who was able
to rally the French forces and finally push the English out of France. The In-
quisition turned Joan over to the English to be executed before she saw the
final victory of France. The war ended in 1453—a date often used to mark the
end of the Middle Ages. Future armies would consist more of foot soldiers
and mercenaries rather than mounted knights, and kings would use money,
not personal agreements, to field armies.

In the fifteenth century, the Byzantine Empire proved to be another casualty
of changing technology of warfare. The Byzantine Empire was threatened by the
Ottoman Turks, a group of Asiatic nomads who had converted to Islam and who
brought a new vigor to Muslim expansion. By 1355, the Ottomans had effectively
surrounded the Byzantine Empire that had stood for so long as a powerful state
and buffer for the West. Finally, a power sultan—Mehmed II (r. 1451–1481)—
committed his government to a policy of conquest. He brought his cannons to
the walls of Byzantium and attacked the ancient city. After a heroic struggle,
Byzantium fell in 1453, offering another reason to use this date to mark the end
of the Middle Ages. The last emperor of the East—Constantine XI Palaeologus—
died in the battle. Mehmed made Byzantium his capital under the name of Istan-
bul, by which it is known today. (The name was only formally changed in 1930.)

The medieval order had ended. The culture of Europe and Byzantium that
had developed through a dynamic 1,000 years was transformed by the disas-
ters of the fourteenth century. The way was paved for new ideas to emerge—
the Renaissance—that would bring about a resurgence of individualism and a
creative spirit that we find familiar. However, the Middle Ages contributed
much to modern society: parliamentary democracy, the structures of urban
life, deep Christian ideas and religious institutions, artistic creations, and many
other features that we take for granted. The Middle Ages also has left us with a fascination for this time long ago when knights in shining armor roamed the land and people believed magical creatures like unicorns.

Further Reading

2. RELIGION

The Middle Ages in Europe is often called the “Age of Faith” for good reason. By 400, Christianity was the only official religion in Europe, and the next millennium saw continued progress in creating a uniform religious practice under a tight religious hierarchy. Religious ideas that continue to influence modern Christianity were developed by men who have come to be called “Fathers of the Church” in recognition of their influence. However, in spite of a superficial appearance of uniformity, diversity of belief and practice continued to distress church leaders. In 1054, the church split between East and West, separating Roman Catholic from Eastern (or Greek) Orthodox. By the thirteenth century, various heresies seemed so threatening that the church established the Inquisition to combat errors in belief. All these developments only served to reinforce the idea that religion was at the heart of medieval culture and society.

Religious Life

The Catholic Church took over the broad Roman administrative organization, which divided the Empire into dioceses with a bishop in charge. The major cities had an archbishop, who was responsible for the other bishops in his region. Each diocese was, in turn, subdivided into parishes, each presided over by a priest, who was responsible for the spiritual well-being of his parishioners. The bishops were theoretically responsible for making sure that all priests were appropriately educated so they could read, write, and be responsible for conveying accurate religious information. However, throughout the early Middle Ages, local priests often did not meet the high standards demanded by bishops but instead were chosen for their ability to comfort and appeal to their parishioners. For example, in the seventh century, Spanish priests were criticized for being chosen for their good humor and skill in music and dance instead of for their religious knowledge. Ensuring the presence of an educated priesthood remained a concern throughout the Middle Ages.

Priests were to perform the essential function of serving as mediators between God and humans, and in doing this they were charged with delivering
the sacraments that the Catholic Church believed contained grace and helped bring salvation. Priests perform baptisms, which by the early Middle Ages were increasingly granted to infants to bring them into the Christian community. They also performed the Mass, or the mysterious re-creation of Jesus’ last supper, and marriages, which became more and more of a religious, rather than a secular matter throughout the Middle Ages. Priests also took confessions and granted the last rites to comfort the dying.

Priests were assisted by deacons, who helped distribute communion, read the gospel in church, and care for the church’s material possessions. If a church were large, a bishop might appoint subdeacons to assist the deacons, and finally, young boys could serve as acolytes, bearing candles and assisting in the church services. Exorcists, readers, and official doorkeepers rounded out the list of medieval church offices. As an example of church personnel in the Roman church of the third century, a letter of Pope Cornelius, preserved in Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History* claims that in Rome there was 1 bishop, 46 priests, 7 deacons, 7 subdeacons, 42 acolytes, 52 exorcists, readers, and doorkeepers (Eusebius, book 6, ch. 43). By 245, the Roman province on North Africa had 95 bishops. These figures from the third century suggest how quickly church organization became complex.

In the earliest centuries of Christianity, women served in all these capacities. However, from the fifth century onward, women were slowly excluded until by about the tenth century all these roles were restricted to men.

During the violent early centuries of the Middle Ages, the careful regulation of the parishes and dioceses broke down. In many churches, religious discipline was at best lax and, at worst, criminal. Repeatedly, letters from churchmen complained of sexual debauchery, illiteracy, drunkenness, and many other sins being committed by deacons, priests, and even bishops. Beginning in the eighth century, the Carolingians in the Frankish kingdom began to reform the church. Charles Martel’s son Pippin was the first to require that everyone pay 1/10th of their income to the church, and this first universal tax in European history put the church on a sound economic footing. The stage was set for the first large-scale religious reform under Pippin’s son Charlemagne (768–814).

Charlemagne was convinced that his empire needed a cultural and religious revival. His biographers (Einhard and especially Notker) related many accounts of abuses in the church that upset the emperor: illiterate priests, bishops who could not preach, and monks who could not chant the divine office. He issued lots of edicts to correct the abuses, established schools in which promising boys of all classes could learn to read, and insisted that all his churches have a consistent and regularized service. Charlemagne brought some of the greatest scholars to his court, and the most influential was Alcuin of York (c. 740–804). Alcuin had come from England and was instrumental in spreading the British custom of confession and penance throughout the churches of western Europe. The Carolingian renaissance brought an increased awareness of sin and ethical responsibility to the people as well as newly invigorated church services. Carolingian scholars also introduced the study of canon law, which was a body of religious law that became very influential in subsequent centuries.

In 1215, Pope Innocent III presided over the Fourth Lateran Council, which was to issue a number of decrees that shaped the religious lives of the Catholics.
It decreed that there were seven sacraments, and all were necessary for salvation. The seven are Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Penance, Extreme Unction, Marriage, and Holy Orders. The rules established for these sacraments were felt in each parish throughout Europe. For example, the council decreed that every Christian had to go to confession at least once a year as part of the sacrament of penance, so this placed priests even more at the center of social life of villages and cities. Furthermore, the council decreed the doctrine of transubstantiation of the Eucharist. This doctrine declared that the bread and wine were actually transformed into the body and blood of Christ. (This doctrine would be later attacked during the sixteenth-century Reformation.)

Throughout this age of faith then, the daily life of the people was centered on a regular cycle of church services that were held either at small, local parish churches or (by the twelfth century) at Gothic cathedrals in the growing cities. The religious architecture of these buildings is one of the important remnants in Europe of medieval religious life. These cathedrals, presided over by bishops, might hold up to ten-thousand people at a time. The faithful gathered at the churches once a week (or more, depending on festival days) and took communion, listened to sacred music (like the Gregorian chant or more complex polyphonic music), spoke prayers together, and listened to a short sermon, the average length of which was about 2 minutes.

The range of people’s religious expression did not end with attending church services presided over by a strong religious hierarchy. There were a series of practices that have come to be called “popular religion,” that is, that were driven by the impulses of the laity (those who held no church office). Many faithful longed for a more immediate experience of the divine that was available in church services, and the most visible expression of this longing was people’s attachments to the relics of saints and martyrs. These remains of the holy dead were prominently displayed in churches and shrines, and people came from many miles in pilgrimages to visit the relics looking for miraculous help. Some of the greatest pilgrimage sites throughout the Middle Ages were Santiago de Compostella in Spain, St. Marks Cathedral in Venice, and Rome, Italy, and Jerusalem. But many local churches as well proudly displayed their relics and drew faithful from afar.

In the Eastern and Western churches, popular religion found another expression in the popularity of icons: images or statues of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and saints. Like relics, these icons were seen to be vehicles through which divine power became accessible to the faithful. People lit candles and offered prayers to these icons, and on feast days, statues were paraded through the streets in celebration of the power of God working among the people. The veneration of icons led to a controversy in the eighth century called “iconoclasm” which contributed to a split between East and West.

Another deep expression of a popular religious impulse was the important force of mysticism, which means the feeling of becoming one with God. In the Eastern Orthodox church a mystical contemplation of God permeated the prayer and liturgy within the church. In the West, ordinary Christians often experienced direct visions of God. Many of the greatest church writers—such as Francis of Assisi (1182–1226), and Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153)—were mystics, but some less well-known also experienced the gift of direct vision of God. Meister Eckhart (1260–1327) was a Dominican friar who wrote of the importance of cultivating an interior life to develop a soul that was identified
with God. The Franciscan friar Bonaventure (1217–1274) wrote that the mind is drawn to God by divine love, and people needed to meditate and pray to move the mind to God. A number of women became well known for their mystic writings: Julian of Norwich (1342–1416), Catherine of Siena (1347–1380), and Margery Kempe (1373–1438) showed the range of mysticism, which drew from those with high education to people of lower classes.

By the late Middle Ages, the growing numbers of mystics began to challenge the very need for the hierarchy that had been the backbone of the medieval church. Flemish mystics, such as Ruysbroeck (1293–1381) and Gerhard Groote (1340–1384), became the founders of a movement called the “devotio moderna” (modern devotion), which concentrated on concentrating on the life of Christ. They established a group called the “Brethren of the Common Life,” who tried to follow Christ. This group was made up of pious laypeople, not monks, who stressed study and piety. The most well-known mystic from the devotio moderna was Thomas à Kempis (1380–1471) who wrote The Imitation of Christ, which is considered one of the greatest works on spirituality in the history of Western Christianity.

These movements of popular religion grew from the deep faith of medieval people. However, these very movements would undermine the strong hierarchical church that was the hallmark of medieval Christianity. If a person could have direct access to God, what was the need for the church and its sacraments? However, those challenges would only come to fruition during the Reformation in the sixteenth century—after the medieval Age of Faith had closed.

**Monasticism—Religious Specialists**

From the second century, Christianity embodied a tension between those who sought God in community and those who wanted to do so in solitude. The former made up the Christian congregations, while the latter became monks and nuns. The word, monasticism comes from the Greek word monos (alone) and points to the idea of religious specialists separating themselves from society to seek spiritual perfection.

Monasticism began in the eastern part of the old Roman Empire when men and women left society to live in solitary contemplation in the deserts of Egypt and Syria. These solitaries were called “hermits.” Monasticism proper—that is, a group of religious men or women living together in a community under a formal rule—is credited to Pachomius (290–346) who established monasteries in Egypt. His model was so popular that by his death he was in charge of nearly three-thousand monks in nine monasteries and two convents of nuns. Basil of Caesarea (330–379) in Asia Minor wrote another popular rule for monks that became the model for Greek and Russian monasticism. In the Eastern Orthodox Church, monks were more dedicated to the contemplative life, dedicating themselves to prayer and devotion than in the West. In the East, also, monks gained a virtual monopoly on making icons, and monasteries grew rich on this trade.

News of Eastern monasticism spread to the West and influenced the life of the famous church father, Augustine (354–430), who lived in a monastic community in North Africa even while he served as bishop of Hippo. Augustine’s experience is reflective of monastic life in the West, where there was a great deal of monastic influence on society as a whole. Other influential monastic
founders in the West were John Cassian, who founded two monasteries in France in about 415. His communities used a rule based on Pachomius. Irish monasticism was particularly rigorous and influential, where it was governed by a rule written by Columbanus (543–615).

However, the most influential monastic founder in the early medieval west was Benedict of Nursia (480–550), and his Rule became the foundation of western monasticism. Under the Benedictine Rule, the daily lives of monks were divided into three kinds of activities: work, communal worship, and private reading and meditation. All Benedictine monks and nuns had to take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience to the abbot or abbess, who led the monastery and in turn owed obedience to the local bishops. Monks and nuns in these monasteries of the early Middle Ages copied and preserved ancient manuscripts, and it is thanks to them that we have so many ancient texts available to us.

Throughout the Middle Ages, monastic movements underwent a series of reform movements, and these newly invigorated monasteries became, in turn, agents of reform of the church in general. One of the first groups to reform Benedictine monasticism were the Cluniacs. By the tenth century, many monasteries had fallen under the control of local secular lords. To address this, Duke William the Pious of Aquitaine (in southern France) in 909 made a gift of land to a group of twelve monks at Cluny in central France. According to the charter, the new monastery was to be self-governing and answerable only to the pope. By 1100, Cluny had more than one-thousand “daughter” houses championing the cause of reform. The influence of the Cluniacs spread beyond the monasteries when a Cluniac monk, Hildebrand, became Pope Gregory VII, who introduced a number of reforms in a controversy that is called the “Investiture Controversy.” Included in these reforms was the enforcement of clerical celibacy on members of the church. The investiture controversy was influential in helping popes exert authority over western European secular as well as religious life.

The Cluniacs focused their attention on prayer and performing the liturgy, but they came under criticism for their acquisition of land and extravagant Romanesque churches. Hoping to revive a more austere monastic ideal, Robert of Molesmes established a new monastery at Citeaux in Burgundy in 1098. This laid the foundations for a new monastic order, the Cistercians, called “White Monks” dedicated to more austerities and focusing on humility and manual labor. The Carthusians were another order founded in 1084, which intended to be even more ascetic, seeking out rugged and isolated sites for their communities.

The Crusades brought about a need for new kinds of religious orders—those who would be soldiers of Christ. These Military Orders lived under similar rules as other monastic orders, but their duties included fighting. The first were the Templars, who were founded in Jerusalem in 1120. Subsequent orders were the knights of the Hospital of St. John, or the Hospitalers, and later, the Teutonic Order of knights that flourished in Germany. At their height, the Hospitalers could supply five hundred knights for service in the field, and the Templars, three hundred, and these orders served as the backbone of defense of the Holy Land. Members of these orders helped protect pilgrims and also served as bankers to pilgrims traveling to the religious sites.

The growth of cities and universities in the twelfth century led to new religious impulses that, in turn, spawned new religious orders. Many people in the late twelfth century began to criticize the visible opulence of the church
and once again a religious order was established to address this longing. **Francis of Assisi** (1182–1226) gave up all he owned to live in extreme poverty, spirituality, and charity. He founded an order called “Franciscans,” and his sister Clare of Assisi founded a comparable order for women called the “Poor Clares.” The members of these orders did not live in communities, but wandered about, and thus were called “mendicant orders” to distinguish them from other monks, and they were called “friars,” and the Franciscans were called “Grey Friars” because of their clothing.

A second mendicant order was founded by St. Dominic (1170–1221). Dominic was an intellectual with a gift for administration. He decided the best way to combat heresy (that is, incorrect views of religion) was to preach and teach. Dominic went to the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 to ask the pope’s permission to organize an order of friars dedicated to preaching. The Dominicans were thus born and became known as the “Black Friars” in contrast to the Franciscans. The Dominicans emphasized education and thus had a large presence in the universities. Their battles against heresies led them to take an influential role in the religious courts of the Inquisition. A similar mendicant order was founded in 1274: The Carmelites, called “White Friars,” lived in towns, where they could beg, preach, and hear confessions.

Just as there were always avenues for popular religious impulses that ran parallel to the official religious outlets, the same was true for the desire to live a monastic life. In the thirteenth century—especially in the Low Countries—groups of women chose to live together in informal religious communities. They were called “Beguines,” and they spawned similar communities of men, called “Beghards.” During the plague years of the fourteenth century, some groups gathered to wander and whip themselves to try to expiate God’s wrath. These Flagellants offered visible and dramatic evidence of some people’s belief that the church did not satisfy their religious needs. The official church was never comfortable with these informal religious communities and repeatedly suppressed them.

**Leading the Churches: Popes and Patriarchs**

Organizing the church by parishes and dioceses left open the question of who is on top of this structure. The Eastern Orthodox and churches in the West separated on this (and other) issues, and the continuing struggle about church leadership not only kept East apart from West but caused centuries of struggle in the West.

After its fall in the West, the Roman Empire continued in Constantinople. Emperors continued to rule there (with a short break in the thirteenth century) until the empire fell to the Turks in 1453. The continuing presence of a strong emperor allowed him to exert a good deal of control over the church; indeed, many have called this form of church leadership “caesaropapism,” which means that one person leads church and state.

The Eastern Orthodox Church believed that under the guidance of the emperor the church should be led by five bishops—called the “patriarchs”—who resided in five major cities: Rome, Constantinople, Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Antioch. Each of the patriarchs (which together are called the “Pentarchs”) exerted jurisdiction in his own area and met with the other patriarchs in council to regulate matters of dogma and church discipline. Over time, they rejected
decisions made outside these councils solely by western bishops. Because the East was outside the influence of western reformers, they never adopted the idea of clerical celibacy, so priests and patriarchs in the East could marry.

With the absence of strong secular leadership in the West, the struggle over who should lead the church was longer and more turbulent. Theoretically, all bishops were believed to be the successors of the original apostles. However, as early as the fourth century, the bishops of Rome began to assert their supremacy over all the other bishops and began to claim the exclusive title pope, or “father.” Their early claims for supremacy were based on the Petrine Doctrine, which looked to Biblical precedent in which Jesus was to have said to Peter, “upon this rock I will build my church (Matt. 16:18–19). The early popes had claimed that Peter had been the first bishop of Rome, so each subsequent pope said he was the spiritual descendant of Peter.

Claiming supremacy over other bishops did not resolve the issue of who should be on top of an earthly hierarchy—pope or emperor. Pope Gelasius (r. 492–496) tried to resolve this issue by describing authority on Earth as two swords: one wielded by kings and the other by the church, and in Gelasius’s view the church’s sword was the greater because it was spiritual. This theoretical position was forwarded in a practical way by Pope Gregory the Great (r. 590–604) who was able to exert a good deal of actual authority.

However, the real struggle for supremacy in the West began in the eleventh century in what was called the “Investiture Controversy.” What began as a struggle about who could choose bishops and give them their signs of office—king or pope—ended being about who is on top of a divinely ordained hierarchy for ruling western Europe. The controversy began when the Cluniac pope Gregory VII (r. 1073–1085) challenged the German Emperor Henry IV (r. 1056–1106). The struggle moved on to the battlefield as Gregory was supported by the powerful Matilda of Tuscany, and the struggle continued in England as Thomas Becket was martyred in a struggle with his king, Henry II (r. 1154–1189).

As popes began to emerge victorious in this battle with kings, they were able to call on Christian armies from all over Europe to go on Crusade to reclaim the Holy Land from the Muslims. The struggle took time, but by the beginning of the thirteenth century, popes could with some accuracy claim they presided over a universal Christendom. Innocent III (r. 1198–1216) insisted that kings from all over Europe obey him in matters large and small, from waging war to sleeping with their wives.

In the fourteenth century, papal leadership of a universal western Christendom broke down. The French king Philip IV (r. 1285–1314) challenged the authority of Pope Boniface VIII (r. 1294–1303) over the issue of taxing French clergy. Boniface died during the controversy (with a little help from Philip’s men), and the French king was able to obtain the election of a French cardinal as the next pope, Clement V (r. 1304–1314). Although named Bishop of Rome, Clement never went to that city but instead set up the papal court in Avignon, under the influence of the French king. For 72 years beginning with the election of Clement V, popes ruled from Avignon. Many Christians objected to critics called the “Babylonian captivity” of the papacy. The Avignon papacy expanded their administration and streamlined the collection of ecclesiastical taxes, both leading to more criticism.

The mystic Catherine of Siena (1347–1380) was influential in persuading Pope Gregory XI (r. 1370–1378) to return to Rome and reestablish the credibility of
the papacy, but things quickly grew worse. When Gregory XI died shortly after his arrival in Rome in 1378, the situation was volatile. The cardinals elected an Italian, Pope Urban VI (r. 1378–1389), but then some dissenting cardinals—claiming an irregularity in the election—named a rival Frenchman to be Pope Clement VII (r. 1378–1394). Urban stayed in Rome while Clement returned to Avignon. The faithful in Europe divided their loyalties between the two popes in a split that was called the “Great Schism.” From 1378 until 1417, two and three competing popes reigned at the same time, destroying the illusion of a united Christendom.

The Great Schism was finally resolved by the Conciliar Movement, which claimed that the authority of the Western church lay not in the person of the pope, but in the bishops meeting in council. The first test of the conciliar movement came at the Council of Pisa, convened in 1409 convened by cardinals of Rome and Avignon. This council asserted its supremacy by deposing the two reigning popes and electing a third. This only exacerbated the problem because the two previous popes refused to step down, leaving three popes reigning. Finally, a second council was called. Some four-hundred churchmen assembled at the Council of Constance, which met between 1414 and 1418. This council was finally able to depose all three popes and elect a Roman cardinal—Martin V (r. 1417–1431). Thus at the end of the Middle Ages, the Great Schism was ended, but this conciliar movement ended the universal power that medieval popes had claimed.

Critique, Heresy, and Response

The history of medieval Catholicism was one of consistently struggling to get a uniformity of belief in the face of constant questioning. Once Christianity became linked with the Roman power structure, differences of opinion about religious matters became “heresies,” equivalent to treason. In the early centuries, differences were resolved in church councils that established correct belief, and later in the West, popes in consultation with bishops determined what was orthodox and what was heretical. Nevertheless, throughout this age of faith church leaders had to wrestle with confronting and suppressing heresies.

Before the twelfth century, heresies grew from a variety of opinions—many left over from earlier deep discussions about the nature of Christ, humanity, and the clergy. The Eastern Church had always had a tradition of actively discussing theological issues, and three important heresies arose there in the early Middle Ages. In the fifth century, discussions about the nature of Christ led to two different opinions: The Nestorians emphasized the split between Jesus’s humanity and divinity, claiming that Mary was the bearer of the human person, but not of God. In response, others emphasized Jesus's divinity, claiming that the divine portion of God obliterated the human at the Incarnation much like the sea would overwhelm a drop of honey. These were called “Monophysites” (“one nature”). The Council of Chalcedon in 451 condemned both positions arguing that Christ was fully human and fully divine. However, Nestorians and Monophysites continued to flourish in Egypt, Armenia, and even as far away as China.

In the eighth century another serious conflict arose in the Eastern Church that further emphasized the differences between East and West. The Byzantine emperor Leo III (r. 717–741) ordered all icons destroyed to avoid idolatry, and in an autocratic style, he intended for this decree to apply to all Christendom,
East and West. This introduced iconoclasm, which raged in the East for a century, during which many mosaics in Constantinople and Asia Minor were destroyed. Ultimately, the iconoclasts were discredited, and icons remained a part of Christian worship.

In the West, the church father, Augustine, spent much of his career battling three heresies. The Manichaeans believed that a good God could not have created evil, so they posited the existence of two gods, one good and one evil engaged in a timeless battle for the soul of humanity. This dualist belief reappeared in the Albigensian heresy that flourished in southern France in the twelfth century.

Augustine also battled against Donatism, which split the North African church for centuries. The Donatists argued that priests who had turned over sacred books during the Roman persecutions should lose their offices. Augustine and the orthodox position was that sins of a priest did not affect the efficacy of the sacraments they perform. The violent proponents of both these positions did not end until North Africa was conquered first by the Vandals then the Muslims.

Augustine's last struggle against heresy took a more intellectual turn when he penned his arguments against the Pelagians. Pelagius was a British monk who argued that free will was possible, that people could choose not to sin. Augustine, drawing from his own struggles against lust and sin, denied this possibility and claimed that people were burdened by original sin. Augustine's position became the orthodox one, and Pelagianism was condemned.

By the twelfth century in the West the greatest critique of the church came from those who believed that the church had become corrupted by wealth. There were many groups who advocated following what they called the "apostolic life," a simple existence embracing poverty, reading the Bible, and preaching God's word. The most famous of these groups was the Waldensians, who were centered in southern France. Their leader, Valdes of Lyons (also known as Peter Waldo) was condemned as a heretic in 1181, but the movement continued in spite of repression. There are even some Waldensian churches today.

Late in the Middle Ages, other critics challenged the hierarchy in ways that foreshadowed the sixteenth-century Reformation. John Wycliffe in England and John Hus, in what is now the Czech Republic, were influential at universities and questioned papal supremacy and other church doctrines.

In the thirteenth century, the established church felt sufficiently threatened by these various heresies to establish a new court to discover and root out heretical ideas. This court was the Inquisition, and it was different from the many criminal courts in the lands because it was concerned with ideas instead of actions. Consequently, it had to resort to torture to find out what the accused was thinking, instead of other evidence to determine what he or she had done. The progress of the Inquisition contributed to the breakdown of the medieval religious structure. See also Document 16.

Further Reading


3. ECONOMY

Throughout the 1,000 years of the Middle Ages, most people worked on the land, so agrarian life represented the prevailing economic structure. However, throughout human history people have loved to shop, enjoying the novelty of new products. Therefore, although trade dramatically decreased in the violence that accompanied the decline of the Roman Empire, it never completely disappeared, and trade and related urban life would flourish again beginning in the prosperity of the twelfth century and beyond. To understand the economy of the Middle Ages, we shall first look at the agrarian life that shaped most people’s lives then study the growing cities and the short- and long-distance trade that flowed on the contours of Europe. It was in these peasant villages and small towns that many of the structures of modern life were formed. Finally, we shall see how the disasters of the fourteenth century disrupted the medieval economy.

Agrarian Economy

With medieval farming methods, most people had to work the land to produce enough food. Throughout Europe, there were two kinds of settlement patterns that organized the rural landscape: dispersed pattern and clustered villages. Each developed depending on the kind of land available.

The dispersed pattern of agriculture involved peasants who lived in tiny hamlets or isolated farms. This pattern was widely established in regions of poor soils on the fringes of Europe: Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, Spanish Galicia, western Normandy, and most areas of the Scandinavian countries. In these areas of dispersed settlement, each household had a small plot of land close to the house, called the “in-field,” which would be cultivated continuously. In addition, a section of land—the “out-field”—was cultivated for a year or two exhausting the soil, then abandoned for another out-field. The land left fallow was left for grazing of animals.

In areas of more fertile land, the economic pattern was of clustered villages that were often further organized into larger manors. This form of agriculture is called “manorialism” and is the defining form of medieval agrarian organization. In these clustered villages, the land is surrounded by large open fields that during the early Middle Ages were divided into two parts. One lay fallow (uncultivated) one year while the other was sown with grains. By reversing the fallow fields, farmers tried to avoid the problem of reduced fertility by overcultivation.

The open fields were divided into long strips, and individual peasants owned different strips. This arrangement allowed the whole village to share large plows pulled by six to eight oxen to plow the large open fields. These large plows could turn over the heavy clay soils that dominated most of northern Europe.

A critical problem for medieval farmers was lack of fertilizer. The only fertilizer available was manure, which was never enough to keep all the fields fertilized.
Farming areas near towns often collected human waste—called “night soil”—to fertilize the fields, which led to increased spreading of diseases. Collecting animal manure required people to keep animals, which in the north had to be fed with hay that was grown on the scarce fields. Therefore, keeping large numbers of animals to produce manure was not economically feasible. People in seaside communities—like Scandinavia, Scotland, and Ireland—collected seaweed to fertilize their beds, but this was a highly labor-intensive activity. In dispersed pattern communities, only the in-field was fertilized with manure, so during the early Middle Ages leaving the land fallow was the main technique of rejuvenating soil depleted by repeated plantings.

A second problem that plagued medieval agriculture was how to sow seeds. Peasants used “broadcast” method which meant walking in the plowed fields casting the seed out by hand. This led to loss of a lot of seeds to birds and other hazards. Yields (the amount harvested versus the amount planted) remained very low.

The most important part of the peasant economy was the cultivation of cereal crops. The main crops were wheat, rye, barley, and oats. In mountainous areas or regions with poor soil, peasants planted spelt. Grains were important not only to make bread, the staple of the diet, but to brew ale, which formed a large proportion of the caloric intake.

Women were usually in charge of the gardens that were grown near the peasant households. Here, families grew turnips, cabbages, leeks, and other vegetables, along with some herbs like dill. In some areas (where the weather permitted), peasants produced grapes for wine.

Animal husbandry supplemented the crops that formed the basis of medieval diet. Only the rich could afford to eat much meat; most people had to be content with using their animals (especially goats and sheep) for milk and cheese. Some texts indicate that sometimes even deer were kept and milked! They kept chickens and other domestic fowl for eggs, and an occasional stew. Pigs were very important because they could fend for themselves browsing in the woods for food. Although they were thin and tough, they formed an important part of the medieval diet.

The most important animals were the large animals that supplemented human labor. Great oxen pulled plows and carts, as did horses and mules. These animals had to be fed through the winter, and there was always a struggle between raising an animal to work and slaughtering it to save on food. When oxen grew too old to work, they were fattened and slaughtered to make a tough, but substantial meal. The church forbade the eating of horseflesh (because it seemed too associated with pagan ritual), so old horses were good only for their skin and to provide food for domestic dogs. (People in the northern parts of Scandinavia and Iceland never adhered to the prohibition against eating horseflesh and continued to do so into the modern era.)

In the tenth and eleventh centuries, medieval Europe saw a number of agricultural innovations that greatly increased food production and fueled a population expansion. (see “Science and Technology” section for more technological advances.) By the eleventh century, a new padded horse collar that had been developed in China appeared in western Europe. This harness rested on the animal’s shoulders (instead of on his neck like a yoke for oxen) and allowed horses to be used for heavy plowing and pulling. Because horses can work 50 percent faster and 2 hours a day longer than oxen, the advantages were huge.
Peasants discovered that even placing horses with oxen in front of the large, wheeled plows would spur the oxen to work harder.

The increased use of animal power required peasants to cultivate more land for fodder and hay, and clustered villages slowly adopted a three-field system, over the previous two-field system. In this system, plots of land were divided into thirds: One-third was planted in the spring, another in the fall, and the remaining third was left fallow. This three-field system also stimulated the growth of new crops that boosted production of the all-important grain. Villagers began to plant legumes, such as peas and beans, which add nitrogen to the soil, thus fertilizing the subsequent grain crop. Legumes also provided an excellent source of protein, which improved the villagers’ diets.

In the twelfth century, more iron became available in Europe. This allowed horses to be shod and plows to be equipped with iron plowshares, both of which improved agricultural production. However, iron had other less-obvious advantages: Iron cooking pots became more prevalent, and when people cook in iron some leeches into the food, offering an advantageous supplement to people whose diets where often iron deficient. This particularly helped menstruating women, and women’s health improved noticeably, so much so that by the thirteenth century, contemporary observers were noticing that there were more women than men in the population. This is the first time in history that we notice such a gender distribution.

This agricultural revolution spurred a population growth, which had further economic ramifications. Between the eleventh and the thirteenth centuries, the population of Europe approximately doubled—from about 37 million to 74 million people. Settlement was expanded as lords and kings established new villages to accommodate the growing population. The increased population and rural efficiencies permitted more specialized labor, which fueled the growth of commerce and the rise of urban areas (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Millions of People</th>
<th>Percent Increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1000</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1050</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1100</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1150</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1200</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>22.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1250</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>13.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1300</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Growth of Trade**

The disruptions of the early Middle Ages broke down the trade networks that had fueled the prosperity of the Roman Empire. The invasions of the Germanic tribes in the fifth century led to a decline in trade in the northern parts of Europe. The seventh-century rise of Islam split the lucrative Mediterranean trade, and the Viking invasions of the ninth and tenth centuries further disrupted commerce. However, the new agricultural prosperity beginning in the eleventh century paved the way for a new economic change in the West.
Now economic wealth became increasing based on a vigorous exchange of goods and a growth of money in circulation.

The commercial revival began in Italy, whose cities had escaped the devastating decline of the north. By the tenth century, Venice was shipping grain, wine, and lumber to Constantinople and importing silk cloth. Merchants of Genoa and Pisa began to sail along the coast toward France on trading ventures, risking the ever-present threat of Muslim pirates. In 1016, the fleets of Genoa and Pisa conquered Corsica and Sardinia and raided Muslim ports in Africa. When Norman conquerors occupied Sicily in 1091, the Western Mediterranean was opened for western commerce.

The Crusades that began in the eleventh century also increased commerce. The kings of Jerusalem and their barons opened trade routes to Baghdad, and goods from the Far East flowed to the Italian merchants in the ports of Syria and Palestine. Silks, sugar, and spices began to move into western courts and created appetites for more. Thus, by the twelfth century, and southern, Mediterranean zone of commerce was reestablished that moved goods from as far away as China to the ports of Spain.

Meanwhile, a northern zone of trade was beginning to flourish around the Baltic Sea. Flanders first took the lead in its production of woolen cloth, and when Scandinavian merchants came down from the north to trade furs and hunting hawks, Flanders was ready to serve as the hub of that trade. Soon, the demand for Flemish cloth exceeded the supply of wool, so Flemish merchants looked abroad for raw wool. They found an abundant supply in England, and English farmers began to raise more and more sheep to supply the seemingly inexhaustible demand for wool cloth. In the late thirteenth century, many cities in northern Germany created the Hanseatic League, an association of cities that united to capitalize on the prosperous northern trade. At its height, the Hanseatic League included 70 to 80 cities.

Although Flanders and northern Italy were active centers of commerce by the end of the eleventh century, trade between the northern and southern zones was comparatively slight. Transportation was difficult between the two zones: Muslim pirates still controlled the Straits of Gibraltar, so shipping from the Mediterranean north was unsafe. Overland trade was dangerous and costly because every local lord along the route wanted to charge tolls to merchants passing through his lands. Early in the twelfth century, a powerful dynasty saw in this situation a chance to reap profits. The Counts of the region of Champagne created a vast marketplace in their lands. At a number of their chief towns, they founded fairs, which came to be called the "Champagne Fairs." For about 200 years, these fairs were the most important markets in western Europe and served to link the lucrative trade between north and south.

The Champagne Fairs were by no means the only fairs in Europe, for the model was so lucrative that lords in various areas sponsored fairs. By the fourteenth century, the Hanseatic League offered their own fairs that competed with the popular French ones. These brought not only goods from near and far but also entertainers and new ideas as people mingled in excitement at the bustle that brought novelty to otherwise rather dull days.

The revival of commerce increased the need for coined money. Western Europe had no gold mines, so gold was not widely available for coinage until the fourteenth century. Italy had gold earlier from its trade with Muslims. Genoa and Florence struck gold coins in 1252, but most coins of western Europe
through the Middle Ages were of silver. The basic coin was the silver *denarius*, or penny. Twelve of them made a *solidus*, or shilling. Twenty solidi made a *libra* or pound. There was also a *mark*, worth thirteen shillings and four pence. However, these amounts represented accounting numbers, not actual coins. Each lord who coined money set his own standards of weight and purity and changed those standards whenever he needed to. Therefore, important men of commerce were always the moneychangers, who made money by making sense of the different coinage (Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Currency</th>
<th>Purchasing Value</th>
<th>Modern U.S. Equivalent $</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 English pound</td>
<td>1 good cart horse</td>
<td>$2,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Eng. shilling</td>
<td>1 day’s wages—knight</td>
<td>$100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English penny</td>
<td>1 day’s cheap labor</td>
<td>$10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 French livre</td>
<td>1 month’s rent—Pairs</td>
<td>$1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 French sou</td>
<td>1 Day’s wages—craftsman</td>
<td>$50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 French denier</td>
<td>1 (1 lb) loaf of bread</td>
<td>$3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, the main institutions that dealt in foreign exchange were the two great *Military Orders*, the Templars and the Hospitalers. Because they had far-flung resources and military power, they were well placed to serve as bankers for merchants and pilgrims. They would accept money in one country and pay it out in another, which would save merchants the hazard of traveling with large sums of money.

The continued growth of commerce depended upon the development of banking principles, and Christians were hampered in this activity because of the prohibition on charging interest. Christian prohibition derived from the belief that it was sinful to make money from time, which belongs to God, and charging interest is exactly that—profit made from using money over a period of time. Neither *Jews* nor Muslims believed in this prohibition, so they developed banking and lending money; and by the twelfth century, Jews became the predominant moneylenders and coin changers in western Europe. Although many Christians blamed Jews for engaging in banking, others valued their contribution. For example, in the late eleventh century, the Bishop of the German town of Speyer gave Jews a special charter to urge them to settle in Speyer and freely change coins and stimulate the local economy.

By the thirteenth century, many Christians developed creative ways to avoid the prohibition against making a profit on lending money. For example, an Italian merchant might lend money to an English baron engaging in wool trade. The agreement provided for the baron to repay the Italian in wool priced below market value, thus giving the Italian banker a profit without formally charging interest. Other informal banking mechanisms might include offering a lender a generous gift in “thanks” for a loan. Such techniques led more and more Christians into banking—particularly in Italy and Germany—making Christians believe that Jews were an unnecessary source of competition. By the end of the thirteenth century, Jews were banished from England and France. At the end of the Middle Ages, this anti-Semitism would spread to Spain and Germany.
Throughout the Middle Ages, most European trade was quite local. Most food and other staples were traded within a radius of one day’s travel—about 20 to 25 miles, and most people might live their whole lives not traveling more than 5 miles from home. However, the real engine of the economy came from merchants who were willing to travel great distances, with equally great risks, to bring scarce luxury items to the courts of Europe. Most of the long-distance trade brought goods from the fabled East by Muslim merchants who then traded with merchants in the Byzantine Empire or Italian traders. Not surprisingly, some enterprising Italians decided to try to avoid the middlemen and seek the riches of the East on their own. The most famous of these travelers were the Polo family of Venice, accompanied by the young Marco Polo.

The Polos left Venice in the late thirteenth century and traveled across Asia to Khanbalik, the capital of the Mongol empire in China, to the court of Kublai Khan. The Mongols knew the value of long-distance trade and encouraged it across their vast lands, and the European merchants found a welcome in the court. Even with the relative peace established within the Mongol lands, the journey was arduous. It took the Polos three-and-a-half years of travel by horseback to get to the Chinese capital. The Polos stayed 17 ½ years in China before returning home to Venice.

During their 17-year absence, their relatives in Venice were certain they had died. When the travelers returned, wearing rough traveling clothes, they pounded on the door of their family home. It took some time for them to convince their relatives that they, indeed, had returned from the Far East. Soon a great feast was arranged to which old friends and the famous of Venice were invited to hear of the travels. The travelers wore crimson robes of silk and told tales of China. However, the most impressive moment took place at the end of the meal, when the Polos left the room and once again donned their rough travel cloaks. When they returned, they took sharp knives and slit open the seams and linings of the cloaks and a king’s ransom of precious jewels fell to the table to astound the visitors. Now all of Venice was convinced not only that the Polos had returned rich, but also that trading in the East was a lucrative commercial venture. More merchants went to the East, and by 1300 there was even a community of Italians living in China. The stories of Marco Polo and the wealth of the East would remain a lure for merchants and explorers well after the Middle Ages, when explorers like Christopher Columbus would look for easier ways to the fabled East.

**Growing Urban Life**

There are two reasons for cities to exist: (1) to serve administrative functions governing local regions and (2) to serve economic functions as artisans and merchants gathered together to make and sell products. The few remaining urban areas in northern Europe during the early Middle Ages served primarily the first function, as churches of bishops drew supporting populations. The growth of commerce in the eleventh century, however, served as a catalyst for the growth of new commercial cities that slowly grew all over the continent.

The first trading cities grew as lay and ecclesiastical lords encouraged craftsmen and merchants to settle in their administrative cities. At first, these lords sponsored artisans who had special skills that they needed, for example, blacksmiths and armorers, but soon other craftsmen—from goldsmiths to shoemakers—gathered in the towns to sell their wares. Other small cities
were founded by colonies of merchants who settled along important trade routes. The cities outside the boundaries of the old Roman Empire were usually founded in this way.

All medieval cities were small in comparison with the great cities of the ancient world or of China. A substantial commercial city with a permanent settlement of merchants might have only about five-thousand inhabitants. In northern Europe only the largest commercial centers—like London, Bruges, and Ghent—had as many as forty-thousand inhabitants. The great cities of Italy—Venice, Florence, Genoa, Milan, and Naples—maintained some continuity from the ancient Roman times and boasted populations as large as one-hundred thousand.

At the heart of city life is a division of labor. In rural villages, peasants did everything from grow their food to making what they needed for their households. In cities, by contrast, artisans and merchants could focus on their particular skills and make enough money to buy their necessities including food. While city dwellers were often disdainful of country folk who seemed so backward, they nevertheless depended on the countryside to feed the urban population. Rural people also needed the cities as an outlet for their excess food, but peasants always remained suspicious of “city slickers” who might cheat their rural neighbors. This uneasy symbiotic relationship between city and countryside is as old as city life itself. For example, one estimate suggests that a town of three-thousand inhabitants in the eleventh century required the land of some ten villages to support it (Braudel, 486). Consider how many villagers toiled in the fields to support larger cities of one hundred thousand or more!

There was no urban planning, and the structure of cities reflected their dynamic economic functions. First, towns struggled for safety, and as soon as townspeople could raise the money they built a sturdy wall around the town. Walls were expensive, however, so every bit of the space they enclosed was used. Narrow, winding streets were crowded with two-story houses, and the second story often extended over the street below. Houses were built of wood, so fire was an ever-present danger. The crowded cities had no provision for sanitation, so sewage was either dumped into local rivers or left to run off in the mud during rains. The most enterprising towns gathered the “night soil” to cart to the nearby fields as fertilizer.

Because the business of medieval towns was commerce, all had some kind of public marketplace—whether an indoor hall, an open square, or just a wide city street. Small towns held their markets one day each week, while large cities had multiple marketplaces more often. Beyond the markets, trades were clustered in neighborhoods, often dictated by local conditions or opportunities. Inns and horse dealers were often clustered by the gates of the town to serve travelers. Taverns were often clustered near markets. Artisans that created much waste, like butchers, often set up shop near a river that flowed through town so the flowing water could remove the waste. This practice led to rivers flowing through cities being sadly polluted. This arrangement of trades made it easier for shoppers to compare products: All the goldsmiths would be in one area, shoemakers in another.

The craftsmen and laborers who worked in the cities were normally drawn from skilled peasants from the countryside. This raised a question of the status of urban residents because in the country villages, most residents were semi-free. That is, they were serfs who were not able to move off the land without permission from the lord (see “Society” section). However, lords knew the
financial advantage to be gained by having a town in their lands, so they granted charters granting towns the privileges they needed to conduct business. These charters usually provided that everyone who lived in the town for a year and a day would be free. Thus, if a runaway serf evaded capture for this time he or she was free. This provision served to draw the most talented and enterprising people from the countryside.

Charters also allowed townspeople, called “burgers,” to hold their lands for money rents. In an age when most people owed their labor to their lord, this was also a strong advantage for the towns. Finally, all charters protected townspeople from arbitrary seizure of property. In fact, this last provision usually set limits on the amounts of rents a lord could charge and the amount of fines he could charge for crimes. These basic freedoms were available in most towns and stimulated the growing commercial ventures. Some towns gained even more generous rights, such as the right to try crimes committed within the town or an exemption on tolls on bridges or sales taxes.

If lords did not want to relinquish their authority, inhabitants of some towns—first in Italy they elsewhere—gathered together to for what was called a “commune.” This was a sworn alliance of townspeople who agreed to fight to preserve their freedoms from external authorities. The communes in the Italian towns led to their having a great deal of political autonomy.

The charters from lords and the communes determined the relationship between the town and the surrounding estates but did not address the governance within the town itself. In spite of the freedoms granted townspeople, there was a social structure within the towns based largely on money. Rich merchants—often drawn from younger sons of nobility—had status, money, and prestige and generally led the governing of towns. Craftsmen and artisans often felt themselves oppressed by the merchants, so they wanted ways to assert their own rights. Within towns, guilds developed as the institutions to regulate trade and protect workers.

Merchant guilds did everything from insuring merchants against losses in long distance trade to burying them when they died. Guilds secured monopolies for merchants, forbidding foreign merchants from selling goods in the town. Guilds for craftsmen served similar functions, caring for widows and orphans of members and regulating the trade. Guilds also regulated prices and quality of goods as well as the skill of the membership.

During the Middle Ages, towns were small and seemed to be peripheral to the great events guided by kings and lords. However, the economic resources generated in these small towns established structures that paved the way for the modern world. In the fourteenth century when medieval Europe was buffeted by large-scale disasters, it was the towns that generated the new spirit that was to be called the “Renaissance.”

**Economic Disasters**

Just as the economic boom of the Middle Ages was built on agricultural innovations that allowed a healthy population boom, the fourteenth century decline of medieval society began with agricultural disaster. By 1300, the burgeoning population began to put a strain on existing technology. With the expansion of population, people cultivated poorer lands and crop yields dwindled. For example, on some marginal lands, farmers harvested only three bushels for every
one planted. After setting aside one bushel to plant the following year, the remainder was hardly enough to feed the populace.

As people tried to bring more and more acreage into cultivation to feed humans, there was less open land to feed livestock. Thus, as they slaughtered animals, there was less manure to fertilize fields and yields fell further. Many people were living on the edge of starvation, but then things got worse. Beginning in 1310, the weather worsened. Chroniclers tell of drenching rains all over Europe that flooded fields and washed away the scattered seed. Summers were dark and wet, and already sparse crops failed. This cooling trend helped destroy the Scandinavian settlement in Greenland that had flourished for centuries. But, even the heartland of Europe suffered.

Famine began in 1315, and in some parts of Europe lasted until 1322. Aching hunger drove peasants from their lands in search of food. The food scarcities affected towns as well. For example, in 1322 artisans in the town of Douai in Flanders rioted because of rumors that rich merchants were hoarding grain. As workers stormed the warehouses, soldiers brutally repressed the uprising. This was repeated in towns all over Europe.

People weakened by hunger suffered from respiratory illness and intestinal ailments, but a greater illness soon added to the misery. In about 1348, the *bubonic plague*—known as the “Black Death”—began to sweep through Europe, rapidly killing huge numbers of people. Estimates vary, but historians reckon that between one-third and one-half the population died during this terrible scourge that moved through Europe throughout the century.

The dramatic population drop had significant economic consequences. Many marginal lands were abandoned as villagers moved to better areas. When the deaths ended, there was more food available for those remaining, but labor shortages caused peasants to radically reconsider their lot. Landlords who felt a double pinch of falling grain prices along with rising labor costs tried repressive measures to maintain their old standard of living. This led to *peasant revolts* throughout Europe, including the Jacquerie in France and the rebellion in England led by John Ball. None of these rebellions was immediately successful, but in the end the shortage of agricultural labor brought about changes that transformed the medieval economy. In western Europe, serfdom ended. Peasants owned their own labor and could work for wages and hope to improve their lot. By and large, the landed nobility would never again have the prosperity they enjoyed during the height of the Middle Ages.

The cities, too, were transformed by the population decline. There was an immediate oversupply of goods and a drop in overall demand. The wealthy merchants tried to hang on to their declining fortunes by enacting restrictive guild regulations and city ordinances to prevent more competition. Laborers who saw little hope in improving their lot revolted against city governments. Eventually, like in the countryside, urban workers began to get more freedoms to trade and better their positions.

The changes in the fourteenth century served to transform long-distance commercial transactions as well. The Champagne Fairs declined, and the Hanseatic League in the north became a formidable power that established alternate routes to Venice. Through this, more wealth flowed to the north.

The difficulties of doing business profitably in a shrinking market stimulated merchants to develop new techniques of business management. Records of Italian merchants in the fourteenth century show the development of meticulous
double-entry bookkeeping and a growth of capital. Some enterprising families began to be involved in banking, taking that lucrative business away from Jewish families. The most successful were the Medici in Florence, who began as cloth merchants and ended up growing rich in banking. The Fuggers of Augsburg built up a similar financial empire in Germany.

By the end of the fourteenth century, the European economy was transformed. The population decline provided opportunities for enterprising people to conduct business in new ways unhampered by the traditions of the past. Europe was poised for the next dramatic leap forward that we have come to call the Renaissance.

Further Reading

4. THE ARTS

Like other aspects of early medieval civilization, the arts emerged from a synthesis of classical, Germanic, and Christian elements. During the early Middle Ages—from about 400 to 800—artistic struggles to form this synthesis were readily apparent. For example, Irish manuscript illuminators in the Book of Kells struck an uneasy balance between trying to portray a realistic human figure in the classic style while surrounding it with intricate patterning which represented the Germanic aesthetic.

By the Carolingian age, this synthesis had been achieved, and a glorious new art aesthetic was created that embodied several values. Medieval artists (and critics) believed that art was simply one part of the mystic web that joined creation and God, and that artistic creations could help reveal the transcendent. As part of this quest, artists identified some aesthetic principles that shaped their creations. The first principle was one of mathematical proportion; beauty was symmetrical and proportional, whether it appeared in poetry, music, or the visual arts. Additionally, artists valued bright primary colors (rather than nuanced blends) and bright illuminating light. Finally, medieval artists valued allegory and metaphor in ways that seem extreme and confusing to modern sensibilities. For example, a unicorn could refer to a human lover, Christ, and a fierce prey at the same time without contradiction. Furthermore, because the reality of the message of the unicorn was central to the depiction, it did not matter whether there were real unicorns or not—a metaphor could be more “real” than the observed world.

Literature
The early medieval world had inherited a rich tradition of Latin literature that was preserved in monasteries and venerated by the educated. Some medieval
scholars, such as Isidore of Seville and Bede the Venerable, made a point to preserve classical knowledge and transmit it to the future. This tradition of Latin prose literature also included the great Christian writings that had shaped and defined Christian belief. These influential writings included works by Augustine, Jerome, Ambrose, and many others who are called “Fathers of the Church.”

The tradition of classical theater was preserved in monasteries in a changed, Christian form. The most famous monastic playwright was Hrotswitha of Gandersheim, a tenth-century nun who wrote entertaining plays that combined classical traditions with saints’ tales. By the twelfth century, dramatic performances became part of church services and spread to cities to be performed outdoors to the pleasure of many.

The Germanic tribes had a long tradition of oral poetry, much of which was heroic poetry designed to remember the great deeds of their ancestors. Most of this poetry was lost, but fortunately some was preserved in northern monasteries by monks who had grown up appreciating oral tales. The most famous Germanic epic is Beowulf, which was probably composed about 680 and written down in about 1000. Other Germanic epics that have survived include The Song of Hildebrand and the Niebelungenlied. These works preserved a time when the deeds of heroes were preserved by poets in the dark halls of northern folk.

The prosperity of the twelfth century saw a flourishing of literature in Europe, and more and more of this work was written in vernacular languages instead of in Latin that could be understood only by the educated. One new type of literature is called chanson de geste, or song of brave deeds. These poems honored the heroic adventures of warriors who lived under the complex rules of feudal law and chivalry. The most famous chanson de geste is the Song of Roland, a heroic version of a minor battle fought by Charlemagne in northern Spain, in which his vassal Roland was killed. This was written down in about 1100 and portrayed the struggle as one between Christians and Muslims. A second, more realistic, chanson de geste is the Spanish Poem of the Cid, which tells of this hero’s struggles against the Spanish Muslims.

Although these stories of battles reflected the values of the warrior nobility, a new kind of literature arose that praised courtly love, a new value that appealed to noble wives who waited at home for their warrior husbands. This new value of love was first praised by troubadours, poets in southern France, or Provence. The ideal of this romantic love was that the lover would be made better (stronger and more noble) as a result of his love—even though in most cases the love was an adulterous one with a married woman. Perhaps the culmination of this tradition was the thirteenth-century long French poem, the Romance of the Rose, which carefully detailed how men might seduce the object of their desire.

As the influence of troubadour poetry spread, the status of women in Western literature was revolutionized as noblemen were to do great deeds in return for the love of noble women. At the same time, the cult of the Virgin Mary flourished throughout Europe. Many critics see a relationship between these movements that praised the feminine in religious and secular realms.

After 1150, courtly romances quickly replaced the feudal chansons de geste in popularity. These romances were verse stories that combined miraculous adventures of knights with romantic entanglements with their ladies. One of the romance poets, Chrétien de Troyes, wrote romances centered at the court of
King Arthur of Britain. Another romantic tale that remains influential today is the story of the tragic love affair between Tristan and Isolde. Some critics argue that this praise of romantic love that began in the Middle Ages established a new direction in the emotional life of people in the West, which set it dramatically apart from the rest of the world.

Another literary genre that flourished in the twelfth century was the lay, a short lyric or narrative poem meant to be sung to the accompaniment of an instrument such as a harp. The oldest surviving lays were those written by Marie de France, who also wrote fables. Marie’s works were profoundly influential in making the classic form of beast fables relevant to the medieval courtly audience.

The growing importance (and wealth) of townspeople stimulated the growth of literature aimed at the more cynical middle class instead of the romantic nobility. French fabliaux were short poetic compositions that portrayed hilarious, and often bawdy, stories about medieval life. Many were misogynist in their portrayal of women, but all were hugely influential as writers in the late Middle Ages looked to these amusing tales as models. Fourteenth-century writers like Geoffrey Chaucer in England and Giovanni Boccaccio in Italy drew from these humorous tales as they wrote works that used humor to confront the disasters they faced in the decline of the Middle Ages.

Perhaps the highest development of medieval literature came in the fourteenth-century Italian work, The Divine Comedy, by Dante Alighieri. In this work, the poet imagines a tour through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven, and the resulting allegory—that is full of historical figures—marks a brilliant synthesis of medieval thought, while pointing to the Renaissance that was to come.

**Music**

During the Middle Ages, the greatest composers turned their talents to create religious music that was composed to draw the faithful to a more spiritual experience during church services. The roots of this sacred music lay in ancient Hebrew, Greco-Roman, and Byzantine styles, and we have no records to study these ancient forms. However, theorists of ancient classical music give us some hints about its nature, and one of the important music analysts was the Italian Boethius, who was a significant thinker at the court of Theodoric the Ostrogoth in Italy. Boethius reinforced the aesthetic principle of proportion when it came to music. He echoed the classic view that the heart of music was mathematics, and that beauty in music lay in presenting sounds that were proportional to each other. In this, Boethius was following Pythagoras, who argued that a divine “music of the spheres” existed, which was a harmony produced by the seven known planets orbiting around a motionless earth. He believed each planet generated a note of the scale, and the pitch heightened according to the planet’s velocity. From Boethius on, medieval religious musicians sought to come close to reproducing this divine music through appropriate proportional notes.

All musicians may not have considered the abstract mathematical principles articulated by Pythagoras and others, but there was a clear recognition that spiritual experience was enhanced by sacred music. By the early Middle Ages, we know there were a number of important traditions of sacred music. The influential bishop, Ambrose of Milan, wrote hymns for services as did the Spanish poet Prudentius. However, we know laypeople as well wrote hymns
because church councils ruled that it was permissible to sing such compositions in church.

By the sixth century, there were hymns to invoke God’s aid, celebrate happy occasions, and for funerals. In spite of the proliferation of church songs, the most influential sponsor of sacred music was Pope Gregory the Great (540–604), who was reputed to have codified the existing church music. In the eleventh century, church music was named “Gregorian chant” in honor of Pope Gregory.

The Gregorian chant (which continues to be performed today) was “monophonic,” that is, one or many voices sang a single melodic line, and more often than not the performance lacked musical accompaniment. Most of the music consisted of simple chants for the recitation of psalms and the mass at the services. This Gregorian chant was also called “plainsong.” In its elementary form, the chant consisted of a single note for each syllable of a word. Gregorian chants lent a hypnotic beauty to church services.

Most of the compositions from the Middle Ages were anonymous, but an exception is the hymns by Hildegard of Bingen, a German nun of the twelfth century. Hildegard’s works are preserved and performed today, and they show the wide range of creativity that composers could bring to the plainsong of the medieval church.

By the twelfth century, skilled composers like Hildegard began to add complexity to the plainsong, which led to dramatic innovations in sacred music. The first innovation was called a “trope,” which were new texts and melodies inserted into the existing Gregorian chants. These musical embellishments slowly changed the plainsong into more elaborate songs and led to the creation of “liturgical drama,” musical plays that were held in the middle of church services. In time, liturgical dramas became so popular that they began to be sung in the vernacular (instead of Latin) and performed in front of the church. These spurred the eventual revival of secular theater in the West.

A second modification of Gregorian chant lay in the organization of the notes themselves (instead of simple insertions like the tropes), called “polyphony.” In polyphony, two or more lines of melody are sung or played at the same time. In the early eleventh century, polyphony was very simple and known as “organum.” It consisted of a main melody accompanied by an identical melody sung four or five tones higher or lower. By about 1150, composers made the second line have its own separate melody, increasing the complexity of the composition. By the thirteenth century, the two-voiced organum gave way to multivoiced songs, called “motets.” The various parts of the piece could be performed by either voices or instruments.

The increasing complexity—and beauty—of the sacred music gave concern to some thinkers, who probably quite rightly believed that some listeners would just appreciate the music itself, instead of using it as a vehicle to bring the soul closer to God. Thomas Aquinas, for example, in the thirteenth century said that sacred music should only be sung, because instruments “move the soul rather to delight than to a good interior disposition” (Eco, 9). Aesthetic delight in music was to be left to a second form of medieval music, secular songs.

Secular songs were performed in the courts of the nobility and the squares of the towns. The poetry of the troubadours was designed to be sung, and the earliest musical notation for secular songs came from this music. These songs were mostly about love, but some sang of warfare, and even some everyday
work songs, like spinning songs. We have some poetry written by women as well. Some 1,650 troubadour melodies have been preserved. The notation does not indicate rhythm, but it is likely that they had a clearly delineated beat, which sets secular songs dramatically apart from Gregorian chants.

One famous collection of secular songs is the *Carmina Burana*, which are named after the Bavarian monastery in which the lyrics were discovered in the nineteenth century. These songs may have been written by wandering scholars and show a lively range of emotions and humor. The songs include a praise of love (and sex), an exuberance of youth, drinking and gambling songs, and humorous parodies of religion. In about 1935, a German composer, Carl Orff, set a number of these poems to music in a way that was intended to recapture medieval music by blending heavy percussion with choral voices. In this form, the *Carmina Burana* remains popularly performed today.

The earliest surviving form of instrumental secular music is the *estampie*, a medieval dance. The estampie has a strong fast beat and would have been performed by a combination of medieval instruments. The beat would have been maintained by hand drums while the melody might have been played on a *rebec*, a bowed string instrument, a *psaltery*, a plucked or struck string instrument, or on various pipes. The Celtic lands used the ancient bagpipes to accompany lively secular songs and dances.

That we can re-create many of these songs is thanks to the innovations of an Italian monk, Guido of Arezzo, who in the early eleventh century modernized musical notation. He invented the musical staff—the set of five horizontal lines and four intermediate spaces on which notes may be drawn. This allowed a consistent way to indicate the pitch of notes, and we have many beautiful manuscripts that show this system. Guido also began the practice of naming the musical tones by the syllable *ut* (for *do*) *re*, *mi*, *fa*, *sol*, *la*, that makes it easier to teach music and that survives until today. Although there were significant changes in musical theory and notation after the Renaissance, the roots of all our modern music began in the Middle Ages.

**Architecture**

In medieval Europe, religion was central to people’s lives, so it is not surprising that church buildings were the focus of some of the most remarkable developments in architectural history. At the local level from the earliest years of Christianity, villages were clustered around parish churches. A parish was often considered to extend to the area where parishioners could hear the church bell and gather to services. The buildings themselves were small and plain compared to the great monastic and urban churches that were to follow it, but nevertheless, the structure was large compared to any other building in the village. (The average parish church was probably about four times larger than any peasant cottage.)

These churches were usually built of stone, with thick walls that were whitewashed with lime on the inside. Sometimes these dark interiors were decorated with frescoes with religious imagery. As the candlelight flickered on these images, parishioners were to be reminded of the spiritual life. As in music, the decorative arts in the churches were designed to serve the religious purpose of the building. Churches were built with entries facing west, from where they expected Christ to return on the second coming, and the altars were at the east end.
By the eleventh century, church builders began to strive to make build-

ings larger. These were mostly in service of growing cities or—more often—
monasteries. These larger churches were built in a style that came to be called
“Romanesque,” which meant developed from Roman models. Romanesque
churches—like parish churches—were built of thick stone with solid walls.
Architects designed these churches in the shape of a cross, with a long central
aisles (called the “nave”), side aisles, and a “transept” crossing the nave toward
the front of the church. The altar was in the “apse” at the front.

Architects also tried to make Romanesque churches with high ceilings to
help the faithful think of heaven. To achieve this height (without the roof col-
lapsing), architects had to make the walls thick and added support by thick-
ened portions of the walls called “buttresses.” The interior of the Romanesque
churches were supported with round arches all along the nave and aisles. The
feel of Romanesque buildings was one of solidity—fortresses of God that were
sanctuaries in a violent world. One of the most famous Romanesque churches
was that of the monastery of Cluny, which served as a model for similar
churches all over Europe.

In the twelfth century, the growth of cities led churchmen to recognize they
needed a new form of architecture to serve the increased populations and the
many pilgrims (and tourists) who visited the growing, exciting cities. Two
problems with the Romanesque architecture stood in the way of the need for
larger churches: The roof was so heavy that the nearly windowless walls had
to be very thick to support it, and the rounded arches limited the buildings
height to fewer than 100 feet. Eventually, through the creative imagination of
Abbot Suger of the Abbey Church at St. Denis, near Paris, a new architectural
style was created, that has come to be called “Gothic.”

The first brilliant innovation developed by Suger and his architects was to
change the vaulting in the churches. Instead of the round arches that had been
used in the Romanesque churches, they used pointed arches that had been
developed by Muslims. They combined this with a ribbed vault in which the
weight of the roof was carried down huge stone pillars. This meant that the
weight was not carried by the walls, so builders could incorporate beautiful
stained-glass windows into the walls. The exteriors were given further sup-
port by the addition of “flying buttresses,” great pillars set away from the
building and connected by bridges to the heights that further distributed the
great weight of stone roofs.

These innovations allowed Gothic cathedrals to grow huge. For example,
the interior vaults of Notre-Dame in Paris rose to a height of 110 feet, and the
towers to 210 feet. Notre-Dame could easily accommodate nine thousand peo-
ple, so these urban churches now could satisfy the needs of growing cities.
They also became centers of urban pride, as pilgrims traveled throughout Eu-
rope admiring the brilliant architecture. By the fourteenth century, late Gothic
buildings became ever more ornate as builders elaborated on the basic engi-
eering principles that had stood the test of time.

In the East, the Byzantine Empire had created a different kind of style for
church architecture. Throughout the Byzantine Empire churches were de-
signed by local builders, which led to variation among churches. Some had the
long nave of Western churches (designed from Roman basilicas), but others
were designed in the shape of a Greek cross, with the transept the same size as
the nave. The most stunning example of the Byzantine style, however, is the
magnificent church—Hagia Sophia—built in Constantinople by the emperor Justinian in the sixth century.

Covering an area of almost 58,000 square feet, Hagia Sophia was one of the largest interior spaces of the medieval world. Even more striking than its size, however, was the enormous dome that spanned the interior space. Byzantine architects invented “pendentives” to support the dome. These were supports in the shape of inverted concave triangles that allowed the dome to be suspended over a square base. As a result of such innovations, domed buildings soon became synonymous with the Byzantine style.

The Byzantine style of churches influenced the West a bit. Charlemagne in the ninth century had his chapel at Aachen designed in the Byzantine style with a dome, which was the last domed building in the West until the Renaissance. In the fifth century, rulers from Byzantium built churches in Ravenna, Italy, and used many of the features that marked the Byzantine style—particularly the use of mosaics.

The most visible and remarkable examples of medieval secular architecture are castles. Medieval warfare was largely defensive, basing victory on armor to protect soldiers and on great walls to protect fortified positions. The height of this defensive posture was castles that dotted the landscapes all over Europe. Walled defenses were not new; the Romans demonstrated their use by circling their great cities with thick walls. For example, the walls of the great eastern city of Constantinople successfully held off the waves of Germanic invaders and ensured the survival of the eastern empire. Castles, however, introduced something new. These fortifications tended to be rural and expressed the reality that defense was a matter for nobility and their retainers. This was the feudal system in action.

In the tenth century, castles were private fortresses made of timber and earth that were built on mounds. By the thirteenth century, they had become large, defensive structures of wood and stone and were virtually impregnable. Many castles consisted of a large exterior wall surrounded by a moat filled with water, and an interior fortified structure, called the “keep,” that served as the noble family’s home and an extra line of defense should invaders breach the outer wall. The interior fortress had to include a deep well for water and plenty of capacity for food storage, for the castle’s ability to withstand a siege depended largely on supplies within.

The real advances in castle architecture came about as a result of the Crusades. Because the newly captured lands in the East had to be held by a few thousand knights, defensive fortifications were essential. Military Orders, such as the Templars and Hospitalers, lined the frontiers of Syria and Palestine with castles that were the engineering marvels of the age. Architects of these castles drew from Byzantine and Muslim models and rounded the corners of the square keep to fortify the vulnerable corners. The design of these eastern castles quickly spread through western Europe.

Entrance to a castle was through a gatehouse, whose “portcullis,” or heavy door, was oak plated and covered with iron. This was raised vertically by a pulley operated from an upper chamber in the gatehouse. Spanning the moat was a bridge. The most famous of all the twelfth-century castles was the “Krak des Chevaliers” (Citadel of the Knights) built by the Hospitallers in the Holy Land. This castle withstood every siege, until in the thirteenth century it was
captured by a trick. A Muslim general tricked the garrison with a forged order to open the gates.

Defensive castles dotted the countryside and formed the basis of warfare until the fourteenth-century development of gunpowder. When cannons could breach the thick walls, people could no longer rely on defense to protect them. At that point, the medieval culture yielded to the modern world, in which offensive weapons marked warfare.

**Visual Arts**

All the medieval visual arts adhered to the same aesthetic principles: a love of proportion, bright color and light, and a heavy use of symbolism. In addition, visual arts in the Middle Ages were virtually always created in service to some other art form and were predominately religious. That is, sculptures and visual representations (frescos and mosaics) were usually always attached to church buildings, and the best tradition of painting was manuscript illumination, where the painting was subordinate to the book. Painted or sculpted church icons in the Byzantine Empire were used in religious rituals.

The secular arts were also attached to some other purpose. For example, everyday items, such as belt buckles or jewelry, were artistically decorated. Magnificent woven or embroidered tapestries decorated practical wall hangings or clothing. Only late in the Middle Ages did sculpture become free-standing and oil painting developed. One of the characteristics of the Renaissance that saw the end of medieval culture was when the visual arts became valued on their own.

The arts in the early Middle Ages were influenced by a blending of Germanic sensibilities with Roman forms. The Germanic love of intricate patterns appeared on everything from jewelry, to religious objects (chalices, reliquaries, and church buildings), to manuscript illuminations. Vikings also brought this love of patterning into medieval sensibilities during the invasions of the tenth century.

The dark parish churches of the early Middle Ages were frequently decorated with frescoes that showed biblical scenes, religious figures, or even scenes of everyday life. These often included rather crude portrayals of the human figure while elaborate animals, plants, and patterns that were beloved of the early medieval artists dominated the artwork.

The churches in the Byzantine Empire, on the other hand, were brilliantly decorated with mosaics. Mosaic making had been a vibrant art form in the late Roman empire, and so it is not surprising that mosaic artists would have been welcomed in Constantinople that saw itself as the continuation of the glory of Rome. However, Byzantine mosaics differed from the Roman predecessors in significant ways: Roman mosaics were usually of stone and laid in the floor, but Byzantine mosaics were usually of glass and set into the walls. The glass in bright colors with a particular emphasis in gold gives the mosaics—and the churches that contain them—an otherworldly brilliance.

Because Constantinople experienced the conflict of **iconoclasm**—which argued that Christians should not make images—many of the early mosaics in Constantinople were destroyed. Thus, perhaps ironically, the best location to see mosaics in the Byzantine style is in Italy: in Ravenna, where the last emperors in the West established their court, and in Venice, where the magnificent Cathedral of St. Mark was built to glorify the relics of that saint.
The monasteries of the eleventh century, especially Cluny, were instrumental in bringing a new style of art into the new Romanesque churches. Romanesque churches were carved with fantastic creatures, symbolizing all the deadly sins that might ensnare the faithful. Gargoyles that grace the roofs of many churches (Romanesque as well as Gothic) are a good example of how function was infused with symbolism. Gargoyles served a practical purpose of funneling rainwater off the roof but were also symbols of evil fleeing the sacred premises of the church.

At the same time, religious topics were carved into the churches. Christ was portrayed in majesty on Judgment Day in many of the churches. Monastic churches became so decorated that some churchmen wondered whether all this beauty was appropriate. Bernard of Clairveaux, for example, wrote, “one could spend the whole day marveling at one such representation rather than in meditating on the law of God. In the name of God! If we are not ashamed at its foolishness, why at least are we not angry at the expense?” (Eco, 8). But Bernard was in the minority; most saw the Romanesque art as drawing the mind upward to God. This belief was continued in the Gothic style.

When Abbot Suger began the artistic revolution that has come to be called “Gothic,” he began with new architecture that allowed for huge churches to dominate the medieval urban landscapes. Intimately tied to the new architecture, however, were the visual arts that decorated almost every space of the cathedrals. Gothic designers decorated every external pillar with a sculpture of figures from the Hebrew Scriptures, New Testament, or secular kings. These figures were depicted in an idealized way and served in a literal as well as metaphoric sense to be “pillars of the church.”

More revolutionary were the stained-glass windows that filled the walls that were no longer necessary to support the roof. Abbot Suger wrote about his views of the symbolic importance of light; he argued that every living thing has some bit of divinity—that he described as “light”—and the mind and soul long to move ever higher to the perfect and pure light that is God. Gothic builders believed that stained-glass windows created with bright primary colors brought divine light into the church building.

The glass was rolled into long colored strips which were broken into shape by placing hot lead along the design lines, then broken when buckets of cold water were poured on to the heated lead. Skillful artisans learned to create stunning, complex images that retold Biblical tales, sermons, and folk wisdom as sunlight entered the windows.

The whole Gothic cathedral represented a synthesis of medieval life and thought. In these engineering marvels, theologians, artists, and artisans reflected the full panorama of medieval life in which the community of the faithful expressed their longings for the divine and their expectations of heaven. The cathedrals represented a visual expression of the medieval philosophy of scholasticism, which argued that everything was linked in a divine order.

In the fourteenth century, scholasticism was attacked by a new philosophy that was less certain that universal principles were accessible to the human mind. This philosophy of nominalism called into question much that had been taken for granted before, including principles of aesthetics that had unified medieval art. Slowly, great art became that which was created by the genius of individuals. This idea began to be expressed in the great paintings of the late Middle Ages, especially in Flanders and Italy. Painters like Giotto in Italy or
Jan Van Eyck began to portray individuals in artwork that was separated from buildings and books. The Renaissance view of art was being born.

Further Reading

5. SOCIETY

Medieval society was organized very differently from our own. The principal theoretical goal of twenty-first century society is freedom and democracy, in which every individual has the right to pursue his or her dreams and aspirations. In the Middle Ages, on the other hand, the goal was to have each individual linked in obligation to another. In other words, the goal was not freedom, but connection. The wealthy placed themselves under the permanent protection of those more powerful; peasants were tied to their land and their masters, and churchmen and women owed obedience to their superiors. All believed that only when everyone was linked in obligation and place was the social order secured.

Medieval society was also different from modern societies because it was arranged by “orders” instead of class, gender, wealth, or other ways we might understand social divisions. For medieval people, “order” meant one’s function, or how the individual contributes to society. By the eleventh century, medieval thinkers saw three orders that made up society: those who pray, those who fight, and those who work. Each of these orders included people of varying wealth. For example, those who pray included everyone from wealthy bishops drawn from the highest nobility to poor parish priests drawn from the peasantry. Those who fought included the wealthiest king to a poor knight. Women, too, were arranged within these orders, whether they were nuns praying, noble women producing heirs to fight, or peasant wives working the land.

This essay will explore the social structure of medieval times from the lowest peasant order—those who work—through the warrior class—those who fight—to the highest church official—those who pray. This essay will also look at the growing body of laws that developed to secure the social order. Ironically, the laws formed institutions such as Parliament and created an idea that law was more important than the social ties that bound people to one another—an idea that would ultimately destroy a medieval society based on personal ties. The reliance on law and governing bodies formed the basis for the freedoms that we enjoy today.
Manorialism: Those Who Work the Land

Peasants throughout most of Europe lived clustered together in villages and worked together in agriculture, farming strips of land that surrounded the villages (see “Economy” section). Beyond this basic structure, the rural inhabitants had varying degrees of freedom, but no one was completely free. All owed some rents and some labor to their landlords. These landlords might be nobility, who did the fighting, or churchmen, who did the praying. Peasant is the general name for rural agricultural workers of the Middle Ages and refers to workers who live in villages. Farmers, on the other hand, are those agricultural workers who lived isolated and surrounded by their fields. Scandinavia and a few other regions on the fringes of Europe were inhabited by farmers more than peasants. Farmers tended to be more free than peasants. However, most medieval agricultural workers were peasants clustered in small villages.

Most of the peasants in Europe were serfs (known in England as villeins). Serfs were personally free, that is, they were not slaves, but unlike the general term peasants, serfs could not choose to leave their land without permission from the lord. In addition, serfs owed a certain amount of their labor in addition to rents. A few lucky peasants had “freeholds,” that is they owed no labor obligations to the landlord, only rents and a portion of their produce. Whether a peasant was a serf or a freeholder, he or she worked to support the ruling orders; the only difference was how much they owed. When a lord received a land grant from the king, he also gained the service of the peasants who worked the land, who had to support his noble household.

Serfs’ obligations were of two kinds: goods and labor. They had to give the lord a percentage of their crops or whatever livestock they raised, and the percentage depended upon the initial contract that bound the serf to the land. Typically, families might owe the lord one-tenth of their grain, a piglet from a litter, a number of eggs from their hens, and some of the cheese made from the milk of their goats. Rural women might also owe a portion of the cloth they wove, the yarn they spun, or the vegetables they grew.

Serfs found the labor they owed the lord even more onerous than the goods they paid. On some manors, serfs had to work as many as three days a week on the lord’s personal lands (called the demesne lands). Serfs had to plant his crops, build roads, erect walls or buildings, dig ditches, and do anything else the lord needed. Remember, this work was in addition to tilling their own lands and growing their own food from which they would pay a portion. Women, too, owed work, going to the lord’s household to help spin, weave, and do domestic work.

Serfs were supposed to receive some benefits in exchange for this labor and rent. Lords were to provide protection to serfs in times of war, and justice in times of peace. In addition, lords provided things that required a large investment of capital: mills, barns, ovens, large draft animals, and the like. However, most serfs found this a bad bargain. In times of war, too often their crops were burned and their warehouses looted by invading armies, and the justice obtained in the lord’s court often was just one more form of exploitation. Even the mills and other equipment became a way for greedy lords to extort more fees.

Throughout the Middle Ages, there was sporadic evidence of peasant dissatisfaction with this arrangement. For example, law cases record peasants who tried to prove they were freeholders instead of serfs so they would at least own their own labor. Some chronicles describe an early form of strike, in
which peasants refused to use the lord’s mill, preferring to grind their grain on hand mills to avoid the ever-increasing fees. Some peasants even resisted plowing with more efficient horses to avoid doing extra work themselves as they had to walk more quickly behind horses instead of oxen (see “Economy” section).

The agricultural expansion in the eleventh century helped some peasants gain some freedoms as lords were forced to negotiate more reasonable terms to encourage peasants to settle new lands. For example, one charter permitted serfs to be free from tax on the wine and food they produced for their own consumption. In the fourteenth century, peasant revolts arose throughout western Europe as peasants resisted the manorial system that bound them to their lords and struggled to gain a better life.

The examples of peasant resistance to lords’ demands reveal the importance of law and legal contracts in the manorial system. Villagers had always created laws to govern local affairs, and the earliest medieval law codes incorporated what had clearly been previous village legislation. For example, peasants had penalties for people who kept dangerous dogs or who set wolf traps without warning their neighbors. These villagers were participating in an ancient custom of self-governance at the most local level. The contractual basis of the serfs’ relationship to the lords was also written down and bound by law, so the importance of the legal system was established throughout medieval society.

The Feudal Contract Binds Those Who Fight

Medieval manors were large rural entities that included one or more peasant villages, agricultural land, pastures, forests, and a large house (or castle) for the noble landlord. These entities were designed to serve as the economic base to support the fighting forces that by the ninth century were highly specialized. It took about ten peasant families to support one mounted soldier, so an efficient manorial organization was essential to produce an army.

The next problem was how to organize the nobility who lived spread out in the manors of the land. The French dynasty of the Carolingians first developed a complex way to organize the fighting men so that, like peasants, they were bound in ties of mutual obligations. Elements of this system spread all over Europe, and in the most general sense, this system of mutual obligation formed the political structure of the elites in medieval society. Historians in the sixteenth century called this political system “feudalism,” but historians today prefer to avoid this term because it suggests a highly organize system. Instead, feudal law governed a loose structure of ties between people that varied from place to place. Whatever we call this political structure, medieval nobility saw themselves linked in a chain of mutual obligation, even if the forms of the obligations varied.

The basis of the feudal tie was that lords (or kings) granted a “fief,” usually land but it might be something else (like a monopoly) that would generate enough income to support the nobleman. The nobleman then became the lord’s “vassal,” bound to the lord in loyalty and service for life. In return for this fief, the vassal owed the lord certain obligations, known as “aid and counsel.” The greatest “aid” was to fight, the main function of the nobility. Other aids included monetary support when lord’s incurred specific expenses, such as a wedding of his eldest daughter or the knighting of his son. The requirement of “counsel” meant that when a lord required advice, his vassals had to assemble
to give it. This requirement of counsel contributed to the growth of democratic institutions, such as Parliament. Both parties owed each other fealty—that is, good faith to do the other no harm, and this vow was sealed with a solemn kiss that confirmed the ties between them.

There was a great variation in wealth, power, and status among the vassals, all of whom were aristocrats. Over time, vassals acquired various titles to distinguish their ranks. All were often called “barons,” with dukes were the highest, counts guarded borders, and the lowest of the aristocrats, the knights, often owned no more than their fighting ability and their weapons. Whatever their titles, they all shared the same social order: those who fight and who are supported by those who work. All were supposed to be loyal to their “liege lord,” the king who commanded loyalty of everyone in their lands, but this was a tenuous tie, and medieval life was marked by violence among those whose purpose in life was warfare.

The fact that these feudal ties were based on mutually binding contracts defensible in law led to precedents that contributed to modern notions of law and democracy. For the United States, the most important such precedent is Magna Carta. This “Great Charter” grew from a dispute between King John of England and his barons. The barons believed (quite rightly) that John was not showing “good faith” in his dealings with them. He was charging new taxes and generally violating the traditional feudal relationships. In 1215, he barons forced John to sign the Magna Carta, which asserted that even the king is not above the law. This document is treasured as one of the precedents of constitutional law.

The feudal system tied the elites of Europe together in mutual obligations that were bound by law. These obligations held society together when other more modern forces—like nationalism—were nonexistent. The ties were sometimes tenuous and sometimes hard to enforce, but they served to forge some sense of order in a violent age.

The ties among the nobility also included marriage ties. At all levels, marriage involved a serious economic commitment that created alliances between families. Thus, marriage was too important to let couples choose their partners for love; instead, families carefully negotiated matches and drew up elaborate agreements stipulating the property that would be brought by each party.

The church also had a stake in marriages, forbidding unions that it deemed too close. Today, first cousins are forbidden to marry in most places, but in the thirteenth century the prohibition extended to four degrees. That is, a couple who shared a great-great-grandfather could not marry. Such prohibitions also extended to godparents, making the determination of kinship very complex.

Once a marriage took place, the couple was joined for life and were required to live together. Divorce was forbidden, but the church sometimes allowed marriages to be “annulled” if the marriage had been illegal in the first place. One of the main reasons for annulling a marriage was the discovery that the couple had relatives in common so it was forbidden by the consanguinity rules. A marriage could also be dissolved if it had never been consummated by sexual intercourse.

The main purpose of marriage was to produce children to ensure the continuity of the noble family lines. Children were born at home with the help of a midwife and the other women living in the household and remained in the care of women until they were about 6 years old. After that, the boys were
entrusted to men to learn the arts of war, and girls learned the domestic arts surrounded by the women of the household. Even while they were young, their parents began to plan their future, looking for suitable mates or deciding that children would be dedicated to the church to enter monasteries. Like everyone in the Middle Ages, children were to fulfill the obligations that came with the ties that joined them to family and community. No one thought to ask their opinion of their future!

The daily life of the nobility revealed the sense of community engendered by the feudal system. The lords with their wives and children lived together with crowds of their own vassals and their servants. All ate together on long tables in the common hall of the manor house and played games together in the evenings. The nobility also developed an idealized version of their rugged, violent lives in an elaborate code of values and symbolic rituals called “chivalry.” In this idealized world, knights were strong and disciplined, who used their power to defend the church, the poor, and women in need. They fought mock combats called “jousts” or tournaments, and gloried in the pageantry as they honed their battle skills. In reality, knights probably violated their own ethics as often as they adhered to them; the code of chivalry provided only a veneer of symbols and ceremonies that overlay the violence at the heart of “those who fight.”

Marriages were arranged with no regard for the emotions of the couple, so it is perhaps not surprising that nobles often found love outside of marriage. In noble households beginning in the twelfth century, some poets praised new ideals of love called “courtly love.” In this romantic love, noble men promised to do anything to win the affection of a noble woman. Even though the church frowned on this new praise of adulterous love, some historians suggest that the praise of romantic love is one of the most influential ideas that emerged in the Middle Ages that set the stage for love matches and separated the West from the rest of the world.

Medieval life was violent, and to protect themselves nobles usually lived in fortified houses and castles, which by the thirteenth century had become marvels of engineering. The best castles had concentric rings of walls that guarded an interior fortress that sheltered the noble family and its retainers. These castles showed the importance of defensive warfare that marked the Middle Ages. It was only the fourteenth-century development of gunpowder that could breach the walls that made these fortresses obsolete.

The new weaponry developed in the fourteenth century also led to the decline of the feudal ties that had marked medieval society. Lords increasingly wanted money (called “scutage”) instead of military service in return for fiefs. Lords then used this cash to hire professional armies—called “free companies” because they had no feudal ties and sold their services to the highest bidder. The feudal system deteriorated into what is sometimes called “bastard feudalism” in which the old ties of loyalty were replaced with cash payments.

**Ordering Those Who Pray**

From the beginning of the Middle Ages, church organization stressed bringing all religious people into a tight hierarchical organization (see “Religion” section). However, just as medieval secular society increasingly relied on laws to regulate the ties that bound people to each other, the church, too, began to look to contract law to confirm its order.
The turning point in church law—called “canon law”—came in about 1140, when the church lawyer, Gratian, issued his “Decretum,” a collection of canon law that showed that church canons could form as complete a structure of jurisprudence as secular law. This collection argued that the pope was the supreme judge and had jurisdiction over any religious matter. Of course, the question of what constituted a “religious matter” quickly became contentious. For example, since the church was charged with protecting widows and orphans, they could claim jurisdiction over wills and inheritance. Again, since crimes like murder and theft were also sins, did this mean the pope was the supreme judge over these matters?

The eleventh century struggle for power between popes and emperors called the “Investiture Controversy” was in large part a question of who had legal authority at the top of medieval society. With the help of a growing number of skilled canon lawyers, thirteenth-century popes like Innocent III were able to exert authority over the secular arm of government to a remarkable degree. It appeared that the right order of medieval society placed the pope at the top of a strong hierarchy of connections that tied each person to another.

In the disasters of the fourteenth century, this situation changed. The French king Philip IV directly challenged papal authority over the issue of taxation and was able to ensure the election of a French cardinal as pope in 1304. This pope, Clement V, did not even go to Rome. Instead, he established a new papal court in Avignon, in the shadow of the French king. For the next 72 years, popes ruled from Avignon, and many Christians objected to what the Italian Petrarch called the “Babylonian captivity” of the papacy.

The Avignon papacy built up its administration, its cadre of lawyers, and its tax collectors and ruled as any effective modern state might. However, there were many who criticized this direction, arguing that the church had become all too secular while disregarding its spiritual charge. The pressure mounted on the Avignon papacy to return to Rome, and an influential mystic, Catherine of Siena was a last straw in persuading Pope Gregory XI to return to Rome.
Pope Gregory died in 1378 almost as soon as he had arrived in Rome, and the situation of the administration of the church quickly grew worse. A disputed papal election ended up with two popes. From 1378 to 1417, the church suffered from the Great Schism in which there were two and at times three popes claiming jurisdiction over Christendom.

The schism (split in the church) was resolved in the fifteenth century by church councils. This Conciliar Movement argued that the collective group of bishops, not the pope, held ultimate authority over church matters. This essentially argued that Christendom was more of a constitutional monarchy rather than an absolute one. The conciliarists prevailed, and in 1417 they deposed reigning popes and elected a Roman cardinal, Martin V, as the only pope. The Great Schism was over, but it had transformed the medieval papacy and the social order that it had established. No longer would “those who pray” be able to govern the society as a whole.

As fourteenth-century kings took over control from religious authorities, they also took over legal authority that had been claimed by church leaders. Canon law became incorporated into secular law with the unforeseen consequence that many issues of morality—like sexual practices—became matters of secular law. It would take into the twentieth century before secular states began to sort out what was properly religious law and what was secular. This is another long-standing heritage of the medieval struggle to order society.

City Social Structure

Medieval rulers—secular and religious—did not give much thought to how the growing urban life fit into their view of the social order of the world. Indeed, they thought of cities as islands separate from the feudal and manorial ties that shaped their society. Urban residents, however, took matters into their own hands and created influential and enduring social structures of their own.

Once towns had received a charter from a local lord (see “Economy” section), they established ways to govern themselves. Town government was likely to take the form of a mayor (or provost) and a council. Sometimes the mayor was appointed by the lord and sometimes he was elected by his fellow townsmen. These offices were almost always held by the wealthy merchants who were recognized as town leaders. However, artisans and craftsmen quite rightly recognized that wealthy merchants were not always looking out for their interests. They formed their own groups to handle their needs; these organizations were called “guilds.”

Guilds probably began as social, or even drinking, clubs, but they quickly became organizations to look out for the common interests of their members. Guilds maintained schools to train members’ sons and helped guild widows and orphans. Guilds also acted as religious fraternities to sponsor religious festivals and help the local churches. For example, some of the marvelous stained-glass windows of cathedrals were contributed by local guilds.

In an age of much lawlessness, guilds also protected the business interests of its members. If a man in a neighboring town refused to settle his debts, guildsmen might capture the next person from that town who entered their town and hold him hostage until the debt was paid. In the freewheeling marketplace of this early capitalism, unorthodox methods were sometimes called for!

Over time, more and more specialized guilds were formed. There were guilds of spinners, weaver, fullers, and dyers, all within the cloth industry. There were
also guilds of goldsmiths, bakers, and every other kind of production. Guilds regulated the quality of their production as well as their membership. An artisan began his career in a guild as an apprentice, working for a master until he learned his trade. When he was able to produce a quality product—judged a “masterpiece” by guild members—he could qualify as either a “master” with full membership in the guild, or a “journeyman,” who could work in the trade for wages until an opening in the guild came available.

In time, guilds came to be the major power brokers in city government. In some cities single guilds dominated. Often the merchants’ guild, which had the wealthiest members, prevailed and virtually ruled the towns. In other cities, like London, many guilds joined together to govern jointly. All in all, however, working people joining together in guilds became a force to be reckoned with.

Throughout the Middle Ages, women participated in all aspects of urban life. Women actually dominated some trades as we can see by the words we use to identify some work: The ending “ster” is a feminine ending, so trades like “brewster” (beer brewing) and “webster” (weaving) were originally dominated by women. Women through their family alliances could be guild members and inherit shops and workshops. By the fourteenth century, however, women began to be excluded from guilds and restricted to supporting family roles. In women’s work, the early modern world inherited more from the restrictive Renaissance than from the more open Middle Ages.

The urban groups became significantly influential in England in the thirteenth century when the English King Edward I (r. 1272–1307) desperately needed new taxes to finance his wars. Instead of just calling his nobles and church leaders to Parliament to fulfill their obligation to give him counsel, Edward sent agents throughout the land calling two knights from every county and two townsmen (burgesses) from every city. Edward ordered that the burgesses be elected by the populace. This expanded gathering has come to be called the “Model Parliament” and shaped the future of English representative government.

As the representatives gathered they had to decide how to arrange themselves. In France, the equivalent parliament sat by order: one house for the clergy, one for the nobility, and one for the commoners (“those who work”). In England, however, a different precedent was set. The clergy sat with the upper nobility, but the lower nobility (the knights) sat with the burgesses to act together for their mutual benefit. In time, the nobles would become the House of Lords and the burgesses would become the House of Commons. This medieval institution shaped the democratic structures of the modern world.

The Byzantine Empire

The Byzantine Empire centered on the magnificent city of Constantinople and was the heir of the Roman Empire, and as such its society represented some differences from the decentralized states in the West. The court of the emperor offered a centralized authority over church and state and controlled huge amounts of wealth. Money poured in not only from the lucrative trade with Far Eastern lands, but also from royal monopolies on production of silk and purple dye, both much in demand in the West.

Even outside the royal monopolies, craftsmen in the cities of the East belonged to guilds or corporations that were strictly controlled by the state. The state regulated purchasing raw materials, marketing of finished products, manufacturing
methods, prices, and profits. Government inspectors watched all aspects of production. This system led to a good deal of stability and quality control, but little technological innovation.

The emperor himself was viewed as a sacred person appointed by God to rule. He lived in a magnificent, and isolated palace complex overlooking the sea in Constantinople, and his subjects came into the royal presence prostrating themselves on the floor. Not surprisingly, this centralized empire was governed by a complex bureaucracy, which was expensive to maintain, yet quite efficient. These government employees prevented the decentralization that was so marked in the West.

The Byzantine Empire was surrounded by enemies. The Persian Empire in the East, the Muslims in the South, and the Slavs in the North always represented a threat. Therefore, the empire built and maintained a strong military to guard its borders. The backbone of the army was its heavy cavalry, which accounted for about half its force. The army was well supplied with servants who did all their work, and the generals were professional soldiers who tried to keep the old Roman tradition of rigorous discipline. During the Crusades, when this disciplined force met the individualistic knights from the West there was a shocking culture clash representing the two different types of armies.

The Byzantine generals used peasants in their armies in a way that the West did not, because free peasants served as infantry supporting the all-important cavalry. By the sixth and seventh centuries, the Byzantine Empire was organized by themes. The theme system made land available to free peasants who performed military service. The emperor tried to encourage this free peasantry by trying to restrict the power of great landholders, but over time wealthy landholders were able to bring a feudal system into the centralized theme structure. As nobles accumulated large estates, free peasants were reduced, and became serfs, who as in the West were bound to the soil and owed their lords rents and labor.

The Byzantine Empire was different from the West in that there always remained a large centralized state that could employ larger resources. Therefore, the Byzantine imperial household continued the ancient practice of owning large numbers of slaves. The emperor's household and lands were served by slaves that were drawn from warfare or slave traders. As slavery virtually disappeared in western Europe, it continued throughout the Middle Ages in the East.

The Byzantine Empire preserved the legal legacy of the Roman Empire. The early sixth-century emperor Justinian ordered the codification of Roman law that had been growing and changing for a millennium. Emperors and senators had passed decrees, judges had made precedent-setting decisions, and jurists had written complicated legal interpretations. By Justinian's time, the collections were full of obscure rites and internal contradictions, which the emperor knew needed clarifying for the law to be useful. The results of this formidable project were published in 50 books called the Corpus Juris Civilis (the Body of Civil Law) published in about A.D. 533. In this form, Roman law was revived in western Europe in about the thirteenth century and influenced canon law and modern law codes.

Although Justinian saw himself as preserving the old Roman Empire, in fact by his reign, Byzantine society was very different from the West. Justinian was the last emperor to use Latin as the language of government; subsequent
emperors shifted to Greek, a language largely forgotten in the West. Church services were conducted in Greek, and the differing languages and alphabets separated the two halves of Europe.

The disruptions that fragmented the old Roman Empire in the beginning of the fifth century introduced a new society into Europe. This social order emerged in response to a new, decentralized reality in the West, and an increasingly autocratic empire in the East. Throughout, however, personal ties were important as nobility and peasantry alike found themselves bound to a hierarchy that demanded personal loyalty and contractual obligations. Also throughout Europe, these ties were increasingly legal obligations, and the rule of law slowly rose to be a significant feature of medieval society. In the fourteenth century, when disasters broke down traditional social ties, the rule of law remained as a significant heritage of medieval social order. See also Documents 11 and 17.

Further Reading

6. SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Science refers to a systemized understanding of how the universe operates, and technology refers to inventions or practical applications of things to make our lives easier. In the twenty-first century, we usually assume that the former informs the latter and that the science and technology progress together. However, in the Middle Ages, that was not the case. Until the late Middle Ages, scientific discoveries were slow to come though throughout this millennium technology improved rapidly. This essay will look at both these movements.

Science

Progress in medieval science was impeded by two forces: a veneration of ancient science (with all its inaccuracies) that was carefully preserved in the education of the Middle Ages, and second was the desire to incorporate religion into a unified theory. In fact, the “science” of the Middle Ages included the desire to study God’s laws as well as nature’s laws, and to understand the “mind” of God as well as human understandings. Thus, the greatest minds of the medieval world first learned the science of the Greeks and Romans then formulated ways to include that into theology.

Medieval medicine remained theoretically bound to the ancient Greek physician Galen’s (131–201 C.E.) views. He had claimed that all illness came from an imbalance of the four “humors” or fluids of the body: blood, bile, urine,
and phlegm. He argued that each of these humors had its own properties—warm, cold, dry, and moist—and when a person was out of balance, the cure was to restore an appropriate equilibrium. For example, if a person were feverish and flushed, he or she was considered to have an excess of blood, which would be resolved by bleeding the patient. This theoretical understanding of the functions of the body persisted well into the modern age. Medieval medicine also included more practical wisdom about healthy herbs or other cures, which were included in a number of the medieval medical tracts that were preserved and studied especially at the medical school in Salerno. The famous mystic Hildegard of Bingen wrote a medical tract—Causes and Cures—that combined Galen’s system with some popular cures and included a particular consideration of women’s health that was absent from Galen’s analysis.

The educated man or woman of the high Middle Ages also held the same view of the physical universe as had the ancient Greeks: a motionless world made of four elements: earth, water, air, and fire. Of course, medieval people observed motion in the world—flames rose upward, rocks sank in the water—but they believed all such motion was due to the fact that this world was imperfect, so the four elements were mixed. Motion came about as each element tried to find its “rightful” place. That is, fire moved upward and rocks descended.

The physics of the heavens was also drawn from the Greek Aristotle’s view. The four elements of the fallen world were surrounded by circles made up of a fifth element—the “quintessence”—in which were embedded the planets and stars. They believed these circles rotated around the still earth creating beautiful music as they did so (see “The Arts” section). Aristotle was so revered that no one in the Middle Ages challenged this view of the universe. Or, if they did, it was not taken seriously enough to be recorded for posterity.

Medieval thinkers were acute observers of the heavens, and as such, they understood that the earth was round, and that’s why they could see the motion of constellations circling the sky, and ships disappearing over the horizon. Early Vikings apparently imagined the earth to be round and flattened (like a saucer) surrounded by water.

Observations of the heavens allowed medieval thinkers to recognize that the old Julian calendar inherited from the Romans was inaccurate. Because the year is not exactly 365 days long (which is why we add leap year every 4 years), the calendar had drifted considerably. For example, by the mid-thirteenth century, the winter solstice, which should be about December 21, was occurring on December 15, and the vernal equinox occurred on March 12 instead of March 21. As Roger Bacon in 1267 claimed: “This fact cannot only the astronomer certify, but any layman with the eye can perceive it” (Gimpel, 190).

Heavenly observations included recognition of comets, eclipses, and other events. However, observing and even predicting such heavenly occurrences did not mean that observers used modern scientific techniques to interpret the events. Comets and other unusual things continued to be seen as messages from God, which needed interpretation. For example, when Halley’s Comet streaked across the sky just before the Norman Invasion of England in 1066, many saw it as an omen of disaster for the realm. Such interpretations show the great difference between accurate observation of a comet and a modern scientific method—the Middle Ages were accurately called the “Age of Faith,” not science.

In the fourteenth century, at the twilight of the Middle Ages, some thinkers began to question Aristotelian physics that had formed the core of medieval
understandings of the universe. Two Parisian philosophers, Jean Buridan (c. 1300–1370) and Nicole Oresme (c. 1330–1382) questioned Aristotle’s law of motion that lay at the core of ancient physics. They argued that a moving body acquired “impetus” that kept it going until a counterforce (such as friction) stopped it. Oresme further suggested that the idea of heavenly spheres was inaccurate because the heavenly observations could be explained by a spinning earth. When movement, not stillness, was acknowledged to be the main force of the universe, the stage was set for the modern scientific revolution, when people relied on observation, rather than on classical authorities.

In the twelfth century, many Europeans became fascinated by the ancient pseudoscience, alchemy, which is the desire to turn base metals into gold by using a “philosopher’s stone.” These early chemists believed that gold is the only pure metal, and that all others are impure versions of it. Therefore, if they could only figure out how to distill the pure gold from the mixed metals, they would be rich. Of course, the theory was false, but alchemists in their laboratories became the ancestors of modern chemists in learning how to melt and separate elements. One practical result of alchemists’ efforts was the development of effective stills that allowed for the production of brandy and other alcoholic beverages.

The one area of significant scientific innovation in medieval Europe was in the field of mathematics. Like other sciences, Europeans inherited Roman mathematics. However, the Romans (like the Greeks before them) were handicapped by the fact that they did not use a zero. (This is why the B.C.E–C.E. system of dating begins with the year “1” instead of more logically with a zero.) The cumbersome Roman numerals made all but the simplest arithmetic calculations possible only for experts. For example: To multiply VI x VI (6 x 6) might take several steps. You would have to do simple doubling, then add the results:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{II} \times \text{VI} &= \text{XII} \\
\text{II} \times \text{VI} &= \text{XII} \\
\text{II} \times \text{VI} &= \text{XII} \\
\text{VI} \times \text{VI} &= \text{XXXVI}
\end{align*}
\]

Imagine how complicated more difficult problems would be!

Medieval thinkers knew the importance of mathematics. In the mid-twelfth century, for example, Thierry of Chartres argued “on mathematics all rational explanation of the universe depended” (Gimpel, 179). Thierry died in 1155 before the real revolution in mathematics came about that brought the numerical tools that ultimately allowed the calculations that form the underpinning of our modern science. These tools came from India via the Muslim world.

Around 1180, a Pisan merchant sent his son, Leonardo Fibonacci, to study with Muslims in North Africa. Fibonacci discovered the usefulness of the Hindu-Arabic numerals that contained the all-important zero. Leonardo published a widely diffused book called *The Book of the Abacus*, in which he claimed the “nine Indian figures are 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1. With these nine figures and the sign 0, any number may be written” (Gies, 226). Fibonacci’s book dealt with practical business applications, such as calculating interest, profit, and percentages. However, he also made great strides in theoretical mathematics. He is best known for originating the “Fibonacci sequence,” which describes the relationship between
two or more successive terms by a formula. But his greatest achievement was in developing algebra (the word itself is a Muslim term).

The use of what we call “Arabic numerals” (and what the medieval world called “Hindu numerals”) spread slowly. However, its impact was great on the early medieval scientists who immediately saw its use. Trigonometry in the West was established in the thirteenth century at Oxford University, and the precise measurements of optics were facilitated by the use of the new numbering system. Truly, Western science began with the spread of Hindu numerals.

We can look back at the new mathematics as a singular turning point in the history of science, but for medieval thinkers, this was only a sideline. They believed the high point of their scientific discoveries lay in the philosophical school of **scholasticism**. Scholasticism was the attempt to reconcile faith with reason—that is, to understand with one’s mind what one believed with one’s heart. This involved a noble attempt to understand the natural and the divine worlds in one unifying system. The twelfth-century rediscovery of the advanced logic by Aristotle seemed to give thinkers the tools to understand even the mind of God.

The greatest of the scholastics was Thomas Aquinas, whose huge work, the *Summa Theologiae*, represents his summary of all knowledge through which the believer is led to God. Through this long tract full of questions and discussions, he adapted Aristotle’s ethics and politics to serve a Christian society. His famous “Five Proofs of God” demonstrate how the scholastics believed that observations of the natural world combined with faith can help us understand God. For instance, he showed that we can observe motion on earth, and all earthly motion is caused by some other motion. When we trace back all the motion that is caused, our logical mind leads us to understand that there must be some first mover that originated all other motion. This “unmoved mover” is God. Thus, our understanding of the physical world of motion leads us to an understanding of one of the elements of God.

For all of Aquinas’s emphasis on using the natural world as a path to truth, he did not study the natural world much. Instead, he read Aristotle’s views on the natural world. In this way, scholasticism did not lead directly to our modern scientific methods. However, medieval reaction against the shortcomings of scholasticism did. Some thinkers believed that the scholastics were fundamentally wrong to try to approach God through logic. Many felt that the proper way to approach God was through faith alone, because God should not be limited by the rules of logic. These people believe in **mysticism**, or the ability to feel a union with God: a union of feeling rather than thought.

The most devastating intellectual critique of scholasticism came from Franciscan thinkers, and the most important of these was the brilliant philosopher, William of Ockham (c. 1285–1349). Ockham argued that philosophical speculations were interesting logical exercises, but not a path to certain truth. Instead, through his philosophy of New Nominalism, he argued that it was impossible to know God or prove his existence through reason because God was all-powerful, so he did not have to act logically. Therefore, any attempt to know God through logic was a waste of time. Ockham’s findings led to a decline in abstract logic, but a rise in scientific observation. Instead of studying God’s mind, human intellect should focus on observing and studying the world—this is the beginning of modern science.

The heart of modern science lies in a method of observation and experiment. This scientific method began in the late Middle Ages at Oxford, where
philosophers of the New Nominalism had begun to turn their attention to studying the world. One of the important forerunners of this movement was Robert Grosseteste (c. 1175–1253), who was the first chancellor of Oxford University. He emphasized that natural philosophy had to be based on mathematics and experimentation and further believed that the study of optics was the key to understanding the physical world. He suggested that lenses could be used to magnify small objects, and the development of eyeglasses in the thirteenth century may well have been influenced by Grosseteste’s studies of lenses.

Grosseteste’s fame has been eclipsed by the accomplishments of his successor and student, Roger Bacon (c. 1214–1292). Bacon, too, was a Franciscan at Oxford, and though he had never met Grosseteste, he greatly admired the master’s work. Bacon refined Grosseteste’s studies of optics, and his description of animal eyes and optics nerves were pathbreaking. Bacon also claimed that mathematics was key to scientific knowledge and was embarrassed by the inaccuracies that had crept into the Julian calendar. Bacon appealed to Pope Clement IV to reform the calendar, but his calls went unheeded during his lifetime. However, papal reform of the calendar would lead Copernicus to offer his heliocentric view of the universe in the sixteenth century—the starting point of the modern scientific revolution. Bacon’s most-remembered contribution to science was his demonstration that experimentation was more important than logic. He was a man of the future of science, not one of the medieval past.

Technology

Science may explore the truth and mysteries that lay behind the visible world, but technology makes everything work and our lives easier. In spite of this practical advantage, people through most of the past have seen technology as a poor cousin to the favored science. Aristotle favored a life of the mind in which people contemplated abstract truths—essentially science—over those who practiced what he called “bananas arts,” manual labor in creating things. As medieval thinkers venerated everything Aristotelian, they transmitted the devaluation of bananas arts. However, the situation in the Middle Ages was different from that in the classical world in some ways that contributed to the growth of technology. Most significant was the end of slave labor. No longer was there an abundance of labor to produce all that was necessary. Instead, medieval people were remarkably quick to adopt labor-saving devices, which led to a technological revolution that changed the face of European society.

By the ninth century, some medieval thinkers saw the need to dignify technology above the disparaging position it held with Aristotle. John Scotus Erigena in the ninth century invented the term *artes mechanicae* (mechanical arts) to supplement the liberal arts in a well-rounded education. In the twelfth century, another scholar—Honorius of Autun—developed this idea further by adding mechanics to the liberal arts curriculum He wrote: “Concerning mechanics . . . it teaches . . . every work in metals, wood, or marble, in addition to painting, sculpture, and all arts which are done with the hands” (Gies, 11). Thus, from the twelfth century onward, thinkers—and scientists—had recognized the importance of technology in the spectacular growth of European medieval society.

To study the history of medieval technology is to review the many inventions that changed society rather than to consider individual inventors. This is
largely because virtually all the great innovations that changed the West were invented in the East. Chinese inventions spread slowly to India, the Muslim world, and then into the West. Sometimes we can trace direct and sudden transmissions—silk worms, for example—but other times we just know that items that had been used in China for centuries slowly appeared in the West. The success of the medieval West was in its ability to adapt the inventions that came from older societies of the East. The easiest way to consider these technological innovations is to look at various industries that benefitted from new technology.

At the heart of most of the change was a revolution in power. Early medieval Europe suffered from a shortage of labor. This caused people to rely more on animal power and, more importantly for the history of technology, on new sources of power: water and wind. Waterwheels in particular offered reliable sources of energy all along rivers and even in the tidal areas of northern Europe where the difference between low and high tide was extreme.

For water mills to work, builders had to solve a specific problem: converting the rotary, horizontal, motion (of a wheel being turned by running water) to vertical motion. This was accomplished by using a cam, projecting from the axle of the waterwheel. Once this technological problem was resolved, builders could harness waterpower to accomplish many tasks. The most common watermills were used to grind grain, freeing people from the essential, but labor-intensive task of converting hard grain into useable flour to make bread. The watermill would power two large horizontal grindstones that made short work of the grain. But this was just the beginning.

Watermills were adapted to power triphammers to stimulate the constant food kneading that was necessary to break down fibers in other occupations. Waterwheel-powered triphammers greatly facilitated the difficult process of making thickened (also called “fulled”) wool fabrics, like felt. This had previously involved hard and disagreeable work as people had to pound the wet wool that was soaking in various solvents. Triphammer mills also pounded hemp stalks to make linen and broke oak bark into small pieces for tanning. Other agricultural products needed milling as well: Mustard and poppy seeds were turned into paste, and vegetable products were made into dyes and pigments.

The numbers of watermills that proliferated in the early Middle Ages were astonishing. The Domesday Book, a survey prepared in England in 1086, records 5,624 mills in England: This is a remarkable three mills for every mile of river. Comparable figures exist for other areas of Europe, including the Byzantine Empire in the East. One analysis suggests that there was a mill for every forty-six peasant households (Gies, 113). This meant that peasants ate more baked bread instead of boiled, unground porridge, which allowed for a more portable food supply. Bread travels better than oatmeal.

Once builders had the concept of watermills, they applied it to all kinds of conditions. There were floating mills that could be moved so they wouldn’t obstruct river traffic, and mills that were permanently attached to bridges. Some mills harnessed water flowing over the top, but others were undershot mills, harnessing waterpower from a low river flowing beneath. Modern calculations reveal the impressive advantages in power that constantly improved waterwheels offered medieval peasants: The Roman donkey or slave-powered grinding stone produced about one-half horsepower. The undershot (water flowing beneath) medieval wheel produced about three horsepower, and the
medieval overshot wheel could generate as much as 40 to 60 horsepower (Gies, 115).

Waterwheels depended upon access to rapidly flowing rivers, so all regions could not be served by this technological wonder. Medieval engineers, however, took the principles of water-driven power and applied it to other sources of energy. Tidal mills were recorded in Ireland as early as the seventh century and in the Venetian lagoon before 1050. However, by the end of the twelfth century, windmills began to appear in the English Channel and the North Sea. Windmills were probably developed in Persia and spread through Muslim lands, but the Europeans modified the design to make it extremely useful. They reversed the waterwheel’s design by placing the horizontal axle at the top of the mill to be turned by sails. The power would then be geared to stones below. Wind now joined water a power that was available to medieval people.

I should note that this technological revolution in harnessing power was not universally praised. It required a substantial investment to build these mills, and lords of the land recouped the investment by charging peasants fees to use the mills. Local peasants were required to grind their grain (or press their oil and wine) at the local mill, and pay the required costs. This led to some boycotts in the fourteenth century, but the future lay with technology. In the long run, people will pay for labor-saving devices, and the mills of medieval Europe represented the first major innovation in labor saving in the West.

Beyond power, the basis of medieval technology all over the world was iron. From the beginnings of the Iron Age in about 1200 B.C.E., metallurgists heated iron repeatedly in a hot charcoal furnace to combine carbon molecules with iron. Then the iron had to be pounded to become strong. Smiths were valued craftsmen who could work the metal. Throughout the Middle Ages more and more iron came into circulation, allowing for use of horse shoes, metal plow-shares, and cast iron cooking pots. However, in the fourteenth century European engineers (probably inspired by Chinese models) applied the technology of the waterwheel to forging iron and created the water-powered blast furnace.

A waterwheel could pump pairs of bellows continuously into a furnace, substantially raising the temperature. The higher heat increased the carbon uptake rapidly, producing an alloy that had a higher carbon content. Thus, iron was improved. Not only that, but the blast furnaces could run continuously for weeks or months at a time producing more iron than ever before. The molten metal flowed into several large, shallow depressions that reminded smiths of a sow with suckling pigs, so they called this “pig iron,” a term that remained long after ironsmiths forgot their rural roots (Gies, 202). The new mechanized forges produced much more iron cheaply, so Europe entered a newly invigorated iron age.

Although iron was useful in tools and cooking, it is best remembered for its application in warfare. In the late eighth century, French forces under Charles Martel, fielded horsemen on saddles equipped with stirrups, an innovation that had spread from India. Stirrups gave horsemen enough balance that a mounted soldier could directly engage an enemy (instead of riding by shooting arrows or throwing spears). The mounted knight was born and became the basis of medieval armies under feudal law. These knights, often called “men of iron,” depended upon defensive armor of increasing thickness and complexity—chain mail, developed by Vikings, was worn over thick padding, and in the fourteenth century, plate mail was placed on top of the chain.
In the fourteenth century, changes in the technology of warfare appeared in the West that transformed feudal society. In the Hundred Years’ War, the English made use of the Welsh longbow, which offered substantial advantage in range and firepower over the crossbow. Furthermore, in Switzerland, foot soldiers armed with long pikes successfully held off mounted knights. The final transformation in warfare, however, came when gunpowder, developed in China, began to spread. The first European mention of gunpowder occurs in 1268, but by the late fourteenth century, the use of guns and cannons began to change the defensive posture of knights in armor in favor of foot soldiers armed with the new weapons. The future lay with large armies of foot soldiers with guns rather than mounted knights with iron swords.

Through most of the Middle Ages, the Byzantine Empire held the lead in the technology of warfare. Their most dreaded weapon was “Greek fire,” believed to be an incendiary mixture of crude oil, bitumen, resin, and sulfur. The secret of this recipe was carefully guarded, and Byzantine forces could pour or pump the deadly mixture on wooden ships in the harbor or on armored knights in the battlefield. The other military technological advance enjoyed by the Byzantines was systems of torches and mirrors for rapid communication. However, the coming of gunpowder leveled the advantage of Byzantine technology: The great walls of Constantinople that had withstood invading armies fell to the cannons of the Turks in 1453, a date that signals the end of the Middle Ages.

In agriculture, too, medieval technology created a small agricultural revolution. By the eleventh century, a new padded horse collar that had been developed in China appeared in western Europe, allowing more rapid horses to plow alongside (or in place of) slower oxen. A new, heavy wheeled plow came into service that efficiently turned the heavy clay soils of northern Europe bringing more land into cultivation.

By the twelfth century, many manors moved to a three-field system of cultivation in which one-third of the land was planted in the spring, another in the fall, and the remaining third was left fallow to improve its fertility. This replaced an old Roman system of two-field cultivation in which half the land was left fallow each year and immediately brought more land into cultivation. In addition, the three-field system stimulated the growth of new crops that boosted production. Villagers began to plant legumes, such as peas and beans, which add nitrogen to the soil, thus fertilizing the subsequent grain crop. Legumes also provided an excellent source of protein, which vastly improved the villagers’ diets.

These major agricultural innovations were further aided by other labor-saving devices that spread from the East. For example, wheelbarrows appeared in Europe speeding peasant labor. In western Europe, peasants also began to harvest using a sickle, instead of bending over with a scythe. Of course, the increased availability of iron helped produce all these tools. The agricultural revolution in the West allowed the population to double between the eleventh and the fourteenth centuries.

The Byzantine Empire, which always boasted a larger population of workers, was not as quick to adopt these labor-saving tools. Instead, through most of the Middle Ages, the Eastern empire continued agricultural techniques that had served the Roman Empire.

The most labor-intensive occupation for women of the ancient and medieval worlds was making cloth. There was a constant desire to improve ways to
prepare the raw materials—mostly wool, but later cotton—to make clothing. It is perhaps not surprising that the nineteenth-century industrial revolution first mechanized the fabric industry. The Middle Ages saw its own improvements in the production of fabric and in acquiring new fabrics. We have seen that watermills were put to use to make felt, but that was only one innovation.

The Byzantine Empire achieved a great advance in fabrics in the sixth century, for at that time, some monks smuggled silk worms and white mulberries to feed them back to Byzantium. This began a silk industry in the Byzantine Empire that finally broke the age-old monopoly held by China. In the thirteenth century, after the Fourth Crusade, the secret of silk was brought to Italy.

In most of Europe, however, the main fabric was wool, which had to be washed, combed, then spun into thread. The traditional instrument for spinning was the drop spindle, a stick with a weighted disk at the bottom. The spinner spun the spindle, which twisted the attached fibers into threads. Women spun wool like this constantly, even while doing other tasks. In the thirteenth century, Europeans acquired spinning wheels that had probably originated in the Near East, making the process much more rapid. Once thread was spun, it could be woven into cloth on a loom. The earliest medieval looms were vertical, but by the late Middle Ages, these were replaced by horizontal looms, further speeding a weaver’s work. Knitting was introduced into Europe some time in the twelfth century.

A final major revolution in medieval technology came in navigation, which culminated in the explorations of the Renaissance that marked the end of the medieval age. The greatest ships of the early Middle Ages were the Viking longships, astonishingly seaworthy oak vessels propelled by a square sail and banks of oars. Vikings navigated by the position of the sun and of the North Star at night, but their ability to navigate the treacherous waters of the stormy north remains a wonder to modern sailors.

Improvements in sails stimulated shipping so much that by the thirteenth century shipping in the Mediterranean doubled in volume. The first improvement was the development of the “lanteen” sail, a triangular sail that allowed ships to sail closer to the wind, which means they can sail almost into a head wind, instead of waiting for a tailwind. In addition, more masts were rigged allowing ships with two and three masts to capture even more wind.

There remained the problem of how to know where you are going when out of sight of land. In the twelfth century, Christian Europe had acquired the astrolabe from Muslim Spain. The astrolabe essentially projected a map of the heavens on a plate that the navigator could rotate to show the local coordinates. The twelfth-century philosopher Abelard and his wife Heloise were so enamored of this new instrument that they named their son “Astrolabe,” which shows the enthusiasm that these new technological wonders stimulated in Europe. The astrolabe allowed ships to sail at night using the stars.

A magnetic compass had been invented in China and improved by the eighth century C.E. This was created by rubbing an iron needle with a magnet, then floating the needle on water on a bit of wood. The needle would then point roughly north (varying with the meridian where the reading is taken). The compass was improved by mountings that allowed it to float independent of the ship’s motion. By the thirteenth century, medieval European navigators had access to the improved compass and had begun to make sophisticated use of it in conjunction with navigational charts to find their way when moving
out of the sight of land. The technological improvements were in place to allow Europeans to begin to explore outside the Mediterranean, a marker of the end of the Middle Ages.

**Further Reading**


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**7. GLOBAL TIES**

People move around. This truth has characterized humanity as long as there have been humans. From our origins in Africa about seven million years ago, humans have moved in waves from that continent to populate the earth. Movement over long spaces in the ancient world took so much time we can hardly comprehend it. For example, people moving across a land bridge from Asia to Alaska might have taken about 2,000 years to move down to the tip of South America, but move they did. Why do people move? The answers in the ancient world match today’s motivations: People want a better life, more goods, novelty, or to escape situations or people they don’t like.

Given this reality of human movement, it should not be surprising that during the 1,000 years of the Middle Ages, some Europeans moved to far ends of the earth. Although it is true that most people did not travel more than 20 miles in their lifetimes, a few people traveled very far. However, individuals did not need to travel very far for ideas, goods, and inventions to move great distances (see “Science and Technology” section). For example, archaeologists studying the Stone Age have discovered weapons made from bloodstone from islands off Scotland all the way in central Europe. No individual needed to travel that far to bring the weapons; the artifacts themselves could have traveled from neighbor to neighbor across vast expanses of land. This kind of technological diffusion was also present in the Middle Ages. Although we can ascertain that things like wheelbarrows or gunpowder came from China to Europe by a certain date, we do not suggest that one person traveled those distances to bring the artifact. Therefore, when we study global ties in the Middle Ages, we are really looking at the movement of peoples and the diffusion of goods and ideas.
In his Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, Jared Diamond demonstrates that Europe was favorably placed for things to move to it. Because Eurasia is on an east–west axis, plants and animals can spread more easily than if it were oriented on a north–south direction. This allowed neolithic farmers and herdsmen to acquire domesticated plants native to the Middle East and animals—such as pigs and horses—from as far away as China (Diamond, 176–191). This whole land mass was set up to take advantage of the best developments from a huge span of territory. At first, China was in the forefront of invention, but with cultural diffusion, the whole Eurasian landmass benefitted.

In spite of the obvious benefits of trade and travel, movement remained very slow throughout the Middle Ages. Overland travel was hampered by bad roads and dangers from weather and bandits, and a speed of 3 miles an hour was considered good. A four-wheeled wagon with a pair of horses (the best the Middle Ages had to offer) might travel about 25 miles a day hauling as much as 1,300 pounds. However, large trains with many wagons and guards usually moved only 10 to 12 miles a day. A boat was more efficient, covering perhaps 80 miles in a day traveling downstream (Singman, 214–217), so it is easy to see why cities grew along the great rivers of Europe.

Seagoing vessels were also slow by modern standards. The crossing from England to the West Coast of France might take 4 days, which today is a day excursion. The Mediterranean Sea that today seems a small barrier was formidable. The trip from Venice to Jaffa (the port that served Jerusalem) lasted a month. Marco Polo and his family took 3½ years by horseback to get to the capital of China in the thirteenth century, and by the fourteenth century, this journey would have taken even longer.

In spite of the pace and hazards of medieval travel, people and ideas did move, and European society benefitted from the dynamic exchange. In this essay, I will tour the world with medieval travelers, showing the most famous global interactions. However, these heroic ventures always took place against a quiet, but steady, drumbeat of slower cultural diffusion that transformed the West.

**Middle East, North Africa, and the Muslim World**

The earliest “interactions” between Christendom and the Muslim world came through the conquests that split the Mediterranean basin in the seventh and eighth centuries. Muslim armies swept out of Arabia capturing North Africa and Palestine from the Byzantine Empire, then crossed into Spain conquering most of the Visigothic kingdom. It was only the military skill of Charles Martel that stopped the Muslim incursion into northern Europe. By the beginning of the ninth century, the initial momentum of Muslim invasion had ended. From then on, Christians and Muslims had to interact with each other. Sometimes this took the form of trade and negotiation, more often interactions were on the battlefield.

The ninth-century emperor Charlemagne was the first medieval ruler who exerted enough centralized power to catch the notice of monarchs outside Europe. Charlemagne and the Muslim ruler of the ‘Abbasid Caliphate, Harun al-Raschid (r. 786–809) shared a common suspicion of the Byzantine Empire that bordered both their lands. Consequently, they engaged in friendly negotiations, even exchanging valuable gifts. Harun al-Raschid gave Charlemagne a great elephant named Abulabbas, that caused a stir through Charlemagne’s lands as it traveled in the company of the emperor.
Chroniclers of Charlemagne’s reign also claimed he received envoys from the “King of the Africans,” who brought lions, bears, and precious dyes. Charlemagne in turn subsidized the Africans, who the chronicler claimed were “constantly oppressed by poverty” (Notker, 147). These hints of interactions between Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa are tantalizing demonstrations of the continued global ties that marked European society even in the early Middle Ages.

The most famous contact between Western Europe and the Muslim world came through the crusades, in which Europeans fought Muslim armies over occupation of Jerusalem and its surrounding lands, what Europeans called the “Holy Land.” In the eleventh century, a tenuous balance of power between the Byzantine Empire and the Muslims who controlled the Holy Land shifted. The Seljuk Turks, a fierce central Asian tribe who had converted to Islam reinforced the Muslim armies threatening Byzantium. The Turks imposed new taxes on Christian pilgrims, offending many. In 1071, Byzantine forces had suffered a crushing defeat by the Turks at the Battle of Manzikert, losing control of Asia Minor. Now the Turks seemed to threaten Europe itself.

The Byzantine Emperor Alexius I Comnenus (r. 1081–1118) appealed to Pope Urban II for military help to hold off the threatening Turks. The pope responded by calling for a Crusade, promising soldiers that God would support them fighting in this holy cause. He told departing soldiers to wear the sign of the cross on their breasts as they left Europe and to wear it victoriously on their backs upon their return. This symbol caused these soldiers to be called “crusaders,” and the movement this launched lasted about 200 years as waves of Christian knights left Europe to confront Muslims on the battlefields.

The first crusaders were vividly described by the Byzantine emperor’s daughter Anna Comnena. She articulated the Byzantine position that the crusaders were simply devious soldiers of fortune, who wanted to carve land for themselves instead of serving under the command of the Byzantine emperor. She was not far wrong, for many of the crusaders were younger sons looking for land of their own to rule.

The first crusade (observed by Anna Comnena) in 1099 was successful for the Christian armies. After a bloody capture of Jerusalem, crusaders established kingdoms in the Holy Land along the coast of the Mediterranean from south of Jerusalem up to modern Syria and the edge of Modern Turkey in the city of Edessa. The crusader principalities served as outposts of western European culture in the East, facilitating the travel of pilgrims from Europe. However, these crusaders were also transformed by the surrounding Muslim society. Generations in these crusader states learned to eat different foods, bathe more regularly, and acquired a taste for urban life. Even local Muslims commented on how much more “civilized” were the resident Christians than their cruder European relations.

Needless to say, the relations between Muslims and crusaders were not completely friendly, and Muslims slowly began to take back these lands. In 1144, Edessa fell, and in 1187, the Muslim Saladin retook Jerusalem. From 1147 until 1270, there were eight major crusades sent from Europe to try to reclaim the Holy Land. Although many of these crusades were led by some of the greatest leaders of the West—Richard the Lion-Hearted, Frederick Barbarossa, Phillip II, and Louis IX—they were unsuccessful in holding back the tide of Muslim reconquest.

Some of the crusades went spectacularly awry. The Fourth Crusade never reached the Holy Land because crusaders ended up capturing and sacking
Constantinople—the Christian capital of the Eastern empire. The seventh and eighth crusades, led by the saintly French King Louis IX tried to approach the Holy Land by attacking North Africa. Louis even died in Tunis. Perhaps the height of misplaced religious zeal took place during the Children’s Crusade (1212–1213) when some preachers argued that crusaders had lost God’s help through their misdeeds, and only the innocent might save the Holy Land. Although some historians question whether this appalling incident occurred, contemporary sources say thousands of innocent children died or were sold into slavery as they tried to go on crusade.

The crusades spurred the emergence of new Military Orders of knights who followed a monastic rule and who served as a crucial part of the permanent garrison guarding the Holy Land. The Knights Templars were the most famous of these orders, but they also included the Knights of St. John. These Military Orders became very wealthy and powerful for they served as the bankers of the pilgrims.

Finally, in 1291, the Muslims seized the last crusader outpost on the Asian mainland when the fortified city of Acre fell. This was a terrible military disaster for the West, and the last frightened Christians in the Holy Land paid shipmasters great fortunes to take them out of the doomed city. Knights Templars died courageously while guarding the evacuation of Christians from the burning city. The medieval crusades were over, but they left a legacy of mistrust between Christian and Muslim that continues into the twenty-first century.

The Christian reconquest of Spain that was conducted slowly throughout the Middle Ages provided other opportunities for Christian and Muslim interaction. By the eleventh century, Christian Spain was made up of several independent kingdoms: Leon, Castile, Navarre, Aragon and Barcelona. Rulers of these kingdoms slowly reconquered territories previously held by Muslims. However, as areas were conquered, and Christians settled, they interacted with the Muslim residents and cultural mingling took place. Christians learned about irrigation techniques, acquired a taste for some eastern foods (like peaches), and adopted some Muslim building techniques. By the thirteenth centuries, Spanish kings had recovered the Balearic islands of Minorca and Majorca from Muslims, and by 1252, Muslims only held the southern province of Granada, which they held until the fifteenth century.

In the twelfth century, as part of their conquests, Spaniards recovered precious manuscripts of Aristotle—complete with commentaries by Muslim and Jewish scholars. These texts quickly spread through the universities in the West, stimulating an intellectual movement called “scholasticism,” that came to be the defining philosophy of the Middle Ages.

Outside Spain, western Europeans had the most direct contact with Muslims in southern Italy and Sicily. In the ninth century, Muslims had conquered Sicily and raided southern Italy, where there was considerable political confusion. Byzantine officials ruled some districts and Germanic chieftains ruled others, and there was almost continual warfare among these groups. In the eleventh century, a band of Norman knights returning from pilgrimage in Jerusalem stopped in southern Italy and saw opportunity. Two brothers Robert Guiscard and Roger successfully conquered Sicily and the Byzantine possessions in southern Italy. This introduced a strong dynasty in Sicily. Robert’s successors built a strong state with a highly centralized government.

Significant for the cultural mixing that took place in Sicily, the rulers tried to give equal treatment to the various peoples under their rule. Government
documents were issued in Latin, Greek, and Arabic, and Muslim laws were enforced in the Muslim community by traveling judges. This acceptance of the diverse traditions of the peoples of Sicily allowed for considerable sharing of knowledge and traditions among them.

Perhaps the height of the interaction between Muslim and Christian in Sicily came in the person of Frederick II (1215–1250), the Holy Roman Emperor. Frederick was half Sicilian by birth and was not interested in his German lands. He virtually ignored those territories and lived in Sicily. He was highly educated and had been deeply influenced by Muslim culture. He was even rumored to have a harem filled with Muslim women, and he happily entered into friendly relations with Muslim princes. In response to papal pressure, Frederick went on crusade to the Holy Land, but inciting the anger of the pope, he peacefully negotiated a peace that promised freedom of religion to Christians and Muslims in Jerusalem. However, this kind of balanced interaction between Muslims and Christians was exceptional in the Middle Ages and was viewed with deep suspicion by the other leaders of Christendom.

Throughout the Middle Ages, Europeans had little knowledge of Sub-Saharan Africa. Europeans knew there was gold in West Africa and seem to have had knowledge of the islands on the eastern coast of the continent. Beyond that, Muslim monopoly of the caravan routes across the Sahara kept Europeans away. Only in the fourteenth century, with Portuguese and Genoese explorations beginning along the West Coast of Africa did the situation change somewhat. The Portuguese conquest of the Canary Islands in the fourteenth century gave Europeans a foothold on the edge of the continent that would be increased in the centuries of the Renaissance.

Asia

Western Europeans were drawn to East Asia for two main reasons: to forward Christendom to find allies against Islam, and for trade with the valuable spices, silks, and luxury goods. These two motives remained intertwined throughout the medieval period and into the explorations of the early modern world.

How Expensive Were Spices?

8 bushels of grain (called a “quarter”) can feed one person for a year.
1 quarter of grain cost about 6 shillings.
Spices available in Europe ranged from 1 to 3 shillings a pound.
Saffron cost 12 to 16 shillings per pound.


From the earliest years of the Middle Ages there had been a tradition that the apostle Thomas had gone to India to preach and had been martyred there. By the twelfth century, a man claiming to be an Indian bishop named John visited Pope Calixtus II in Rome and gave further details of the church Thomas allegedly founded in India. These stories, along with some crusader encounters with Syrian Christians, spurred European interest in finding Christian allies in the Far East. Travellers began to seek a mythical “Prester John,” a Christian king of a great nation—first located in Asia, then in Africa—who would help in crusades against Muslims.
In the thirteenth century, the Mongol invasions changed the circumstances for western travelers. By 1300, the Mongols had established an empire that extended from China to Russia. This empire encompassed an extraordinary diversity of peoples and religions—from Muslims to Christians to Buddhists—and it accommodated them seemingly without conflict. This unified empire also created a huge trade area through which goods and ideas traveled easily.

The great Kublai Khan, who was the first leader in the Yuan dynasty of China, encouraged non-Chinese people to serve in his administration and expressed an interest in various religions. One of the great Khan’s favorite wives was Chabi, a Nestorian Christian. The popes saw a wonderful opportunity to try to convert the Mongols to Christianity and sent a series of embassies to visit the Great Khan himself. One envoy was the Franciscan Giovanni di Piano Carpini who left Europe in 1245 and wrote a History of the Mongols, which fascinated his contemporaries. When another Franciscan William of Rubruck arrived in Karakorum, Mongolia, in 1254, he found many foreigners at the court, including Parisian goldsmiths, envoys from Greece, and many others. Neither envoy made much headway converting the Mongols to Christianity, but they did leave a body of information about the Far East that encouraged other Europeans to make the journey.

The missions to the east reached their high point in the fourteenth century with the work of the Franciscan John of Monte Corvino. He described the hostility of the Nestorian Christians, who had been in China for a long time, but also described some positive achievements. For example, he built a church in Beijing with a tower and three bells where he baptized six-thousand people.

Trade missions to the East are probably even more well known than the religious missions. In the middle of the thirteenth century, Italian city-states led the way in international trade as Venetian and Genoese vessels appeared on the Caspian Sea and the Indian Ocean. Of course, any long-distance trade required a stable currency, and in the thirteenth century, Genoa, Florence, and Venice introduced gold coins that were to become international standards of value. Perhaps not surprising given the distances involved, the volume of eastern trade was small: In the fourteenth century the volume of Venetian long-distance trade was only about 1,000 to 2,000 tons (Phillips, 97), but it was very valuable, so the profits were great.

Table 4. Percent of a City’s Trade that Is International

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Genoa</th>
<th>Marseilles</th>
<th>London</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1270</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>Not available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1293</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>Not available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1340</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>Not available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1350</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>Not available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1400</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1450</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: These approximate figures show the shifting nature of international trade as events like the Black Death affected people’s abilities to engage in the lucrative trade. Notice the shifting of trade from Italy to the north at the end of the Middle Ages.

The most famous western Europeans who took advantage of the Venetian experience in trade were Marco Polo and his father and uncle, who traveled to the far reaches of the Mongolian empire in the thirteenth century. The journey took them 3½ years by horseback, which testifies to the hardships of overland travel even through the relatively peaceful Mongol empire. The Polos stayed at the khan’s court for 17 years, and Marco apparently served as an emissary of the khan himself. When the Polos returned home to Venice, they brought back a wealth of spices, silks, and other luxuries. The extravagant items were so impressive that other anonymous merchants followed; by 1300 there was even a community of Italians living in China.

Perhaps Marco Polo’s most important contribution was a book about his voyages. Few believed the exotic tales of the traveler, but the book did excite the imagination of adventurers. It fueled the great age of exploration that followed—Christopher Columbus carried a well-marked copy of the book through his voyages.

By the fifteenth century, however, there had been much that split Europe’s connection with East Asia. The bubonic plague that caused such damage in western Europe had begun in Asia and contributed to the fall of the Yuan dynasty that had welcomed westerners. The growth of the Muslim Ottoman Empire that took Constantinople in the mid-fifteenth century further disrupted the overland trade routes with the East. At the end of the Middle Ages, Europeans would look for new routes to Asia—across the Atlantic and around the coast of Africa.

**North America**

In the tenth century, Viking explorers sailed their longships far and wide. They traveled down rivers as they settled in Slavic lands, they sailed around Spain into the Mediterranean as they captured Sicily, and they struck out across the sea to the west and settled Iceland and Greenland. In the course of their westward travels, some Viking explorers landed in North America.

Apprently, a young merchant named Bjarni Herjolfsson was blown off course as he sailed to Greenland and sighted lands to the south and west. Upon his return, he told his story, and about 15 years later Leif Erikson, called “the Lucky” successfully arrived at the land Bjarni had seen. Leif with his crew of thirty-five men landed on several places to the west of Greenland, probably Baffin Island, Labrador, and then “Vinland,” somewhere between the Gulf of St. Lawrence and New Jersey (Magnusson, 55–56). They wintered in this land that offered abundant fish, game, and fodder. Leif named the land “Vinland” for the wild grapes that grew there.

In the spring, Leif loaded a towboat with timber and grape vines and returned to his home in Greenland. There was much talk about the rich land Leif had found and Leif’s brother Thorvald wanted to return to explore further. This time the explorers encountered and fought some Native Americans. In the battles, Thorvald died and was buried in North America. The remaining Vikings returned back to Greenland with more tales of the new lands.

A captain named Karlsefni decided to go to Vinland to establish a permanent settlement. He took sixty men, five women, and livestock and sailed to the houses that Leif had originally built the first winter in the new world. This is testimony to the skill of Viking navigators, who could return to the same location found by Leif. At first, this settlement traded peacefully with the Native Americans, but then they began to fight. Karlsefni abandoned the settlement.
and returned to Greenland, deciding they could not settle in peace in the new
lands because of the Native Americans. Colonizing efforts were abandoned.

There is no doubt that the Vikings made explorations of North America. Archaeologists have found Viking houses dating from about 1000 in Newfound-
land. Unfortunately, these are probably not those of Leif the Lucky, because
Newfoundland is too far north for wild grapes to grow (Magnusson, 8–9). This
may mean that there were other explorations that were not preserved by saga
writers. It is clear, however, that medieval Vikings knew of the existence of
North America long before Christopher Columbus made his voyages.

Global Misunderstandings

In spite of the many connections between people in Europe and those in the
rest of the world, Europeans retained many misunderstandings about the world
right through to the end of the Middle Ages. These errors grew from three main
sources: (1) Medieval respect for classical antiquity caused geographers and
travelers to respect past views more than the evidence of their own observa-
tions, (2) people (even today) recast what they see in terms that are consistent
with their expectations, and (3) Europeans fell in love with some travel accounts
that were plainly false, but that perpetuated myths instead of realities.

The most popular travel book—the Travels of Sir John Mandeville—appeared
in about 1356 and immediately became astonishingly popular. This was the
only travel book that Leonardo da Vinci possessed, and Christopher Colum-
bus consulted it as he took his voyages. Scholars doubt whether there even
was anyone named Mandeville, nor whether the author of this account ever
traveled further than his local library. His work is fanciful and entertaining
and preserved many global misconceptions from the ancient world. When real
travelers came back from abroad, if their experiences did not match those of
the fictional Mandeville, they did not trust their own eyes. Thus, global misun-
derstandings persisted throughout the Middle Ages in spite of a good deal of
global interaction.

Medieval travelers were also hampered by the maps they used. They had
two main kinds of maps, and both preserved significant mistakes. The first
was one drawn by the Greek Ptolemy, and it was fairly accurate in its por-
trayal of the major continents, but Ptolemy’s map did not show North and
South America and identified only three continents: Asia, Africa, and Europe.
The geographer further believed that land covered three-fourths of the earth’s
surface, making the oceans too small. Finally, Ptolemy misjudged the circum-
ference of the earth, making it one-sixth smaller than its true size. Nevertheless,
this was considered to be the most accurate map, and travelers used it to plan
their voyages.

Even more popular—and more mistaken—were the T-O maps, which take
their name from the basic outline: a circle with an inscribed diameter and, at a
right angle to it, a single radius. This design, that resembled the letter T within
a letter O, gave Asia one-half of the Earth’s land mass, with Africa and Europe
splitting the other half between them. East was often shown at the top and
Jerusalem at the center. T-O maps satisfied Christian understandings of the
world that placed the Holy Land centrally and spiritually prominent and rele-
gated the far reaches of the world to Asia. Viking navigators, who saw the world
as the North Sea surrounded by land, could have corrected T-O maps with
their understanding of the existence of North America. However, there was little communication between the Scandinavians and the mapmakers of the south.

None of these portrayals of the world envisioned a flat space. Those who thought of the world at all envisioned a round earth. Travelers did observe the changing night sky as they moved south, and people living even around the Mediterranean saw ships disappear over the horizon and return, confirming the existence of a round earth. As the popular travel work purportedly by John Mandeville wrote, “It can be proved thus, if a man had adequate shipping and good company, and had moreover his health, and wanted to go and see the world, he could traverse the whole world above and below” (Moseley, 128). Christopher Columbus had read the popular Mandeville’s Travels, and his view of what was possible was shaped by this medieval text.

Thinkers did quarrel about whether there could be people living at the “bottom” of the earth, some arguing that it was impossible because they might fall off, while others, like Mandeville, believed that people could populate everywhere. His “proof” of this, however, remained medieval not scientific: He argued not for gravity, but that the Bible promised that God would not let people fall off the earth (Moseley, 130).

Travelers also had great misunderstandings about what kind of people they might meet in their travels. Since the time of the Roman scholar Pliny the Elder (23–79), Europeans had heard of unusual races of people who purportedly lived in parts of the world outside the Mediterranean basin, and all travelers who went to India, Africa, and Asia expected to find what they called “monstrous races” described by Pliny. Travelers expected to find beings as bizarre as dog-headed humans, headless people, and one-legged “sciopods” who lay on the ground shading themselves with their one huge foot. The popular pseudo-traveler John Mandeville claimed to have visited islands populated by each of these fantastic creatures (Moseley, 137).

Oddly, the quite accurate account by Marco Polo generated much skepticism. Readers who believed in monstrous creatures refused to believe in such marvels as money made of paper or rocks (coal) that could burn. It is only after the medieval period, when people were more willing to question their assumptions by looking at evidence that many of these global misunderstandings would recede. See also Documents 12 and 25.

Further Reading
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Agriculture

Most of the agriculture in medieval Europe was centered in villages, where peasant families lived in close proximity to each other, and all went away from the villages to work their fields. (There were some places—such as Iceland—that had isolated farmhouses, but this was not the usual settlement pattern.) Villages were frequently clustered into “manors” that were presided over by a lord of the land, to whom peasants owed labor and a portion of their produce.

The manors included various kinds of land: There was pastureland to feed grazing animals; woodlands that provided game for the lords and browsing for pigs, deer, and other animals; and the all-important cultivated fields that produced cereals and legumes. Before the eleventh century, most cultivated fields were divided into two parts: one to plant and one to lay fallow to restore its fertility for the subsequent year’s planting. After the eleventh century, most manors changed to a three-field system. In this innovation, only one-third of the field was left fallow, and one-third was planted in the spring in rye or wheat. The final third was planted in early fall in oats or barley.

By the twelfth century, many manors included legumes in the rotational planting. Legumes offered stunning advantages over grains. These plants are “nitrogen fixing,” that is they add nitrogen to the soil that becomes fertilizer for the grains that would be rotated onto these fields the following year. In addition, legumes brought a good source of protein to medieval diets, particularly for the poor who never could afford to eat much meat. Finally, the green tops of the legumes provided needed fodder for animals.

The fields on the medieval manors were organized in strips, so that each peasant would own long strips within the large fields. Richer peasants might own many strips and poorer ones might own only one. This organization of land may seem complicated to modern people who are used to thinking of farmland as being made up on large squares of land, however, it was practical because of the technology of plowing. The heavy clay soils of northern Europe were most effectively plowed by means of a large four-wheeled plow that was pulled by six or eight oxen. This large apparatus needed a good deal of space for turning, so long strips of cultivated land allowed for long furrows, minimizing the number of turns that the plow would make. In addition,
few peasants could own the large plow along with enough animals to pull it, so it made sense for the community to own the plow. Such technology required villagers to work together, plowing, sowing, and harvesting together. And of course, all the peasants were responsible for working the strips that belonged to the lord.

Some regions were suitable for producing larger-scale cash crops, which allowed lords to make a profit on products for a market beyond the local. The most important of such crops were grapes, which could be made into wine. Wine was produced near major rivers, like the Rhône and the Loire. Locating wine production along rivers allowed for the wine to be transported readily, thus solving the problem of producing for only local consumption. Of course, manors could also produce nonfood items for market. Sheep were raised for wool and hemp planted for linen cloth.

Each peasant household also cultivated a garden for vegetables. These gardens were typically fenced to keep out stray animals and were cultivated with intensive care by all members of the household. Families grew turnips, peas, cabbages, leeks, spinach, and other vegetables and herbs. Peasants owed a portion of their produce from these gardens to the lord, but records indicate that they were often able to grow enough to sell the excess in good years.

Fertilizer for the fields and gardens was always scarce. The main source was the animal waste, which was usually deposited as animals grazed on the stubble left in the fields after harvest. Manors that were near towns had peasants collect “night soil,” the human waste that accumulated near the centers of population density. Using human waste, however, made it easier for diseases and parasites to spread, compounding health problems late in the Middle Ages as population grew. In Ireland and Scandinavian lands, people used seaweed for fertilizer, which was labor intensive but significantly improved the soil.

The technology of agriculture in medieval Europe benefitted from global exchanges. We can see evidence of innovations that were developed in China spreading to the rural manors in Europe and improving the agricultural production. For examples, Chinese developed improved horse collars that rested on horses’ shoulders to replace the ox yoke that rested on the neck. This allowed horses to be hitched to plows, and because horses work faster than oxen, more land could come into cultivation. Chinese also developed wheelbarrows, a popular labor-saving device for medieval peasants.

The agricultural production through the thirteenth century was impressive, and European population grew. However, as population increased, more and more land came into cultivation for grain and legumes. This led to two developments. First, land that was less productive was cultivated leading to ever lower yields. Second, pastureland began to be plowed which meant there was less feed available for animals, so more had to be slaughtered. Fewer animals meant less fertilizer and yields fell again. By the beginning of the fourteenth century, population had expanded enough that when weather turned cool, famine struck and many died. The fourteenth century saw the failure of medieval agriculture to keep pace with changing conditions. See also Documents 11 and 22.

Further Reading
Alfred the Great (849–899)

As the eighth century opened, Anglo-Saxon England consisted of several kingdoms. The pagan Anglo-Saxon tribes had converted to Christianity in the seventh century, and monasteries in that land were vibrant centers of learning. In the ninth century, Scandinavian Danes and other Vikings repeatedly invaded the eastern edge of England, and the struggle against the Danes in the ninth and tenth centuries forged England into a unified kingdom. The founder of the English national monarchy was Alfred (r. 871–899), the only English monarch to be called “the Great.” Alfred is remembered for his success in war and his fostering of learning.

Alfred was the younger brother of King Aethelred of Wessex (one of the several Anglo-Saxon kingdoms in England). In his youth, Alfred had been sent to Rome and learned how the Church was the repository and guardian of knowledge, and he passionately wanted to make this Latin learning available to the English-speaking audience. But first, he had to fight alongside his brother against the invading Danes. When his brother died, the nobles chose Alfred to be king (over Aethelred’s young sons). Alfred’s resolution carried his people through years when the Danes held almost all England, and through his tenacity, the king of Wessex became accepted as the king of all England.

Alfred had reorganized the military to confront the invaders and built the first English navy to patrol the coast against the Danish raiders. Finally, the English and Danes signed a treaty in 886. Under its terms, Alfred and the Danish king Guthrum agreed to divide England between them. The northern lands later became known as the “Danelaw” to recognize that they were governed by laws different from those in the southern parts of the land. As part of this settlement, Guthrum agreed to convert to Christianity, which would make it easier for the two peoples to share the land. Then Alfred could turn his full attention to fostering learning in his lands.

Alfred wrote to all his bishops complaining of the loss of learning in England that was due to the destruction of long warfare. He remembered the old days fondly: “It has very often come to my mind what wise men there once were throughout England, men both of holy and of worldly wisdom, and how happy the times were then throughout England” (Marsh, 133). Alfred further complained that the old books were in Latin, so inaccessible to most people. The king himself translated, or helped to translate, some of the great books of literature into Old English so his people could read them. Furthermore, he initiated the writing of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a history of England that continued the work of the Venerable Bede.

The rule of Alfred the Great marked the high point of the accomplishments of Anglo-Saxon England. Not only did he leave a legacy of a unified land that valued religion and learning, but his translations shaped the English language itself. See also Document 10.
Architecture

The most visible remnants of medieval Europe are the architectural wonders that were built during these years. Travelers today look with wonder at the religious and military structures that dominated the human-made landscape.

In western Europe, the finest churches from the early Middle Ages were in Ravenna, where the imperial court had its capital from the fifth century. Here visitors today can see the beautiful mosaics in churches that were built in a basilica fashion of a long rectangle flanked by colonnaded aisles. These churches like St. Apollinare in Classe and San Vitale can give an idea of the excitement of Christians as they celebrated the acceptance of Christianity by the power of the empire.

The Byzantine Empire maintained the continuity of architectural skill from the late Roman Empire, and this can be most clearly seen in the great church of Hagia Sophia, built between 532 and 537 by the emperor Justinian. Reportedly, when the emperor saw the completed Hagia Sophia, he claimed he had exceeded King Solomon in building a structure that glorified God, and the church remains one of the great buildings of the world. In plan it is a basilica (based on Roman buildings) with a dome above the central space. It has two semidomes along the longitudinal axis. The central dome is 107 feet in diameter and rises 180 feet above the floor. The golden dome seemed to be suspended by heaven itself and remains a visible testimony to the skill of the architects who designed it. Aisles with galleries above ranged on either side, where the faithful gathered—men on one side, women on the other—to participate in the services.

The violence that accompanied the fall of the Roman Empire in the West disrupted the tradition of this kind of spectacular building. Charlemagne, who in the late eighth century once again united western Europe aspired to a renaissance of Roman architecture. He built a chapel at Aachen (792–805) that was modeled after San Vitale in Ravenna and had a dome over the center. However, Charlemagne’s unifying work did not long survive him, and memorable religious architecture moved to the great monasteries that served as the sanctuaries of a Christianity that was again besieged by pagan Vikings from the north.

Monastery churches that flourished from around 1000 to 1250 are built in a style called “Romanesque,” which indicates that the structures imitated old Roman buildings. These churches were characterized by semicircular arches leading down to great pillars. Even these stones were not sufficient to bear the weight of heavy stone roofs, so the walls were very thick with only small windows. These churches were dark and often decorated with painted frescoes on the walls. Many of these massive churches survive today, like the Speyer Cathedral or the Pisa Cathedral (next to the famous “leaning tower.”)

By the twelfth century, new circumstances demonstrated a need for new kinds of churches. Cities had grown so large churches were needed to accommodate the growing urban populations and the many pilgrims who traveled to cities that had famous relics of saints. The brilliant leader of the monastery of St. Denis, Abbott Suger, developed a new architectural style that would come to dominate the late Middle Ages. St. Denis was located about 6 miles
north of Paris and was the French royal monastery. Suger wanted to rebuild the old church that was small and somewhat decayed. Suger spoke to travelers from Constantinople for descriptions of Hagia Sophia, and the Abbott wanted to exceed this glorious church. Suger also was fascinated by mystical ideas of light and visual manifestations of spirituality, so when he approved designs for his new structure, they encompassed his ideas.

The new church of St. Denis began what has come to be called “Gothic” architecture, which departed dramatically from the old Romanesque. Gothic architects used pointed arches instead of semicircular ones, which allowed them to build the roofs even higher without thickening the walls because the weight of the roof was brought down along the pointed ribs of the arches to massive columns. This weight-bearing structure freed the walls allowing stained-glass windows to fill the churches with magically colored light.

Architects still had to deal with the problem of wind moving these towering structures, for any movement would create cracks in the stone and weaken the supports. To solve this problem, engineers created “flying buttresses” which were stone towers set away from the walls with stone bridges leading from the tower to the high walls of the church.

Gothic architectural principles created churches that appeared to be miracles of light and space. They were immediately popular, and for the next centuries Gothic cathedrals were built all over Europe. Some of the more famous early Gothic cathedrals are those at Chartres, Paris, and Canterbury, England. However, travelers can admire such buildings all over Europe from Spain to Germany to Scandinavia to England.

Just as frescoes were intimately part of Romanesque churches, the architecture of Gothic cathedrals cannot be separated from the art that is an integral part of the building. Stained-glass windows skillfully told biblical stories and portrayed images of members of the community who contributed money to build the magnificent building. Sculptures surrounded every side of the church, and art historians trace tendencies of sculpture to slowly separate from the columns that supported the building itself.

These magnificent buildings rose in the center of all the major cities of the Middle Ages. All members of the community gathered to celebrate church service in these spectacular structures that embodied the faith and the communities of the medieval world. See also Document 16.

Further Reading

Bede the Venerable (c. 672–735)

In the seventh century, Anglo-Saxon England was a fragmented, violent land, recently converted to Christianity. However, Christian scholarship was forwarded by great scholars who came to the northern lands with Theodore of Tarsus, who was appointed to be Archbishop of Canterbury in 669. Theodore brought with him two scholars: Hadrian, an African, and Benedict Biscop, an Anglo-Saxon nobleman who had become a monk after studying in Rome.
Benedict Biscop founded two Benedictine monasteries in the north of England at Wearmouth and Jarrow. He also journeyed several times to Rome and brought back valuable manuscripts to these monastic libraries. Wearmouth and Jarrow soon became the greatest centers of learning west of Italy. Biscop’s pupil, Bede, called the “Venerable,” was one of the greatest scholars in western Europe between the decline of Roman civilization and the age of Charlemagne. Bede’s writings were original and served to transmit classical learning into the Middle Ages.

Bede was born on the church lands at Wearmouth; his father was a tenant farmer of the monastery. When the boy was 7 years old, his parents sent him as a pupil to the monastery. Shortly afterwards, Bede was moved to Jarrow, which had been recently founded and continued his education there. Bede was able to learn from the brilliant scholar Biscop and take advantage of the books that he had brought from Rome.

When Bede was about 13 years old, an epidemic swept through the monastery at Jarrow, and an account reported that it killed everyone except the Abbot himself and one boy, who is assumed to be Bede himself. Bede remained at Jarrow as a monk for the rest of his life. When he was age 30, he was ordained priest, and lived until he was just over age 60. Bede wrote some forty works, including translations, biographies, commentaries on the Bible and history works.

As a product of the monasteries, Bede wrote in Latin, and his writings were essential to generations of subsequent Latin scholars. He was primarily a teacher who wrote a number of works intended as educational tracts. For example in an influential text of science—The Nature of Things—Bede incorporated much from the Roman encyclopedist Pliny and the Visigothic scholar Isidore of Seville, but he added his own interpretations. For example, in this work he described the earth as a globe and discussed its geography. This tract was counted among the most important scientific texts of the early Middle Ages.

Bede’s most famous work, however, is the Ecclesiastical History of the English People, in which he tells the history of early Anglo-Saxon England to 731. Bede’s vision not only described England but helped his readers see themselves as a cohesive group instead of a number of different tribes. This was all the more remarkable from a man who probably never went farther than 7 miles from the place he was born.

Perhaps the most influential aspect of Bede’s history was that he adopted Dionysius Exiguus’s dating system. Dionysius had been a monk and skilled mathematician in sixth-century Italy, and it was he who first suggested that calendars be dated from his estimation of when the Incarnation of Christ occurred. This turned into our B.C./A.D. system, which is now named B.C.E./C.E. Not many people had read Dionysius’s tract, but Bede’s was read and translated for centuries. Our adoption of Dionysius’s historical dating system can be largely attributed to Bede.

Bede died peacefully in the monastery where he had spent his days. Perhaps his best obituary was his own words: “But my greatest pleasure always has been in studying, in teaching and in writin’” (Marsh, 107). Indeed, generations ever since have had much to be thankful for his lifetime of scholarship. See also Document 5.

Further Reading
Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153)

For more than 30 years during the twelfth century, the monk Bernard of Clairvaux was the major spokesman for western Christendom. He was an adviser to kings, popes, bishops, and abbots and a major proponent of the mystical life through monastic contemplation. He left his mark on many aspects of medieval religious life.

Bernard was born in 1090 in Burgundy. His father was a knight, but he was more influenced by his religious mother, Aleth. He was enrolled in a church school and soon impressed everyone with his love of learning. More than a call to learning, Bernard felt a vocation to serve God as a monk. In around 1113, Bernard and about thirty companions entered the Cistercian monastery of Citeaux, which was renowned for its strict life.

When he was only 24 years old, Bernard’s reputation for holiness was established, and he was chosen to found a new Cistercian monastery. During the rigors of building a new monastery, known as Clairvaux, Bernard maintained his asceticism of long fasts and prayers. His austerities made him ill, and he had to take a year to recover his health, but his reputation for holiness only increased. Once he returned to lead Clairvaux, he wrote many sermons and letters addressed to all the great leaders in Europe.

His preaching was so eloquent that many were persuaded to become monks, and the Cistercian monasteries founded on the model of Clairvaux expanded rapidly. When he and his monks first settled at Clairvaux, there were only five Cistercian houses. By the time of his death in 1153, there were 343 abbeys, sixty-eight of which had been founded directly from Clairvaux. His charismatic personality was the single most important factor in the rapid growth of the order.

Not all of Bernard’s causes were successful. He vigorously attacked Abbot Suger for his decorating of the church at St. Denis that was to become the model for subsequent Gothic cathedrals (see Architecture). He believed that elaborate decorations were frivolous distractions from prayer. However, the Gothic cathedrals proved so popular that his reprimands went unheeded.

Bernard was an important mystic, and in his writings, the monk described four stages of love by which a soul could attain to ecstatic, mystical union with the Divinity (see Mysticism). Bernard also had an important impact on the growing cult of the Virgin Mary because he described her as a tender lady who was accessible to the

St. Bernard of Clairvaux defeating the Devil. Illustration from The Golden Legend by Jacobus de Voragine, French manuscript, 15th century. The Art Archive/Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal Paris/Marc Charmet.
faithful. As a mystic, Bernard opposed the growing scholastic movement that was emerging from the study of logic at the new universities. He emerged from his monastery to confront Peter Abelard at the Council of Sens in 1140. Bernard achieved the condemnation of Abelard and the repudiation of the intellectual approach to God that Abelard and the scholastics espoused. Although many continued to pursue scholasticism, Bernard’s attack kept alive the mystic path of faith as a legitimate approach to God.

Bernard was also heavily involved in the Crusades—those military expeditions to the Holy Land that consumed many resources during the Middle Ages. In 1128, Bernard drew up a charter for the Knights Templars, establishing critical Military Orders that played an important role in the defense of the Holy Land. In 1145, when the crusader state of Edessa fell to the Muslims, Bernard preached the Second Crusade that sent powerful kings to fight. Bernard’s popularity waned when the Second Crusade failed. Nevertheless, he remained active until his death at Clairvaux on August 20, 1153. His reputation for holiness and his impact on the religious life of Europe was so important that he was declared a saint in 1174, fewer than 25 years after his death. See also Document 21.

Further Reading

Black Death. See Bubonic Plague

Boccaccio, Giovanni (1313–1375)

In Italy in the fourteenth century, new ideas that would signal the new age of the Renaissance were beginning to flourish. The new spirit particularly appeared in the city of Florence, fostered by writers, artists, and civic leaders. Giovanni Boccaccio, considered the father of Italian narrative was one of the literary giants along with Chaucer and Dante who lived on the border between the medieval and modern worlds.

Boccaccio was born in 1313 in Florence an illegitimate son of a merchant. His father legitimized him in about 1320 and sent him to study at the best school of the age. In 1327, Boccaccio’s father was sent to Naples to head a bank there, and he took his son with him, clearly intending to prepare him for a career in banking. Naples was a center of learning, and young Boccaccio, who had no aptitude for banking, made the most of Naples’ royal libraries and the companionship of bright young poets. During this period Boccaccio began to write, composing poems and tales that would serve as models for Geoffrey Chaucer in England.

Boccaccio returned to Florence at the end of 1340 and found a city in crisis. The bubonic plague had entered the city and would continue to devastate it through the disastrous year of 1348. The plague took Boccaccio’s father and stepmother, but this disaster stimulated Boccaccio’s masterpiece, The Decameron.

The beginning of the Decameron gives the most vivid first-hand witness to the plague in literature. He described how the many deaths transformed traditional medieval life: “In the face of so much affliction and misery, all respect
for the laws of God and man had virtually broken down and been extin-
guished in our city” (Boccaccio, 52–53). This setting of disaster formed the
backdrop for the remainder of the work, in which ten young people escape to
a villa outside Florence and decide to amuse themselves by telling stories. The
Decameron is the collection of the stories they tell, and most are highly
entertaining.

The stories reflect a new, permissive attitude that arose in the wake of the
plague, for the stories talk frankly of sex, lies, and ordinary people. The he-
roes are not knights or philosophers, but clever men and women who live
by their wits, and their stories were intended more to amuse than to teach
moral lessons. In fact, some of the stories are so bawdy, that they were elim-
inated from the earliest English translations of the work. Later in his life,
even Boccaccio himself became uneasy with his lighthearted works and tried
to urge women not to read them. However, there was no returning to a
more modest age—the future lay with witty, clever individuals who forged
their own path.

Boccaccio spent his later years in service to his city, actively engaging in
diplomatic activities. He too led delegations to the papal court in Avignon (see
Conciliar Movement). He died in 1375, but his influence on the future course
of literature has never waned. See also Document 26.

Further Reading
Boccaccio, Giovanni. The Decameron. Translated by G.H. McWilliam. New York: Penguin,
1981.

Bubonic Plague (Black Death)

In the fourteenth century a horrible pandemic swept from the East and dev-
astated Europe. The disease spread over vast areas, helped by increased trade
from ships moving through the Mediterranean and by the expansion of the
Mongol Empire. There is general agreement that the plague arrived in Europe
in about 1348 on ships of Genoese merchants who traveled between Sicily and
the Middle East, but the historical consensus about this pandemic ends here.
What was this terrifying disease, that people in the Middle Ages called the
“Black Death?”

Medieval descriptions of the disease were vivid: Giovanni Boccaccio, a
fourteenth-century observer, described the symptoms that included swellings
in the armpits and groins that turned black. Once skin darkened in spots,
death was virtually certain. This description causes most historians to identify
the disease with bubonic plague, caused by a virulent bacillus (Yersinia pesta)
that infected rodents in Manchuria then spread to black rats. Some of the most
devastating diseases throughout history have been those that move from ani-
imals to humans, and this rodent disease was no exception; it passed to hu-
mans from the bites of infected fleas. Bubonic plague can also reach a person’s
lungs, becoming “pneumonic” plague, which spreads rapidly through sneezing
and coughing. Estimates are that between 30 percent to 70 percent of people
who catch bubonic plague die, but almost 100 percent of those with pneumonic
plague die.
In modern times, bubonic plague does not spread quickly, which causes some historians to question whether this disease indeed was the Black Death that brought such destruction. Some argue that this virulent form spread quickly to the lungs, becoming the deadly pneumonic form. Others suggest that several diseases—like smallpox—might have joined bubonic plague in sweeping through a population already weakened from famine. Others surmise that there might be another disease, as yet unidentified that wreaked the havoc.

Whatever the exact disease, the pandemic raced through Europe. It spread quickly in the summer and declined in the winter months—the cold, wet summers helped the plague spread. The pandemic killed a shocking one-third to one-half of the population, but historians are uncertain of the exact numbers of the dead. Modern estimates that agree that one-third of the population died, disagree on what that fraction means in actual numbers—estimates range from twenty million to thirty-five million dead. Disease hit the crowded cities hardest: Paris may have lost half its population and Florence as much as four-fifths. These staggering numbers mean that everyone—especially in the cities where death rates were highest—saw neighbors, friends and family members die.

The psychological impact of so great a plague was perhaps even more important than the actual loss of life. Law and tradition broke down, and many survivors saw no point in trying to preserve medieval customs. Medicine failed to offer solace for this horrifying disease, for doctors had no idea where the disease came from. Some attributed the cause to “bad air,” while others applied leeches to reduce fevers. Some people turned to God to relieve the suffering, leading to the sad practice of “flagellants.” These men and women beat themselves three times a day with leather thongs tipped in lead as they marched in procession from town to town. This movement reflected the desperation of people searching for ways to appease a seemingly angry God; instead the disease simply spread more rapidly in the blood that was shed by the pious.

The plague continued to ravage Europe in waves into the seventeenth and even early eighteenth centuries. The plague finally abated when the larger, meaner Norwegian brown rat (today’s urban rat) replaced the European black rats that had served as the host pool for the bacillus. Even though the disease eventually disappeared, it left a legacy of fear and despair and helped to break down medieval society. See also Document 26.

Further Reading
Castles

Warfare in the Middle Ages was largely defensive; armies were only as good as the defensive walls that protected their positions, or as effective as the siege machinery with which they attacked fortified locations. Throughout the Middle Ages, the architecture of castle building grew increasingly sophisticated, and the European landscape remains dotted with these masterpieces made of stone that once guarded strategic roads, rivers, or coastlines.

Before the eleventh century, most of the defensive castles were wooden “motte and bailey” structures. Motte means “mound” and bailey means “yard.” To construct these castles, builders selected a small hill (or motte), which would give a good view of the surrounding countryside. They then dig a ditch around the base of the hill, using the fill to enlarge the existing mound. Between the ditch and the hill (the motte) was an open area—the bailey—which served as a temporary accommodation for soldiers, servants, and others who served the castle. Around the bailey, builders erected wooden walls to serve as the first line of defense. Soon, the mounds became further fortified by building a tower of stone on the top, and stones soon replaced wood in the walls surrounding the structure. The central portion of the “White Tower” of the Tower of London, which was built by William the Conqueror in 1078 is a perfect example of this early stone castle construction.

The earliest surrounding stone walls were made by building two parallel walls of stone and filling the space between them with dirt, stones and rubble. The resulting wall looked formidable, but attackers quickly learned that once the outer stone was pierced, the rubble was quickly penetrated. By the thirteenth century, builders had learned to make thick walls of solid stone.

Castle-building technology was greatly forwarded during the Crusades when Europeans first glimpsed the concentric walls that protected the formidable city of Constantinople and the Syrian castles of the Muslims. Crusading armies desperately needed impenetrable defensive positions to guard the Holy Lands, so castle building came into its own. Sophisticated castle designs spread into Europe from the Middle East and transformed warfare as well as the landscapes. For example, the English king Edward I (r. 1272–1307) built ten castles in Wales as part of his campaign to subdue that region.

These thirteenth-century castles were wonders of fortification. They no longer relied on one surrounding wall, but instead concentric circles of stone walls confronted invaders who managed to breach the exterior wall. Many castles also had water-filled moats surrounding them that served as effective as a wall in preventing concentrated attacks. Towers were built into the walls at intervals of about 200 feet or fewer, roughly the range of a bow-shot, and the towers rose higher than the walls themselves to provide strong high ground for defenders withstanding attackers.

The flourishing trade in castle building brought an environmental cost. Many great forests were cleared for timber to shore up the stones and build scaffolds as laborers came from miles around to work on the stone. Defenders also wanted surrounding forests clear-cut so they could see any approaching foes. The Castle of Windsor near London, for example, required the wood of more than four-thousand oak trees in its construction. The slow-growing oak forests of Europe would not be the same again.

The main way castles were taken was through siege. If attackers could surround a castle and wait for months sometimes, the defenders might run out of
food or water and give up. More often, however, a siege might be lifted when armies friendly to the castle came and attacked the besiegers. All this required time, and it is often hard for modern people used to the rapid pace of warfare to remember that in the medieval world, warfare was often a matter of patience and dogged determination in the face of formidable stone walls.

Although castles came into existence because of warfare, they also served as home to noble families charged with protecting the land. In the early years of castle construction, the nobleman and his family lived in conditions hardly better than those of a peasant family, with cold, sparse rooms and few amenities. By the thirteenth century, the new, larger castles offered finer homes to the nobility.

The main room of a castle was the main hall where the noble family, guests, and retainers gathered to eat, play games, and be entertained by musicians, jugglers, or story-tellers. In the twelfth century the center of the hall was dominated by an open hearth filled with a great fire to offer warmth, light, but filled the hall with smoke. By the thirteenth century, the hearth was moved to the wall as a fireplace to reduce the smoke in the room.

There were also smaller, private rooms where the lord and lady slept, children were born and raised, and the women of the household did the weaving and sewing. The private rooms also served as a bank for the lord: He kept his money and valuables in a strongbox. If someone were able to take the castle, he would be assured of capturing a good deal of wealth as well!

Castle designers working for wealthy patrons placed the living quarters in high towers, out of the reach of arrows. This placement allowed them to put glass in the windows to bring light in without sacrificing too much warmth. Latrines were built into the walls of rooms that were adjacent to the living quarters, but the waste only fell down into a pit that periodically had to be dug out and emptied by an unfortunate servant. More comforts for the nobility were slowly added to medieval living quarters as engineers included pipes to bring water to upper floors.

These impressive structures marked medieval society. However, just as the technology of defensive warfare brought castles into being, new military technology rendered them obsolete. In the fifteenth century, gunpowder came into its own. No longer would stonewalls and the patience of defenders ensure the safety of the nobility. Instead, cannons could rapidly break down even the strongest defensive wall; the great walls of Constantinople were breached by the Turkish guns in 1453. The end of the Middle Ages can be marked by cannon fire that destroyed castles and the life they spawned. See also Document 20.

Further Reading

Champagne Fairs

Amid the violence that accompanied the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West, the vibrant trade that had supported Rome’s prosperity also declined. By the end of the tenth century, however, long-distance trade began to be reestablished, stimulating an economic prosperity that was to transform medieval Europe.
By the end of the eleventh century, there were two clear arenas of trade: The Mediterranean region was dominated by Italian city-states that sent their merchant ships all the way from the Crusader states and Constantinople in the east to North Africa and Spain. Many luxury goods found their way from the Far East into this trade. Meanwhile, a northern zone of trade began to flourish around the Baltic Sea, which specialized in woolen cloth, furs and hunting hawks. For Europe to really enjoy the fruits of a vigorous trade, these two zones had to find a way to come together.

Not only was travel difficult on land and sea, pirates and bandits threatened merchants if they traveled alone. Furthermore, each feudal lord along the way claimed the right to charge tolls to merchants passing through his land. Nor did these tolls guarantee safety, for armed nobles often did not hesitate simply to claim the goods passing through their lands.

Early in the twelfth century, a powerful feudal family saw a chance to remedy this situation and earn a good income. A key region—between the Seine and Rhine Rivers—was dominated by the Counts of Champagne, and they worked to turn their lands into a vast marketplace. At a number of their towns, they founded fairs, where merchants from both the northern and southern regions could bring their goods. The counts set aside a place for the fair, erected booths for the merchants, and set up moneychangers to handle the varied coins that were brought from many lands. The counts also provided safety, employing some of their soldiers to serve as police, and paying judges to settle disputes.

The fairs were well organized. They were spaced so that there was always a fair somewhere in Champagne. Furthermore, each day was set aside for trade in a different product or group of products. For example, a day for wine, cheeses, cloth, leather goods, and so on. To increase the safety of the merchants, no money changed hands during the days of trade; instead, merchants kept careful account of the orders. Then, on the last day, all the merchants took their money to the exchange, converted all the needed currency into the official currency of the fair—the pound of Troyes—and paid their bills.

The counts made a good profit as well. They collected a sales tax on all the goods sold at the fair, rented the booths, and collected fines from anyone who disturbed the peace during the fair. To ensure the safety of the merchants traveling to the fairs, the counts paid the barons who lived along the trade routes to guarantee their safe passage.

The great fairs were basically wholesale markets. Foreign merchants brought their goods and sold to local merchants, who then distributed them more locally. For about 200 years, the Champagne fairs were the most important markets in western Europe, but they were not the only fairs. Other nobles saw the prosperity that came with commerce and also encouraged fairs on their lands. During the twelfth century, a network of fairs appeared throughout Europe. Many were hardly more than cattle markets, but others drew more goods.

The fairs all over Europe facilitated and stimulated economic development, but they also provided exciting entertainment for all those who gathered there. Musicians, jugglers, and others gathered to take advantage of money that was changing hands. Today, those who attend the popular “Renaissance Fairs” that are put on in various cities can sample the excitement of the medieval fairs, and the Champagne Fairs began them all and remained the greatest of them. See also Document 9.
Charlemagne (742–814)

In the eighth century, northern Europe was slowly overcoming the effects of the invasions of the Germanic tribes into the old Roman Empire and establishing the kingdoms that formed medieval civilization. The most important figure in making this transition was Charles the Great—better known as Charlemagne—king of the Franks. The Franks had been ruled by the Merovingian dynasty from the earliest times of their settlement in France and parts of Germany, but the Merovingians had grown weak. The land was effectively governed by another family, the Carolingians, from the time of Charles Martel, the great general who had defeated the Muslim invasion of France at the Battle of Tours in 733. Charles Martel’s son Pepin the Short (r. 747–768) further forwarded the family fortunes. Pepin was not content to simply wield power on behalf of the Merovingians, he wanted to have the title of king. Pepin received the support of Pope Zachary, and the Carolingian dynasty was established in France. The greatest of the Carolingians was Pepin’s illegitimate son, Charles the Great—remembered as Charlemagne.
Charlemagne was born in 742 and lived until 814. In his long life, he transformed medieval European society. His main accomplishments were in warfare, church and educational reforms, and in establishing a new empire in northern Europe. Charlemagne was above all else a warrior, conducting about fifty-three campaigns throughout his reign. The warrior king marched with his armies conquering fierce pagan Saxons in the north to Slavs in the East. He also marched into Italy to put down rebellions. By 800, Charlemagne controlled all of western and central Europe, except for southern Italy that was still in the hands of the Byzantine Emperor, and in that year, he accepted (or took, the sources are inconsistent) the crown of Roman emperor. Once more there was and emperor in the West.

Charlemagne was such a powerful force in the West that the other neighboring empires could not ignore him. The Byzantine emperor objected to his taking the title of emperor, but there was little to be done. Charlemagne had more promising relations with the Islamic caliph in Baghdad, Harun Al Rashid, which is also not surprising, because the caliph was always looking to cultivate allies against the Byzantine Empire. Harun sent Charlemagne a white elephant as a gift in 802, and the great beast traveled throughout western Europe with the emperor, shocking his subjects who had never seen such an impressive animal. Charlemagne’s connections stimulated trade in his lands, and once again goods flowed into Europe from far reaches of the globe.

As memorable as Charlemagne’s political and diplomatic victories were, his most enduring impact came in the area of intellectual achievement. Charlemagne fostered learning for his own interests and to forward the religious health of his kingdom. He wanted priests well trained in reading and writing, so he set up schools all over his lands and improve education. He sent representatives around his lands to check on churches to be sure the services were being conducted competently.

Any educational reform in the eighth century (or later for that matter) depended on reliable texts. In the Middle Ages, all books had to be copied by hand, so in the centuries before Charlemagne many errors had crept into texts copied by semiliterate monks and nuns. Charlemagne gathered the best scholars of Europe to his court to consider the problem of incorrect texts. They attacked the problem in two ways: First, they compared many versions of the same text to prepare a correct rendition. Second, they developed a standardized handwriting so that future copyists could accurately preserve the corrected text. This reformed handwriting—called the “Carolingian minuscule”—reduced errors to preserve wisdom accurately for future generations. Moreover, the Carolingian handwriting style formed the basis for our own lowercase letters and the printing-press letters invented 600 years later.

Charlemagne’s great achievement hardly outlasted his own long reign. His only surviving son, Louis the Pious (r. 814–840) struggled with new invaders—Vikings, Muslims, and Magyars (Hungarians)—who threatened the integrity of his empire. He divided up his besieged empire among his three sons, Charles the Bald, Louis the German, and Lothair I. This division established the rough nationalities of France, Germany, and Italy, although it would be a long time before those emerged as actual national entities. Yet Europe remembered the idea of Charlemagne, an emperor who united all of Europe in the Middle Ages. In modern times, men like Napoleon and Adolf Hitler would try to re-create his accomplishment. See also Document 7.
Chaucer, Geoffrey (c. 1342–1400)

The fourteenth century was a time of disasters and turbulence from plague, famine, and warfare. In this century, new sensibilities appeared that marked the end of the medieval world and the movement toward the modern one. In England, the great author Geoffrey Chaucer exemplified the movement from old to new.

Chaucer was born about the year 1342. His father was associated with the wine trade, and the family lived in London. Young Chaucer was sent to be a page in the household of the Duchess of Clarence, wife of the third son of King Edward III (r. 1327–1377). This was a coveted position, and the young man learned courtly manners and met some of the greatest men in the land. When he was about 17, he went to fight in France as part of the Hundred Years' War; he was captured, ransomed, and returned to his career as a courtier. He became a favored valet to the king and married Philippa de Roet, a lady in waiting to the queen.

The king used his valet on international missions, probably dealing with matters of trade. In time he rose through the king’s ranks until by 1385 he was the justice of the peace for the county of Kent. He had become quite wealthy in the process. In the end of 1386, however, he lost all his positions because his patron John of Gaunt had lost his influence in the court of the new King Richard II (r. 1377–1399). He was restored to work a few years later, but the interval allowed him to concentrate on writing the poetry that has made him famous.

Throughout his work life, Chaucer loved books. He was a prodigious reader in Latin, French, English, and Italian and studied contemporary sciences, including medicine, physics, and astronomy. His travels to Italy introduced him to the works of Dante Alighieri and Giovanni Boccaccio, two other men who were on the cusp of the new age, and their works influenced him tremendously.

His works are varied, including a translation of Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy*, and the Romance, *Troilus and Criseyde*. The work that marked him as the Father of English Poetry is *The Canterbury Tales*. This book, which remains unfinished, consists of the Prologue that described some thirty pilgrims who are going to the shrine of Thomas Becket in Canterbury (see...
**Investiture Controversy.** These travelers agreed to tell two tales each on the way to Canterbury and two on the way back. The tales these pilgrims tell come from all over Europe, some drawn from Boccaccio and other contemporary writers, and almost every tale ends with a moral or idea.

As delightful as the tales are, the Prologue is the real masterpiece of fourteenth century literature. The characters are drawn from all segments of society from a noble knight to a bawdy miller, a gentle nun to a scandalous wife of Bath. Through these realistic portrayals, Chaucer commented on society in a perceptive way. He criticized corruption in the church by commenting on monks who would rather hunt than pray, or Friars who were not interested in the poor.

He was a medieval man at heart, however. He looked back to what he imagined was a golden age when knights were virtuous crusaders, priests cared nothing for money, and scholars loved only knowledge. If that golden age ever existed, it was gone by the fourteenth century. Money was rapidly becoming the measure of success, and the future belonged to bright individuals with as much character as all of Chaucer’s pilgrims.

Chaucer died on October 25, 1400, and was buried in Westminster Abbey. In the fifteenth century a fine tomb was erected over his grave by an admirer, and the site of his tomb became known as the Poets’ Corner of Westminster Abbey. The Father of English Poetry became surrounded by other literary giants and continues to draw visitors from all over the world.

**Further Reading**

**Chivalry**

The Middle Ages in Europe were a violent time; men ruled through the power of armed knights at their command, and might often made right. In the twelfth century, a new idea appeared that was intended to civilize this society based on a Military Order, and this idea has been loosely called “chivalry,” a word derived from *chevalier*, French for “knight.”

Under this code of chivalry, knights were not only to be strong, but also to be disciplined, religious, and ready to use their power to defend the poor, women, and others in need. Such knightly ethics also were to extend to warfare itself. For example, when one knight captured another, he no longer put him in chains and threw him in a dungeon until his family and vassals ransomed him. Instead, the captive was treated as an honored guest. In fact, it soon became the custom to let him go free to seek his ransom on his promise to return if he could not raise the money. Nor was it considered honorable to attack a foe unless he had time to arm and prepare himself.

There were several books written on chivalry, and these provide good sources of information on the details of knightly ideals as they emerged through the Middle Ages. An anonymous French poem, called the “Order of Chivalry” from about the thirteenth century describes a hypothetical story in which a knight, called “Hugh,” was persuaded by the Muslim Saladin to teach him the rituals of chivalry. Hugh described how a would-be knight was first bathed to cleanse him of sin and remind him of his newly dedicated life. Then he was dressed in a white robe, signifying the cleanness of the body; over that he
threw a scarlet cloak, to remind him of the knight’s duty to shed his blood. He gave him a belt of white, signifying virginity, to show he must control his lust, and gold spurs to remind him to follow God’s commandments. Last, he girded him with the sword, whose two sharp edges were to remind the knight that justice and loyalty should go together (Keen, 7).

As part of the development of the code of knightly conduct was the development of mock battles, called “tournaments.” In these tournaments, knights were to show their prowess as well as their noble heritage as they wore their coats of arms on their fighting attire. There were two kinds of tournaments: Melées involved a mass attack of two teams of knights, and jousts were more controlled single combats. Although these events were only mock battles, many came away with debilitating and sometimes fatal injuries. The church repeatedly tried to ban tournaments, but the code of chivalry that required knights to show off proved too strong for such prohibitions, and tournaments continued to be popular until the end of the Middle Ages.

The code of chivalry also appeared in literature, particularly in *chansons de geste*, or “songs of deed,” that praised the activities of brave and loyal knights. The most famous of these literary works are the French *Song of Roland* and the Spanish *Poem of the Cid*. Both poems extol the virtues of feudal heroes—Roland, a perfect vassal of Charlemagne, and Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar, known as El Cid (“my lord”), the perfect vassal of King Alfonso VI (r. 1065–1109) of Aragon. In both accounts, the knights embody the values of prowess and loyalty to a fault, and both stories feature specific details of battle and bloody victories designed to delight an audience of warriors.

Although the code of chivalry was praised in the courts all over Europe and in the pulpits of preachers, the reality was never that simple. Knights probably violated these ethics as often as they adhered to them; the code provided only a veneer of symbols and ceremonies that overlay the violence at the heart of “those who fight”—the ruling classes of the medieval world. Yet it was this code that causes people in the modern age to look back with longing to a time dominated by “knights in shining armor.”

Further Reading

**Conciliar Movement**

At the height of the Middle Ages, popes could claim to rule a united Christendom (see *Investiture Controversy*). However, in the fourteenth century, the situation changed, leading to the belief that the authority of the church rested with bishops gathered in council instead of solely in the person of the pope. This idea is called the “Conciliar Movement.” It represented a dramatic change from the medieval order, and it did not come easily.

At the beginning of the fourteenth century, the French king Philip IV (r. 1285–1314) attacked the principle of church freedom from royal control. In a struggle over taxation of church lands, the French king arrested Pope Boniface VIII (r. 1294–1303). The pope was freed, but the elderly pope died soon afterward as a result of the rough treatment. Philip IV was able to capitalize on the violence against the church, and he brought pressure on the college of cardinals to elect his favored French cardinal as pope.
Philip persuaded the pope to rule from Avignon (near French lands) instead of going to Rome. The new pope, Clement V (r. 1304–1314) complied, and for 72 years after the election of Clement V, the popes ruled from Avignon—in the shadow of the French king. Many Christians objected to this “Babylonian captivity,” as the Italian Petrarch (1304–1374) called it. The Avignon popes expanded their administration and streamlined their collection of taxes, and many believed that the church had become too worldly.

An influential mystic, Catherine of Siena (1347–1380) was influential in persuading Pope Gregory XI (r. 1370–1378) to return to Rome. He did so, but things quickly became worse for the papacy. Gregory died shortly after his arrival in Rome, and the subsequent election was disputed. The cardinals ended up electing two popes: An Italian, Pope Urban VI (r. 1378–1389) and a Frenchman, Clement VII (r. 1378–1394). Clement went back to Avignon, and there were now two popes presiding over Europe. This has been called the “Great Schism” of the church. People chose to follow one pope over the other based on political rather than religious motivations, and the papacy lost its moral authority as the ruler of a united Christendom.

These were the circumstances that allowed the Conciliar Movement to arise. There was ample precedent for church councils to meet to resolve controversies, but these new “conciliarists” wanted to change the church organization into a kind of constitutional monarchy in which the power of the popes would be limited.

The first test of the Conciliar movement came at the Council of Pisa, convened in 1409 by cardinals of both Rome and Avignon. This council asserted its supremacy by deposing the two reigning popes and electing a new pope. Although this should have solved the problem, it only exacerbated it—the two previous popes would not step down, so now three popes reigned.

Finally, a second council was called. Some four-hundred churchmen assembled at the Council of Constance (1414–1418). This body deposed all three popes and elected a Roman cardinal—Martin V (r. 1417–1431). The Great Schism was finally over, and the Western church was once more united under a single head. However, never again did the popes have the power that the medieval popes had. Church councils have gathered periodically ever since to address changes in the church; the medieval church had become the modern one. See also Document 28.

Further Reading

Courtly Love

During the medieval period in the West, poets writing in the courts of the nobility developed a new approach to love that has come to be called “courtly love” or even “romantic love.” The ideals of this new romantic relationship between men and women have shaped our modern world and have separated the West from most of the cultures in the world. Where did this new sensibility develop?

In the early twelfth century, a new kind of poetry appeared in southern France that changed the social code between men and women. This was the poetry of the troubadours, or court poets. Historians are divided on why these new
ideas emerged at this time; some argue for an influence of Arabic love poetry from Spain, others emphasize the patronage of wealthy noble women, while still others see the popularity of the Virgin Mary as influencing how earthly women were viewed. Whatever its origin, this poetry was extremely popular in the courts and highly influential. In these works, the poets praised love between men and women as an ennobling idea worthy of being cultivated.

Although there is a great deal of diversity within the writings, it is still possible to distill some characteristics of courtly love, best summarized in The Art of Courtly Love written by Andrew the Chaplain in the twelfth century. Andrew described how lovers must always turn pale in the presence of their beloved and stressed that secrecy and jealousy were essential for intensifying feelings of love. Andrew also stressed that this kind of romantic love was only for the nobility, for the lack of money and leisure interfered with the ability to “love.” A final emphasis of this love was that it existed outside marriage. Marriages were about alliances, not love, so the courtly love poets mostly praised adultery, not marriage.

Within these general conventions, there is a range of troubadour poetry. Some poets, like Duke William IX of Aquitaine, grandfather of the famous Eleanor of Aquitaine, wrote frankly of enjoying sex with women. Others, like Jaufre Rudel are more mystical, writing of a longing for an absent love in ways that remind readers of religious pilgrimages. Perhaps the greatest troubadour from southern France was Bernart de Ventadorn who was able to combine the earthly with the ethereal in his descriptions and longing for his beloved.

We also have some poems from women troubadours, called “trobaritz”; we can identify about twenty women poets compared to some four-hundred known men, who wrote in southern France. Like the men, these women also write of the game of love, but many express the power differential between men and women, and how even noble women were constrained in their pursuit of passion.

Troubadour poetry spread beyond France to other areas of Europe, leading to even more diversity in the genre. German poets were even more earthy than the French, and the Italians were more metaphysical—leading to the powerful vision of Dante. These poets also influenced a new genre of literature that would be even more long-remembered than the poems: romances.

The most famous romances were those surrounding the fictional court of King Arthur, and the first-known writer to put this king into the long romance form was Chrétien de Troyes, who wrote between 1160 and 1190. He probably wrote under the patronage of the Countess Marie of Champagne, daughter of Eleanor of Aquitaine and Louis VII. He most famous romances included Yvain, or the Knight with the Lion, and Lancelot. The Arthurian romances were copied and developed well into the fifteenth century.

Perhaps the culmination of the courtly love tradition in the Middle Ages was the long poem Romance of the Rose, written in the thirteenth century. The poem was began by Guillaume de Lorris and addresses the quandary of love: How can the Narrator-Lover consummate his sensual love for the rose (woman) without defiling his idealized image of her? This, of course, is at the heart of a romantic love tradition in a society that idealized the Virgin Mary. Lorris left his part unfinished, and some recent critics suggest that the problem was unsolvable. The work was completed by Jean de Meun, whose addition was simply a narration on seduction—a handbook of adultery.
The medieval woman writer, Christine de Pizan (1365–c.1430) attacked the *Romance of the Rose*, claiming that this kind of romantic love leading to adultery was at its heart misogynistic. Men would always believe that women were sex objects and that the masculine behavior implicit in courtly love endangered female honor.

Christine’s work gave a preview of historical controversy ever since: Was the ideal of courtly romantic love good for women, or not? Without a doubt, some noble women in the courts of Europe gained some power over their knights by using the conventions of courtly love. Whether romantic love in general—our heritage from the Middle Ages—is good for society remains up for debate. See also Document 20.

**Further Reading**


**Crusades**

In the eleventh century, the tenuous balance of power in the Middle East between the Byzantine Empire and the Muslim world changed. The Byzantine Empire had grown weak during the beginning of the eleventh century, and when a new, vigorous dynasty came to power in the person of Alexius Comnenus (r. 1081–1118) the situation of the empire had grown desperate. Late in the tenth century, Islam had been strengthened by the Seljuk Turks, an aggressive new band from Central Asia. In 1071, these Turks defeated the Byzantine armies in a dramatic battle at Manzikert (in Armenia) and even captured the emperor himself. The new emperor Alexius was faced with a strong Turkish presence in Asia Minor and weakened armies. Searching for allies, Alexius sent a plea to the pope in Rome for soldiers to help against Islam. Alexius got much more than he bargained for.

In November 1095, Pope Urban II (r. 1088–1099) establishing a strengthened papacy after the *Investiture Controversy* took up the challenge and preached a Crusade. Urban urged Christians to stop fighting each other and set off on a holy task to retake the Holy Land of Jerusalem. He told departing soldiers to wear the sign of the cross on their breasts and encouraged them to wear the symbol on their back when they returned victorious. He promised them salvation and the opportunity for landless nobles to claim some land of their own. This launched a series of military engagements against the Muslims that continued for 200 years that are called the “Crusades” after the cross under which the Christians fought. This series of invasions remain a source of grievance to Muslims even today.

The First Crusade, that left in 1096, was spectacularly successful for the western Europeans—whom the Byzantines called the “Franks.” Emperor Alexius’ daughter Anna Comnena wrote a history of this time called *The Alexiad* tells of the growing hostility between East and West as the Crusader armies ignored Byzantine leadership and sought their own fortunes. However, the armies of the First Crusade swept through the Muslim forces and took Jerusalem—with so much
violence that the streets were ankle deep in blood that had been shed. When the violence subsided, the crusaders had taken the Holy Land and established crusader kingdoms along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea from the Sinai Peninsula up to Edessa on the border of the Seljuk Kingdom in Asia Minor.

Not surprisingly, Muslim armies quickly rallied to attack these outposts of western Christendom. Edessa fell in 1144, and this Muslim victory moved the pope to preach a second crusade to recover the lost territory. The Second Crusade was launched in 1147 and was led by two of the powerful kings in Europe, Louis VII of France and Conrad III of Germany. Louis’s wife, the famous Eleanor of Aquitaine, accompanied him and purportedly distracted the crusades by her flirtation with her uncle, Raymond, prince of Antioch. This crusade failed miserably when the armies decided to attack heavily fortified Damascus, and the armies gave up the impossible task and went home.

Things quickly got worse for the crusader states. The Muslims of Syria produced a vigorous leader named Saladin (1137–1193), who controlled Syria and Egypt. This allowed him to coordinate an attack that retook Jerusalem in 1187. This event shocked western Europeans, who quickly called for a new crusade that was launched in 1189. This Third Crusade brought the greatest leaders of Christendom to the field: Frederick Barbarossa of Germany, Richard the Lion-Hearted of England, and Philip II of France. Everyone thought these pillars of chivalry could retake the Holy City, but they had problems coordinating their efforts. After some stunning successes, Frederick drowned while swimming,
so his army went home. The French king, too, left after experiencing some losses, leaving Richard and Saladin to negotiate a settlement whereby Christian pilgrims could have free access to Jerusalem. However, these concessions seemed humiliating to Christians in the West who unrealistically hoped for a decisive victory.

The Fourth Crusade launched in 1202 went seriously awry. Christian armies failed to negotiate effective transport with Venetian ships and were lured into attacking the Christian city of Zara to pay their fare. They then were sidetracked into attacking Constantinople itself, defeating that city in 1204. Crusaders sacked the city, raping women (even some nuns), and defiling altars. They held the city for 57 years until the Byzantines managed to retake it.

This Fourth Crusade in which Christians brutally killed Christians caused much criticism in Europe. Many people said no wonder God wasn’t giving them victory in the Holy Land because their soldiers were so impure. This line of thinking led to one of the worst examples of crusader zeal—the Children’s Crusade, launched in 1212. Preachers argued that only the innocent could march against the infidel, and thousands of children were recruited. They were lost or sold into slavery during this fiasco. (Some modern historians question whether this appalling incident really occurred, but the medieval sources recount it.)

The Fifth Crusade was an odd venture because it was conducted by Emperor Frederick II (r. 1215–1250) who had been excommunicated by Pope Honorius III (r. 1216–1227). When Frederick arrived in Jerusalem, he was denounced by the patriarch as an excommunicate. Ignoring such details, Frederick marched his army around Palestine while negotiating with the sultan of Egypt who held Jerusalem. Finally, Frederick negotiated an amazing treaty that gave him Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nazareth, and a few other towns. It was an astonishing accomplishment, but it was condemned by the papacy because Frederick was a sinner who did not have the support of the church. Frederick’s accomplishment was overturned in 1244 when an army of Turks recaptured Jerusalem and related lands and returned them to the sultan of Egypt.

The final crusades were conducted by the only French king who has been declared a saint—Louis XI. By all accounts, Louis was brave, generous, deeply pious, and universally respected. In 1249 Louis took the cross and collected a great army. His plan was to strike at Egypt as the center of Muslim power. Louis was captured as his army floundered in the Delta of the Nile. The king obtained his freedom at a cost of a king’s ransom. Louis IX launched another crusade in 1270, landing in Tunis in North Africa, where he died.

Finally, in 1291, the Muslims seized the last crusader outpost on the Asian mainland when the fortified city of Acre fell. Military Orders of knights died courageously on the walls of the besieged city while guarding the evacuation of Christians. Two centuries of Christian expansion into the eastern Mediterranean ended with few concrete results, except a long tradition of anger on the part of Muslims at Christians who came as invaders. One of the high points of medieval Christianity had ended. See also Documents 14, 15, and 23.

Further Reading
Dante Alighieri (1265–1321)

The most famous of Italian poets from the late Middle Ages was Dante Alighieri, one of the literary giants who wrote at the turning point between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Dante was born in Florence in 1265 to a family that had a heritage of nobility, but who was not especially prominent. Dante went to an elementary school run by the Dominicans and came to love French and Italian poets.

As a youth, Dante cultivated a significant friendship with the poet Guido Cavalcanti, who although he was older than Dante, served as his best friend and mentor. Cavalcanti was in the forefront of a new sensibility in poetry called the “sweet new style” (dolce stil nuovo) that explored love—and the love of a woman—as symbols of the highest metaphysical longing. In his poem “The New Life” (Vita Nuova) Dante acknowledges his debt to Cavalcanti, as he writes of his love of Beatrice, a woman the poet had loved from childhood. Although her identity is uncertain, most assume she was the wife of a Florentine banker who died young and tragically. Dante writes passionately of Beatrice, even going so far as to join his love for her with his love of God.

In spite of his love for Beatrice, Dante had an arranged marriage with a Florentine woman, and they had three, perhaps four, children: two sons, and one or two daughters. However, late in the thirteenth century, Dante found himself embroiled in Florentine politics, which were divided between two parties: the Guelfs (primarily the old military aristocracy) and the Ghibellines (the emerging middle class). In 1302, the intervention of Pope Boniface VIII in the
internal political struggles forced many Ghibellines, including Dante, to leave Florence. Dante’s wife and children stayed in Florence, and the poet began years of wandering in exile. Dante would never return to his beloved Florence again.

By 1316, Dante found permanent sanctuary in Ravenna. This was a particularly happy place for exile for Dante because two of his children lived there: his son Pietro and his daughter Antonia. Antonia had become a nun in Ravenna and had taken “Beatrice” as her religious name. Dante found respect and peace in Ravenna and completed his famous work *The Divine Comedy*. Dante died peacefully in Ravenna in September 1321.

*The Divine Comedy* is a magnificent allegory of a soul’s journey through despair to salvation. The lengthy work is divided into three sections—Hell (the Inferno), Purgatory, and Paradise—and the poet journeys through them all. He is first led through Hell by Virgil, the Roman poet whose works formed the basis of an education in the thirteenth century. Virgil shows Dante all the damned describing gruesome details of their punishments. Readers can see Dante’s opinions of contemporary Italian politics in the condemned souls: For example, Pope Boniface who was instrumental in effecting Dante’s exile from Florence was placed by the poet in Hell.

Virgil then leads Dante up the mountain of Purgatory, where sinners who would ultimately be saved were doing penance for their sins. Finally, Dante was led into Paradise by Beatrice, who represents Divine Love. In this, Dante claims that the mind—represented by Virgil—can guide a longing soul only so far; love has to complete the journey to salvation.

Some scholars consider *The Divine Comedy* a perfect medieval work: It incorporates scholastic theology with Aristotelian science in structure as complex as a Gothic cathedral. Other scholars see in the work something new; a departure from the medieval world. Dante with a critical vision criticizes the role of the popes and wrote his epic work in Italian, not in medieval Latin. Either way, Dante assured he would be remembered by this work that reveals the search of an individual for truth through the dangers and temptations of this world.

**Further Reading**


**Dramatic Performance**

The Romans had a strong tradition of plays, as had the Greeks before them. It would take medieval playwrights a long time to reestablish the dramatic tradition and pass it on to Renaissance geniuses such as William Shakespeare (1564–1616). The first step in this process was to bring pagan traditions of dramatic performance into a Christian context. A German nun was the first who seems to have accomplished this task.

Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim was a tenth-century nun who came from a noble German family. She was fortunate to have entered the abbey at Gandersheim, which was an important cultural center in northern Saxony. She seems to have been familiar with many of the Latin classics from Virgil’s *Aeneid* to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Perhaps most influential, she had read the comedies of Terence...
(written in the second-century B.C.E.). Hrotsvitha used Terence as a model when she composed six plays—Gallicanus, Dulcitius, Calimachus, Abraham, Paphnutius, and Sapientia—based on Terence, but using Christian themes of martyrdom, piety, and chastity. These plays have earned her the reputation of being the first dramatists (male or female) of the Middle Ages. This creative nun rediscovered classical drama and wrote in rhymed prose, creating a new genre that was suited to medieval sensibilities.

By the twelfth century, dramatic performances began to appear in churches as part of the liturgical services. At times groups would perform scenes from Biblical traditions—like the Christmas story, or the Book of Daniel—within the service. At first these were in Latin but then increasingly were performed in the vernacular languages and became popular.

Religious dramatic performances left the churches and moved into the towns, where players gathered a crowd to the town square. The plays sometimes were performed by craft guilds or by touring actors. By the thirteenth century, plays were performed on roofed wagon stages that were rolled from town to town. In time, people identified three types of drama (although the distinctions in theme were never rigid). Mystery plays dramatized aspects of biblical history, like Adam’s fall and the Last Judgment. Miracle plays enacted stories from the life of Christ, the Virgin Mary, or the saints. Third were morality plays in which characters were allegories of virtue or vice.

The most famous morality play comes from the late fifteenth century, at the close of the Middle Ages. It is called Everyman and tells how only Good Deeds accompanied the lonely Everyman to his grave, once he had been abandoned by Knowledge, Wit, and everyone else. This play, like the other medieval dramatic performances, was a source of religious edification as well as amusement. It would take the Renaissance before drama once again separated from religion.

Further Reading

Education

During the Roman Empire, education was very important; it was designed to produce involved citizens who could serve the state. The Germanic tribes who invaded the western Empire valued a different kind of education—designed to produce warriors and others who could contribute to the tribe’s needs. Education in the Middle Ages represented a combination of these traditions.

In recollection of their Germanic roots, medieval boys engaged in long apprenticeships learning to fight, plant, or grow skilled in a trade. Girls learned sewing, gardening, cooking, healing, and other arts from their mothers and other women in the household. However, Christian worship required different skills, and the church drew from the Roman past to educated men and women to serve God and the state.

Roman education consisted of the liberal arts and included nine subjects, which would come to be called the trivium and quadrivium. Students began with the trivium: grammar (particularly Latin grammar, which was the official language of church and state), rhetoric (for skillful speaking and writing), and
dialectic (a branch of logic, which was seen to be the principal tool for further studies). Grammar also included literature and its interpretation. Armed with these basics, students added studies of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music (which was valued both as an applied form of mathematics and a key to effective liturgical worship).

During the early Middle Ages, students could get an education in two places: at home or in a monastery. Wealthy families hired tutors to teach their children (often boys and girls) basic literacy. We have tantalizing references that testify to the difficulties of getting a suitable tutor. Some were incompetent, others cruel, and in one case the tutor, Abelard, seduced his student Heloise. Monastery schools prepared their curriculum to train new monks and nuns, but their schoolrooms were open to others. Monastery schools suffered from equally mixed abilities of teachers.

When Charlemagne came to the throne in the late eighth century, he was very interested in education, seeing it as a major way to reform abuses in the church. In a remarkably, forward-looking piece of legislation, Charlemagne ordered that education be provided at churches and monasteries for all boys throughout his kingdom. Although this was too difficult to actually implement (and was repealed by his son), it nevertheless demonstrated the emperor’s recognition that education was the key to building an effective church and state.

Charlemagne’s reforms brought about a number of real changes for the future. By his support of the best scholars in Europe, Charlemagne’s court produced standardized texts, accurate manuscripts, and a solid method of education. When learning was forced back behind monastery walls by the violence of the ninth and tenth centuries, monks and nuns had a clear body of work to use as they conducted their schools that served a much smaller student body.

By the twelfth century, education was ready to take another leap forward. There were enough educated, literate boys who wanted to strive for advanced education. Universities would be born to satisfy these longings. Universities grew up at cathedral schools where students gathered to hear lectures from acclaimed masters and hoped to forward their own careers in the church or in courts. Paris hosted the first institution of higher learning, but soon Oxford in England followed. By the thirteenth century, there were centers of learning in all the major cities of Europe.

Students arriving to study were boys of about 14 years old; girls were forbidden to attend. Groups of students would often seek accommodations together, and townspeople often criticized the rowdy boys who enjoyed their free time. Accounts write of students fighting, drinking, gambling, and generally disrupting the towns that nevertheless enjoyed the income these students brought. Dormitories were later developed to try to alleviate some of these problems that arose between students and townspeople.

Once boys were settled into accommodations, they had to choose a master with whom to study. The master was also young—probably in his twenties and pursuing a higher degree—but was very important to the new student. He would be the source of the lectures and be responsible for making sure the student fulfilled the requirements for his degree. On their part, the masters depended on payments from students for their livelihood, so if a master was particularly unpopular, or viewed as incompetent, he would quickly lose his livelihood.
The heart of the curriculum was the master's lectures. In an age when books were expensive, and thus rare, students did most of their learning by listening. Lecture rooms were small, and only a few students would attend at a time. Morning lectures typically began about 6 A.M. These lasted until 10, when students enjoyed a meal. Then afternoon lectures continued until 5, at which time students would have a second meal. In the evening, students studied their notes, talked about the material, read if they were lucky enough to have access to books, and went to the pubs to drink, talk, and enjoy the companionship of their peers.

The basic curriculum remained the quadrivium, but this framework offered a good deal of flexibility depending on the skill of the master. For example, a study of a work of literature—Virgil's *Aeneid* for example—allowed a skilled master to discuss geography, mythology, religion, and music. By the thirteenth century, students were required to take oral examinations to prove their competencies. They would then receive a “bachelor’s” degree. After about two more years of study the bachelors could test for a “master’s” degree, which would allow them to teach. After that, if they wanted to go on to higher education, they picked specialized schools to study to become “doctors.” Those studying medicine often went to Salerno, for law they attended Bologna, and for theology—called the “queen of the sciences”—they went to Paris.

We can readily identify our debt to the educational system of the Middle Ages. Although the curriculum has been expanded, modern students still strive to achieve the same degrees. The commencement gowns are modeled after the medieval clerical gowns that marked the close relationship between education and the church in the Middle Ages. Finally, then as now new ideas blossomed in the lecture halls and the informal gathering places of students. See also Documents 7, 10, and 19.

**Further Reading**


**Eleanor of Aquitaine (c. 1122–1204)**

The twelfth century was a high point of the Middle Ages. There were powerful kings who consolidated their kingdoms, popes exerted their influence over a Christian Europe (see *Investiture Controversy*), and Christian armies went crusading in the Holy Land. The age also saw a reinvigoration of culture and learning with the growth of Gothic cathedrals, universities, and the rise of secular literature. One woman—Eleanor of Aquitaine—exerted an influence on all these developments and is remembered as one of the most remarkable women of the Middle Ages.

Eleanor was born in about 1122 in Aquitaine, a province in southern France, and she was raised under the influence of her father William X, who was a great patron of artists and troubadour poets. William died in 1137, leaving Eleanor as heiress to the wealthy duchy under the protection of King Louis VI (the Fat) of France. Louis immediately arranged for her to marry his son and heir, Louis Capet. Louis was only 16 years old and a boy more suited to be a monk than a king. Shortly after the marriage, Louis the Fat died leaving the youthful Louis VII as king with his equally young wife Eleanor as queen.
While queen of France, Eleanor served as the patron for the building of the first Gothic church at Saint-Denis near Paris (see Architecture). The couple failed to produce a son and heir, only a daughter, Marie, was born in 1145.

When Louis agreed to go on the Second Crusade, Eleanor eagerly accompanied him, actually joining him in taking the cross in 1146. The couple stayed with her uncle, Raymond de Toulouse in Antioch, giving rise to unsavory rumors about the relationship between Eleanor and Raymond. After the Crusade failed, the unhappy couple returned home. After Eleanor gave birth to another daughter, Alix, King Louis had the marriage annulled on the basis of consanguinity.

Eleanor seized on this legal opportunity to escape a miserable marriage and soon contracted a second marriage with Henry Plantagenet, who became King Henry II of England in 1154. Through this marriage, Eleanor’s extensive holdings in southern France became joined to England and would remain regions contested between the two royal families until the issue was finally resolved by the Hundred Years’ War that ended in 1453.

Henry was 11 years younger than Eleanor, and a forceful monarch. Within 14 years, Eleanor bore Henry five sons and three daughters. As queen of England, Eleanor continued her important cultural patronage, bringing troubadour poetry to England, and encouraging the writing of Romances in English. It is likely that the famous Arthurian Romances took shape in England under her patronage.

The marriage remained stormy, however. Henry was repeatedly unfaithful, and his long-term liaison with Rosamond Clifford angered Eleanor. Furthermore, Eleanor was determined to rule her own lands in France, so the couple separated in 1168, each establishing a court. Eleanor established a fine court in Poitiers, the capital of her family’s lands, and involved herself in the politics of Europe encouraging her sons to take up arms against their father. The uprising failed in 1173, and Henry marched into Poitiers with his soldiers and took his queen captive.

Eleanor remained in her husband’s custody for the next 16 years. When Henry II died in 1189, Eleanor’s favorite son, Richard the Lion-Hearted became king. Richard relied heavily on his mother to serve as advisor, and indeed she virtually governed the land when he led the Third Crusade in 1191. When Richard was captured and held for ransom, Eleanor went to Germany personally to negotiate his release. After this in 1194, she retired from public life to live at the monastery of Fontevrault in northwestern France. She had King Henry buried there.

Eleanor died on April 1, 1204, at the venerable age of eighty-two. She was buried beside Henry. Her influence over medieval life and culture continued through her children, who ruled many territories in England, France, Germany, and Spain.

Further Reading

Fathers of the Church

One of the most significant contributions of medieval Europe was the establishment of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox (or Greek Orthodox)
churches. Both of these churches developed a tradition of theology that has shaped the future course of Christianity. The men (and these early theologians were all men) have come to be called “Fathers of the Church,” and the studies of their writings is called “patristics.”

The term Fathers of the Church generally refers to the theological writers of the first six centuries of Christianity who were instrumental in shaping orthodox religious thought and action. (See Heresies for thinkers who were suggesting alternative Christian patterns of belief.) There is a further distinction between the Fathers of the West, who shaped the Latin Roman Catholic Church, and the Fathers of the East, most influential in the Eastern Orthodox Church, although there was never a full distinction between the two churches, and the Fathers of both influenced each other. By tradition, the last Father in the West was Gregory the Great, who died in 604, and in the East, John of Damascus, who died in 749.

Within this general designation of which writers are deemed Fathers of the Church, there was a further designation of certain of the fathers as “doctors” of the church, which means their writings were particularly valued to instruct the faithful. In the East, the doctors were Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, and John Chrysostom. These doctors were most noteworthy in developing a theology of the Trinity and an orthodox Christology that says Jesus was fully human and divine. Their theological influence on the West was profound as these ideas became accepted as orthodoxy.

In the West, Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, and Gregory the Great are singled out as particularly worthy doctors. Their writings dealt less with theological disputes and more with details of a Christian life, although such reflections did have an impact on the growing body of theology. Jerome is best known for his translations and revisions of the biblical books. His version, called the “Vulgate,” became the accepted text in the Latin West. Ambrose is remembered for his many writings on practical pastoral matters, to his Christian hymns, and his rigid championship of the defeat of Arianism and paganism in Italy. Ambrose also strongly articulated the idea that emperors were subject to the church.

Augustine was the most prolific and influential of the Latin doctors. His writings shaped such important ideas as original sin, the nature of sexuality, and the relationship between the church and the state. Gregory the Great’s contribution lay mostly in his transmission of the ideas of the earlier Fathers, and his description of how a life of prayer can fit with an active life. His life marked what was considered the perfect life of a bishop.

The writings of the Church Fathers formed the background for all the medieval writers. Their vision shaped the medieval church and people’s daily lives. It is impossible to overstate the importance of these pivotal thinkers. Late in the Middle Ages, with the rise of mysticism, two women were admitted to the ranks of “Doctor of the Church,” whose writings were deemed worthy of study: Catherine of Siena (died 1380) and Teresa of Avila (died 1582). The writings of these women point to a more personal Christian quest that belongs more properly in the modern world, when the teachings of the early Fathers no longer seemed sufficient. See also Document 1.

Further Reading
The overriding characteristic of cuisine in medieval Europe was that the food was produced locally. Transportation over long distances was time-consuming and expensive, so unsuitable for moving perishable food items. Therefore, people had to eat what they could produce locally—within a range of 20 miles or so, which was about one day’s journey. The need for consuming locally produced food led to varied diets across Europe. For example, in the south near the Mediterranean, people could rely on olive oil, while in the north out of the range of olive production all but the wealthy had to depend on lard or animal fat for cooking.

Regardless of the location, however, medieval diets—like today’s—consisted of various food groups. Everywhere peasants planted grains to form the basis of the medieval diet. Cereal crops included wheat, barley, rye, spelt, and oats. (Maize and potatoes that are so ubiquitous today were only imported into Europe after the discovery of North and South America in the late fifteenth century.) The more northern lands had to rely on the hardy barley, rye, and oats, while the lands in the south could plant the more-popular wheat.

Grains were consumed in three ways: bread, ale, and pottage. Most grains were ground into flour, which would allow them to be stored for relatively long periods as long as they were kept dry. Flour was then most commonly baked into bread. Medieval bread was generally hearty, full of bran and roughage, for only the very wealthy could afford bread made of refined white flour. Food was often served on slabs of thick bread, which would soak up the liquids. An average aristocrat or prosperous peasant consumed about two to three pounds of bread in a day.

Table 5. Changing Peasant Diets

<table>
<thead>
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<th>1250</th>
<th>1350</th>
<th>1390</th>
<th>1430</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ale</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dairy</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fish</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meat</td>
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<td>5%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bread</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: These approximate percentages of total diets drawn from accounts of harvest workers’ diets in Norfolk, England, show the changing diets through the late Middle Ages. In the more prosperous times after the Black Death, peasants came to eat more meat and ale.

Ale—unhopped beer—was brewed all over Europe. Wives in small households brewed enough for their own consumption and perhaps to sell a little of the surplus, and brewers in "public houses" (pubs) made the popular beverage to sell to locals and travelers alike. In northern Europe, where grapes would not grow, ale was the primary beverage. Ale made up a significant part of the medieval diet and provided a means by which grains could be preserved, because the alcohol content served as a preservative. A typical aristocrat would drink up to a gallon of ale a day, and a prosperous peasant might drink two to three pints. This may seem like a lot, but the alcohol content of the ale was less than that of modern beers that rely on hops and more sophisticated brewing techniques to increase the alcohol content.

The cheapest way to consume grains was preparing pottage, also known as porridge. To produce this, grains were boiled in water or stock causing them to plump and become more digestible. Cooks added many ingredients to pottage, from beans to meat or fish or vegetables, and they were served as a side dish or a thick main dish.

Grains may have been a staple of medieval households, but like today, people had to find sources of protein. Meats of all types were relatively expensive, so only the aristocracy or wealthy merchants and peasants could regularly eat it. More regular protein sources came from milk products from cows, sheep, goats, and even sometimes deer. To preserve milk products, much was made into cheeses, yogurt or salty butter. The wealthy could eat roasted or boiled meats of all kinds—cattle, goats, sheep, pigs, and game of all sorts. Chickens and geese were also regularly raised for meat and eggs. Fish, too, was central to the medieval diet, particularly because there were many holy days when Christians were forbidden to eat meat except fish.

Another significant difference between modern and medieval food production is in the processing. Medieval peasants had to find ways to preserve and process the foods they produced, and this was particularly important with meat. Animals were regularly slaughtered in great numbers in the fall of the year so their owners would not have to feed them through the winter. That raised the problem of preserving the meat. In the far north, people could simply freeze meats outdoors. Some medieval travelers describe sales of completely frozen carcasses displayed on frozen northern rivers. However, most people had to rely on other means of preserving the valuable meat. The most popular means of preservation were smoking, drying, and salting animal flesh, all methods of drying or curing flesh by removing watery tissue that fostered the growth of bacteria. Smoking was achieved by hanging meat or fish over a smoking fire that speeded up the evaporation of fluids so the meat was thoroughly dried before the oils could go rancid. In addition, the smoke imparted a pleasant taste to the smoked flesh, like hickory smoked bacon or ham that we enjoy today.

Drying was particularly suited to fish, which could be spread on rocks in the sun. This was less reliable, because it depended on several days of sunny weather and low humidity. The most common and secure way of preserving meat and fish was salting. Partially dried meat was packed in salt, which drew the moisture out of the meat, leaving none for bacteria. The importance of salt in curing meats led to a valuable trade in salt that either came from evaporated sea water or deep salt mines. When these dried meats were prepared, they had to be well cooked to reconstitute the flesh and remove much of the salt.
The most common source of protein for most people was various legumes—beans, peas, lentils, and so on. From the eleventh century onward, these were planted all over Europe and caused a dramatic improvement in the health of the lower classes who could not afford to eat much meat. Legumes were also easily dried for long-term storage and boiled alone or with grains and vegetables to make a healthful dish.

Fruits and vegetables made up the final component of a healthful medieval diet, and the constraints of local eating were most apparent when it came to these perishable items. Most vegetables, except legumes and herbs, were unsuited to preserving by drying. Root vegetables, like carrots, turnips, and parsnips, can be stored for several weeks in cool conditions, and some vegetables can be pickled in salt brine and vinegar. Fruits can be dried, and through the long winters many people made do with dried apples and pears. The wealthy could obtain candied fruits—dried and coated in expensive sugar—such as Syrian figs. Beyond these preserved items, people celebrated the coming of spring as they looked forward to lettuce, spinach, cabbages, mushrooms, and many local berries and cherries. The best-preserved fruits were, of course, grapes that were converted to wine and saved in barrels for years.

The skill of medieval people in making the most of the foods available to them must not obscure the fact that when people depended on a local food supply, hunger was an ever-present threat. In years when weather was bad, as in the great famine of 1315, or in the declining settlement of Greenland in the fourteenth century, people died. In the following passage from the Divine Comedy, Dante Alighieri describes starvation in a way that captures the vulnerability of medieval people:

The disease of the starving, I mean hunger, is a pitiable affliction. Of human calamities hunger is certainly supreme. It brings about the cruellest end of all deaths. Hunger is a disease that torments with slowness, a pain that endures, a sickness that lasts, and is hidden in the bowels, a death that is always present and ever-lingerling. (Camporesi, 27)

Further Reading

Francis of Assisi (c. 1182–1226)

In the thirteenth century, the medieval church was under attack by many for its wealth and power. Some heresies called for religious people to follow the “apostolic life” of preaching, wandering, and poverty. One such critic, Francis of Assisi, was able to found a religious order that allowed those who valued voluntary poverty to remain orthodox members of the medieval church.

Francesco di Pietro di Bernardone, better known as Francis of Assisi, was born around 1181 in Assisi, Italy. He was the son of a prosperous merchant and received a good education and grew to enjoy the luxuries of life. In about 1202, Francis participated in a war between two warring city-states (Perugia and Assisi); he was captured and imprisoned for a year. When he returned, he
was in poor health and had a long period of recuperation. In about 1205, he tried to take up his military career again but had a mystical experience in which he was told to return to Assisi to await more information on his life’s work.

According to Francis’s own accounts, he received several spiritual experiences directing him to rejuvenate the church. He renounced his father’s wealth and began to renovate churches in need of repair. He began to preach and followers gathered around him. In 1209, Pope Innocent III approved of his band’s simple rule of life and the establishment of the Franciscan Order.

At the heart of the Franciscan rule lay the idea that Franciscans—called “friars”—should not confine themselves to monasteries but instead should help others by working in the world. They should preach the Gospel, care for the sick and dying, and lead lives of simple poverty and chastity. Francis also developed a new theology of nature, arguing that all God’s creations were interconnected. His famous hymn “Canticle of the Sun” articulated this worldview of human integration into the natural order.

The Franciscan Order grew rapidly, extending throughout Italy and beyond. By 1215, there were more than five-thousand men in the Order. In 1212, Francis had established an order for women, named the Poor Clares after its first member, Clare of Assisi.

Francis spent the last years of his life in Assisi. He had another mystical experience in 1224 during a prolonged fast. In a vision, an angel appeared to him to help him share the experience of the crucified Christ. As a physical manifestation of this vision, Francis was reputed to bleed from his hands, feet, and head in imitation of Christ’s wounds. This bleeding is called the “stigmata.” His health declined steadily after this, and he died on October 3, 1226, in Assisi.

After Francis’s death, the Franciscan Order continued its growth. Its very success led to a crisis within the Order. In his will, Francis left strict orders prohibiting ownership of any property to try to preserve the poverty that was at the heart of his theology. By as early as 1230, the pope said Franciscans could “use” property and acquired numerous buildings to accommodate the growing Order. However, this practice also generated critics who argued that the ideals of Francis were being compromised. These critics, who came to be called “Spiritual Franciscans,” caused so much disruption that in 1318 four Spiritual friars were burned as heretics on the grounds that they refused to obey a papal order that called for them to stop criticizing the practice of owning property. Pope John XXII’s condemnation of the Spirituals was later criticized, but the force of his opposition drove many Spirituals underground and out of the church. Thus for all of Francis’s reform, the issue of poverty would remain unsolved until the early modern period, when the Reformation rendered the dispute moot.

**Further Reading**


**Guilds**

The growth of commerce and a European-wide population increase led to the growth of towns in the late eleventh century. By the end of this century, townspeople, including artisans, merchants, and laborers had obtained charters
from local lords allowing residents to govern themselves outside the feudal structure. Thus if a runaway serf went to a town and escaped capture for a year and a day, he or she was free. In general, then, town charters gave the burgers (townspeople) many freedoms. However, the charters did not determine how the various groups within the town were to organize themselves, and during the Middle Ages townspeople began to organize themselves into "guilds."

Guilds came to be organized among people engaged in the same enterprise. There were merchant guilds and guilds for craftsmen. And these became so popular, that by the thirteenth century there was a guild for every conceivable occupation. For example, just within the cloth industry there were guilds of spinners, weavers, fullers, and dyers. In some cities, there were even guilds of prostitutes. Generally, the members of a guild lived together on the same street, which gave an organization to the urban space itself. There were streets of goldsmiths, bakers, cobblers, and so on.

The basic functions of the guild were to care for its members and regulate the trade of the guildsmen. Guilds first decided who would be allowed to enter the craft. Although most members of a guild were men, women could enter a craft during most of the Middle Ages. Only at the end of the period were women slowly excluded from guild membership. An artisan started a career by becoming an apprentice and serving under a craftsman until he or she learned the trade. The number of apprentices and their length of service were decided by the guild. Guilds might also regulate the treatment of apprentices, requiring them to be properly housed, fed, and not overworked.

After an apprentice had served his time in training—often about 5 years, but it varied considerably—he was required to produce a piece of work to be judged by the guild. This was called his "masterpiece" to see if it demonstrated enough skill to warrant the apprentice’s promotion to "master.” Sometimes apprentices were required to serve a further number of years as "journeymen,” a paid craftsman, before being allowed to open their own shop. Guilds would often forbid journeymen to become masters if they believed there would be too much competition within their town. Guilds could also forbid anyone who was not a member to sell in their town, so foreign merchants could not come in and offer competition.

Guilds also controlled prices and wages within their guild and guaranteed quality of the product. But the guilds would not have been so popular if they did not provide many benefits for their members. If a merchant lost his stock in a fire, the guild would help him start again. When a member died, the other members would provide burial and care for his widow and children, even providing schooling for them.

In larger towns, guilds were so prosperous that they often acted as religious fraternities to sponsor festivals and aid the local church. Some of the stained-glass windows in the great cathedrals of Europe were paid for by craft guilds.

The guilds provided a large measure of security for townspeople who wanted to enter the commercial world. The very success of medieval towns and the vibrant commercial life they developed can be attributed to these entities that organized the new economic centers. See also Document 17.

Further Reading
Heresies

In the early fourth century, the Roman Emperor Constantine threw his support to the Christian Church, which then became a church of the powerful as well as the poor. Leaders of this newly constituted “Roman Catholic Church” began to search for a unity of belief that had been lacking in the more informally organized years of the early, persecuted church. Beginning in the eastern part of the Empire (that would come to be called the “Byzantine Empire”), rulers beginning with Constantine himself involved themselves in religious disputes, presiding over church conferences, and giving political support to various positions. This drive for a unity of belief led to one of the hallmarks of medieval society—those who disagreed with the established church’s opinion (called the “orthodox” position) came to be called “heretics,” and they were persecuted for their beliefs, called “heresies.” Many heresies grew through the Middle Ages, and here I have clustered them under general characteristics they shared.

Gnosticism

From the earliest centuries after the crucifixion of Jesus, believers differed on their understanding of Jesus’s message. Some, whom we have come to call generally “Gnostics” believed that Jesus had imparted secret knowledge to his followers (gnostic comes from the Greek word for “knowledge” and means “one who knows”). This knowledge urged them to “not so much to believe in Jesus, . . . as to seek to know God through one’s own, divinely given capacity since all are created in the image of God” (Pagels, Beyond Belief, 54). Many Gnostic texts, like the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Judas offer believers a guide to exploring this self-searching. Gnostic texts were kept out of what came to be the accepted Bible, and many subsequent heresies adopted elements of Gnosticism. Even today, in the twenty-first century, there are many people who believe in a Gnostic form of Christianity.

Christological Controversies

In the fourth century, most of the religious disputes had to do with the nature of Christ. The first question had to do with whether Christ had always existed—even before the world had been created—or did God the Father bring him forth at a particular time. In about 320, Arius, bishop of Alexandria, raised a furor when he argued that Jesus had been created by God. The bishop had many followers called “Arians”—including Germanic tribes who had been converted by Arian bishops. In 325, Emperor Constantine called a church council at Nicaea, which formulated the Nicene Creed, which stated that Christ had always existed. Many churches today continue to chant the Nicene Creed as their statement of faith.

Even Christians who accepted this formulation began to wonder about how Christ’s humanity and divinity were united with Jesus. Some argued that His divinity was so powerful that his humanity was obliterated. These heretics were called “monophysites,” which means “believe in one nature”—His divine one. Others argued that for the miracle of his resurrection to matter to humans, his human nature had to predominate. These heretics were called “Nestorians,” named after Nestorus, one of their leaders. The church condemned both these positions arguing that Jesus was miraculously all human and all divine. However, advocates of both heresies moved away from the centers of Christian power to continue to practice their own brand of Christianity. When Christians
traveled as far as China in the thirteenth century, they found long-standing Nestorian congregations living there.

Dualism
One of the questions that has long troubled many Christians is “With a God of love, where does evil come from?” Several groups of heretics came up with one answer: There are two Gods, the loving God of Christ and another evil God, and this world represents a struggle between these two forces. These heretics are generally called “dualists” from the word two, and they believe that humans are composed of two parts: a spiritual bit of the good deity trapped in flesh that was created by the evil god. The goal of humans was to cultivate their spiritual side and thus escape a cycle of rebirth that would entrap them in this world of pain created by the evil principle.

The earliest dualists who were condemned by the Christian Church were the Manichaeans, whose intellectual brand of dualism even drew the famous Saint Augustine in his youth. Augustine’s later writings against the Manichaeans represent our fullest information about this sect.

In the ninth and tenth centuries, the Byzantines discovered a strong strand of dualism among Bulgars, a Slavic tribe newly converted to Christianity. These dualists were called “Bogomils.” In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, there was a strong resurgence of dualism in southern France and Italy. These were called “Cathari” or “Albigensians.” This group was so popular, that in the thirteenth century, popes called a crusade against these heretics, and the resulting Albigensian Crusade brutally suppressed the heresy and allowed northern France to break the power of the southerners.

Historians have disputed the degree to which each of these dualist heresies influenced the others, and there has been no consensus. Some historians even suggest that this wasn’t even Christianity, because any religion that posits two gods cannot be part of the monotheistic tradition. Regardless of modern historical discussions, medieval practitioners believed they were following a pure form of Christianity.

Heresies of the Apostolic Life
A more serious threat to the established church were movements that struck at the heart of the church rejecting its sacraments, hierarchy, and wealth and arguing that Christians should live as the Bible described the life of the early apostles. For these heretics, true Christians should be poor—giving up all their worldly wealth—and wander about preaching God’s word. The most famous of these movements were the Waldensians, which began in the twelfth century. Its originator was Valdes of Lyons, a wealthy merchant who gave up all he owned to follow Christ. (Subsequent sources named him Peter Waldo, probably in imitation of Saint Peter.) A few years after his conversion, Valdes and his followers began preaching against clerical vice and wealth and were declared heretical for their critique.

There were many other groups condemned for criticizing churchmen for not following the apostolic life of poverty, preaching, and Bible reading. Some were called the “Humiliati” and the “Poor of Lyon.” Many were persecuted and killed for their beliefs.

Toward the Reformation
By the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, the swell of criticism of the established church began to rise. Two popular theologians dominated the
critique: John Wycliffe from Oxford and John Hus from Prague were both intellectuals attached to universities. They were able to marshal arguments that supported popular anticlerical movements. Both called for a simpler religion, grounded in scripture rather than in the authority of the Church. Wycliffe had many followers, called “Lollards.” John Hus was executed for his beliefs.

The arguments of Wycliffe and Hus would be adopted again in the early sixteenth century, when Martin Luther launched the Reformation of the Church that split the medieval church. After that, there was no more universal doctrine of beliefs, and instead of becoming heretics, people chose denominations that were more conducive to their beliefs. But that would happen only after the end of the Middle Ages. See also Document 28.

Further Reading

Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179)

The twelfth century was an age that saw wonderful innovations in learning, medicine, and music. Many of these developments took place at the growing universities, but women were not allowed into these schools (see Education). Yet in monasteries that drew women, many were educated and were able to enjoy the intellectual arts. The greatest of these was Hildegard of Bingen, a German Benedictine abbess who founded two monasteries for women. She became well respected in her age for her accomplishments in theology, medicine, and music and was considered a visionary of God.

Hildegard was born in 1098 in the village of Bermershein in the Rhineland. She was the tenth child of noble parents. From a young age, she suffered from visions that often included seeing dazzling lights. Some historians have suggested that these debilitating experiences were some form of migraines, but Hildegard saw them as messages from God. Her parents sent her to a monastery in her childhood where she must have received a good education, though little is known of her experience during these early years.

In 1136, the abbess died and Hildegard was elected abbess. Five years later, she received a prophetic calling to publicize her visions. With the help of two nuns, she wrote her most famous work of visionary theology, the Scivias (short for Scito vias Domini, or Know the Ways of the Lord). This work took about 10 years to complete and was illustrated with stunning visual portrayals of her visions.

During the next decade, her life was dominated by her desire to found a new monastery. She was involved in construction, fund-raising, music, and caring for the growing number of nuns who joined her. She composed music for the new house, including a music-drama, called Ordo virtutum (Play of Virtues) which is often considered one of the first morality plays.

Her scientific and medical writings reveal the breadth of her knowledge available in the twelfth-century monastic libraries. Her comprehensive encyclopedia
of natural history is called the *Nine Books on the Subtleties of Different Kinds of Creatures*. This collection includes a bestiary, a lapidary (on the properties of rocks and gems), and an herbal and summarizes the state of twelfth-century science. A more original work is her medical volume, *Causae et Curae* (*Causes and Cures*). In this, Hildegard builds on traditional Galenic medicine. However, Hildegard goes beyond Galen in considering the different impact of various humors on gender, including reflecting on male and female sexuality. Hildegard also includes practical folklore remedies probably drawn from her own care of her nuns.

Hildegard’s reputation spread all over Europe. She was revered as a prophet and engaged in correspondence with the greatest figures of the age, including Emperor Frederick Barbarossa (c. 1122–1190), several popes, and the influential monk, *Bernard of Clairvaux*. Hildegard even undertook several preaching tours delivering sermons not only at monasteries, but more surprising in the cathedrals of several German towns.

Her final work of her old age was the *Book of Divine Works* in which she synthesized much of her wide-ranging knowledge, from science to theology. She died in 1179, and modern scholars have repopularized this astonishing medieval woman. *See also Document 18.*

**Further Reading**


**Hundred Years War**

In 1337, England and France entered into a century-long conflict that became the final straw that brought the Middle Ages to an end. The war began as a feudal struggle between a lord and his vassal and ended as a nationalistic struggle between nations whose armies were made up largely of commoners armed with longbows and guns. The world indeed changed in this century of devastation.

The issue that triggered the conflict was the succession to the throne of France. When the French King Charles IV died in 1328 without a son, the closest heir was Edward III of England (r. 1327–1377) because his grandmother had been the daughter of the French king. Edward was at first in no position to complain when the French gave the crown to Philip VI of Valois (r. 1328–1350), a first cousin of the previous ruler. However, soon another issue arose between the two kings. Philip VI tried to interfere in the lucrative wool trade...
between England and Flanders, and the Flemish asked Edward to assert his claim to the French crown so the rich trade could continue unimpeded. Because Edward did not like being the vassal of the French king for his lands in France, he declared war on Philip, whom he called the “so-called king of France.”

The long struggle began with some stunning English victories. The English first secured their communications across the Channel with a naval victory at Sluys in 1340; they then could turn to a land invasion of France. The French outnumbered the English, but the English took advantage of the longbow and pike, weapons that allowed foot soldiers to gain a solid advantage over mounted knights (see Warfare). Edward won a stunning victory at the Battle of Crecy in 1346, and an eyewitness described a sky blackened by English arrows as the flower of French knighthood fell crushed. By this victory, the English secured Flanders and the important port of Calais. The strategy was repeated at Poitiers in 1356, and the exhausted French were forced to sue for peace (the Peace of Bretigny) in 1360. By the terms of this peace, King Edward renounced his claim to the French throne in exchange for Calais and enlarged holdings in Aquitaine. (See Eleanor of Aquitaine for background on English holdings in France.)

The French were not willing to allow so much of their land to remain in English hands, so the war was reopened in 1369 under the French king Charles V (r. 1364–1380). He introduced a wise strategy of avoiding major military confrontation and instead wearing down the English forces on the continent. During this phase of the war, soldiers on both sides devastated the countryside, making civilian misery part of the cost of this long war.

The cautious tactics of Charles V led to French victories. By 1380, the English had almost been pushed out of France—they held only Calais and a small strip of land between Bordeaux and Bayonne. But once again the English rallied, and the last stage of the war (from 1415 to 1453) was marked by rapidly changing fortunes between the two sides. Early in the fifteenth century, France itself seemed to be disintegrating, for the Duke of Burgundy allied with the English to try to dismantle France.

The warfare of feudalism itself came further under attack as new weapons were developed that eventually made heavily armored knights obsolete. In the 1420s, a new kind of gunpowder was developed that was not only stable, but also exploded virtually instantly. Eventually, mounted knights simply grew too expensive and ineffective for the new warfare; the future lay with the infantry armed with longbows, pikes, and guns.

With their Burgundian allies, the English gained ground rapidly. The English king Henry V (r. 1413–1422) reasserted his claims to the French throne, invaded, and had a brilliant victory at the Battle of Agincourt in 1415. This battle was a replay of Crecy, and the French cavalry was defeated again. The French king was forced to sue for peace and declare his heir (called the “Dauphin”) illegitimate. For all practical purposes, France was defeated. In 1428, the English laid siege to Orleans, and its fall would have ensured the English control of all the lands north of the Loire River. It seemed it would take a miracle to restore the French monarchy, and remarkably, many people believed they got one in the person of Joan of Arc.

During these darkest days of France, a young peasant girl—Joan of Arc (c. 1412–1431)—believed she saw visions in which angels urged her to put on
men’s clothing and lead the French troops to victory. The Dauphin, who was desperate, gave her command of an army. Miraculously, Joan stirred the determination of the French armies and lifted the siege at Orleans. After this victory, she escorted the Dauphin to Reims—the city where French kings were traditionally crowned—where he received the crown of France, thus renouncing the previous treaty. The French rallied around their king and by 1453, the English only held Calais.

Joan did not live to see the victory. She had been captured in 1431 by the Burgundians, who turned her over to their English allies. They put her on trial for witchcraft and heresy. She was condemned to be burned at the stake.

As a result of the Hundred Years’ War, the English were expelled from French soil. The French king emerged more powerful than all his vassals, and the slow consolidation of royal rule was effectively complete. The monarchy had a permanent army, and a great deal of prestige among people who were coming to see themselves as “French.” Nationalism—one of the hallmarks of the modern age—was born, and the feudal ties of the Middle Ages were fading. See also Document 27.

Further Reading

Iconoclasm

In the eighth century a religious controversy arose that served to create a decisive split between the Byzantine Empire and the western kingdoms that were loyal to the pope in Rome. This controversy was about whether or not people should venerate “icons”—images of saints and the Virgin Mary that were displayed prominently in the churches, East and West. The controversy was over “iconoclasm,” which means “image breaking.”

From the earliest times, Christians used images, paintings, mosaics, and sculptures of Christ and the saints in their churches. These were to supply concrete inspiration to worship, but some believed it looked like people were worshiping the images instead of the saints they represented. This was particularly true in places where people had recently converted from paganism, where the habits of worshiping images remained strong. Beginning in the late seventh century, there was an additional reason to question the presence of images in churches: The Prophet Muhammad had claimed Christians had fallen into idolatry, and that Islam adhered to a purer form of monotheism.

These criticisms came to a head in Byzantium in the reign of Leo III (717–741), who came from Asiatic provinces where there was a strong feeling that perhaps Muhammad had a point. Leo was very devout and brought this sensibility to his reign. Leo also had a practical reason for attacking idols: Wealthy monasteries had a monopoly on the creating of idols, and Leo wanted to break some of their power.

In 726, Leo brought the issue to a head by banning icons, and this decree led to revolts in Greece and Italy that were suppressed but only after considerable
struggle. The theological issue that generated such passion was based in the idea of whether the material world was good or evil. Supporters of icons believed that portraying Christ supported the incarnation by allowing that the material representation of Christ reflected his material body. Iconoclasm seemed to downplay this central mystery of Christianity.

A more significant political result of the struggle with iconoclasm came when Pope Gregory II (r. 715–731) refused to obey Leo’s iconoclastic decree. In fact, the pope said that he would ally with Western barbarians rather than tear down the image of St. Peter at Rome. This split confirmed that East and West had parted, and popes allied with the Franks as their secular arm (see Charlemagne).

The iconoclastic dispute continued in Byzantium for more than a century, with different emperors taking different sides. Not until 843, when an empress finally restored the images, did the iconoclastic controversy come to an end. Perhaps ironically, it was in the East, in the Byzantine Empire where the veneration of icons continued with the greatest force. The Eastern Orthodox Church continues this tradition today.

Further Reading

**Inquisition**

Medieval society was founded on a solid legal tradition. Lawyers and judges used a rich body of laws to bring order and justice to the land. However, in the thirteenth century, the prevalence of heresies caused church authorities to establish a new kind of court. This court—called “the Inquisition”—differed from other courts in one particular way: Regular courts were established to determine the guilt of someone after a crime had been committed. Now the church was worried about finding people who might jeopardize others by their wrong beliefs instead of their criminal actions.

In 1233, Pope Gregory IX (r. 1227–1241) established a permanent organization to combat heretics. He wanted people who were educated to go all over Europe to inquire about the beliefs of parishioners. Most of these inquisitors were Dominican Friars who had been trained at universities and who were skilled in the nuances of religious thought. The purpose of the Inquisition was twofold: to save the soul of a heretic and prevent him or her from corrupting others. The danger of heresy seemed so pervasive that the Inquisition could use methods that were not allowed in criminal courts. For example, good Catholics were urged to denounce heretics, but the accused was not allowed to confront his accuser, nor even know what the charge exactly was.

Once people came to the attention of the Inquisition, they were questioned to determine their beliefs. Of course, if they were heretics, they would lie to the inquisitors, so the judges were left with a dilemma: how to ascertain a person’s real thoughts? Handbooks for inquisitors recommended various kinds of trickery to trap the accused into revealing a heretical opinion. Sometimes the accused were imprisoned and even starved into making a confession.

If a man or woman seemed guilty to the inquisitors, yet persisted in denying the charges, he or she could be tortured. According to church law, there were rules surrounding the application of torture. The accused could only be
tortured once, and the confession was supposed to be voluntary. However, inquisitors regularly broke these rules, saying they were “continuing” the first torture, not adding a second. Many innocent people confessed under these circumstances.

Once a confession of guilt was obtained, the inquisitors assigned a penance. This might consist of a pilgrimage, public flogging, imprisonment, or other public humiliation. The property of a confessed heretic was also taken and divided up between the king and the church. These “penances” were so onerous, it was difficult for anyone who had been condemned to reenter society.

The Inquisition did not kill people—that was against church law. However, it did work with secular authorities to rid society of those it deemed dangerous. If someone resisted torture and questioning and refused to confess and accept penance, and if the inquisitors believed this individual was indeed a heretic, they turned the accused over to the government. The government then would execute—usually burn—the unrepentant heretic. Anyone who confessed did penance, and then relapse into heresy was immediately turned over to the secular authority for punishment.

Joan of Arc (c. 1412–1431), the famous saint who helped the French drive the English out of France during the Hundred Years’ War, fell into this second category. Under much pressure, she had confessed to the Inquisition and promised to wear women’s clothing again. When, her “voices” told her to once again wear men’s clothing, she was declared unrepentant and burned at the stake.

The Inquisition is a dark part of the history of Christianity. Although there were many good men who deeply believed that heresy could harm society, the result was horrifying. When people can be persecuted for their ideas, it is hard for any idea to be safe. See also Document 28.

Further Reading

Investiture Controversy

Medieval political thinkers, religious and secular, believed that society on earth should be ordered in accordance with God’s wishes, indeed should mirror a heavenly order. This desire for a well-ordered world led to a controversy
that began in the late eleventh century. At the heart of the question was who should be on top of a well-ordered hierarchy, pope or kings? The struggle called the “Investiture Controversy” slowly led to a papal monarchy which by the thirteenth century placed the popes as leaders of a Christian Europe.

The controversy began over control of the papal office itself. In 1059, a council at Rome decreed that only the cardinals should elect future popes, and their deliberations should be free from interference by aristocratic factions and the imperial government. This system, with procedural modifications, has remained in place ever since. The real controversy lay in a related decree issued by this council, claiming that no priest should receive any church from a layman. At first, this portion of the decree was not implemented, but it remained a principle that future popes might enforce.

In 1073, Gregory VII was elected pope. He was a passionate reformer, who believed it was his duty to break royal control of ecclesiastical appointments. He brought the issue to a head with the Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV (r. 1056–1106). Gregory claimed that Henry could not “invest” bishops with their ring and staff, the symbols of episcopal power. This meant that the pope could choose bishops in all the lands of Europe, and because bishops were important politically as well as religiously, papal appointments could effectively undercut the powers of the kings.

Through the struggle, the two sides liberally wielded their weapons: Henry sent his armies marching into Italy; Gregory excommunicated the emperor, claiming that this action could free the ever-rebellious vassals from their feudal obligations (see Law, Feudal). The battle waged on indecisively. Gregory died in exile in 1085, but Henry was unable to secure a decisive victory before his own death. The strengthened claims of papal power allowed popes to call the first crusade in 1096, demonstrating their ability to field armies of Christendom.

In 1122, the new emperor, Henry V, negotiated a compromise to the investiture controversy, called the “Concordat of Worms.” In this compromise, the popes would invest the bishops with their symbols of office, but the elections of bishops would take place in the presence, and under the influence of kings. Tensions between papal and royal power did not end with the Concordat of Worms, however, and sporadic struggles broke out in various regions of Europe.

Perhaps the most famous incident to the royal/papal tensions took place in England. King Henry II (r. 1154–1189) was exerting royal authority through centralizing the law courts in his land. In doing so, he came into conflict with his archbishop and once-best-friend, Thomas Becket. Becket wanted to preserve the church’s right to be exempt from Henry’s legal authority. One day, a small group of knights seeking to please their king surprised Becket in his church at Canterbury and split his head with their swords. Becket died on the altar he had served so well. Beckett quickly became a martyr in the battle for church autonomy, and Henry was forced to compromise with the pope to gain forgiveness for his archbishop’s murder. The power of the popes grew.

As church power grew, the papacy developed structures that increasingly resembled the powerful medieval monarchies. The pope created an administrative unit to handle financial matters, and a legal branch to handle appeals covered by the growing body of canon law (see Law, Roman and Canon). By the beginning of the thirteenth century, popes could with some accuracy claim
that they presided over a universal Christendom, and the most powerful pope was Innocent III (r. 1198–1216).

Innocent was able to exert leadership over princes of Europe, reprimanding them and requiring their obedience. He called the important Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 that pronounced on many issues that came to define the Roman Catholic Church: It identified exactly seven sacraments and reaffirmed their essential role for salvation; it established qualifications for the priesthood, and the monastic life. In effect, the medieval church had become an empire that superseded all other empires. See also Document 13.

Further Reading

Jews

Since the time of the Roman Empire, many towns had a significant population of Jews. For centuries, Jews had played a vital role in town life as merchants, artisans, and members of many other professions. By the eleventh and twelfth centuries when commerce became more prevalent, Christian merchants and craftspeople began to view the Jewish community as competition. Slowly, they excluded Jews from guilds and, in some places, kept them from owning land.

Even as they were restricted from some enterprises, Jews were allowed—indeed encouraged—to enter into money lending, which is essential to commercial enterprises. The Christian religion forbade its followers to collect interest on loans, for they believed it was unseemly to make money from time, which belonged to God. To explain this, a Franciscan in the fourteenth century said that merchants could not charge interest because “in doing so he would be selling time and would be committing usury by selling what does not belong to him” (Le Goff, 29). Muslims, like Jews, also had no religious strictures against lending money, so Muslims and Jews prospered on the important banking trade of the Middle Ages.

Their work in money lending placed Jews in an increasingly precarious position. They were at the mercy of local lords who protected them and helped them collect their debts, but Jews had no rights against a lord who wanted to avoid repaying them. Jews in England were there by the king’s permission and were under his protection. Whenever a Jew made a loan, it was registered with royal officials, and the king collected 10 percent from each
loan. By the thirteenth century, Christian merchants had begun to practice money lending on a large scale. This made Jews less necessary, and they were expelled from England in the thirteenth century.

In addition to economic pressures, there were other reasons that Jews faced increasing persecution during the Middle Ages. Some Crusaders, who traveled long distances to fight the “infidel” in the Holy Land, believed that Jews, too, were worthy targets of crusading zeal. Even the saintly crusader king Louis IX believed persecuting Jews to be a religious duty. Periodically crusading armies conducted pogroms (persecutions) on Jewish communities along their way.

In the fourteenth century when plague devastated Europe, Christians wondered at the cause of such suffering. In their quest for scapegoats, they often turned to Jews, the perennial targets of Christian anger in the Middle Ages. There were hideous massacres of Jews in German cities when the plague spread there in 1348. Pope Clement VI opposed these pogroms, logically pointing out that Jews, too, were victims of the plague. But this did not stop more massacres in 1349.

Anti-Jewish sentiment increased through the fourteenth century and reached a culmination at the end of the Middle Ages. In the fifteenth century there were large-scale expulsions of Jewish communities from many cities and countries. Vienna began expelling Jews in 1421, and many other German cities followed. King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella forced all of Spain’s Jews to leave in 1492, causing one of the largest movements of peoples in the era. Portugal did the same in 1497. Many Jews from Spain and Portugal fled to the Muslim lands in North Africa, and some Muslims today still trace their ancestry back to this exodus. German Jews moved eastward into Poland and Russia, and the center of Judaism shifted from western Europe to the East. As a result of this intolerance, western Europe lost the talents of the many Jews who had inhabited these lands for centuries. See also Document 8.

Further Reading

Justinian (c. 483–565)

The sixth century was a formative time for the eastern part of the old Roman Empire. This was the pivotal period of transition from Roman to the Byzantine Empire, and it was shaped by the Emperor Justinian and his remarkable wife, Theodora.

Justinian was born about 483 in the Balkans. His parents had been Macedonian peasants, and little is known of his early life. When Justinian was 20 years old, he was brought to Constantinople by his uncle, Justin I, who had risen through the ranks and become an important military officer. Justin had no children, so he brought several of his nephews to the capital where they were given a good education and trained for the military. Justinian proved so promising, he was adopted by his uncle.

Justin was able to have himself proclaimed emperor in 518, and Justinian played an important role in his administration. When Justin died in 527, Justinian was proclaimed emperor. Shortly before he was acclaimed emperor,
Justinian married his great love, Theodora. She, too, was of humble origins, but a great beauty and highly intelligent. She apparently had been an exotic dancer when she captured Justinian’s eye, but once she was empress, she used her talents and love of power to share rule with Justinian.

The great crisis of Justinian’s reign was the Nika Riot of 532. This began as a dispute between rival chariot racing teams but ended as a riot against the emperor. Justinian was ready to flee the violence, but Theodora urged him to stand firm and crush the rioters. He prevailed and was able to impose an autocratic rule that marked future Byzantine Emperors. The Nika Riots also destroyed much of the city, so Justinian had the opportunity to rebuild the city in significant ways. He built forts, bridges, aqueducts, and many public buildings like baths. The greatest church was the magnificent Hagia Sophia, a complex building featuring a great central dome with semidomes on each side of the central nave (see Architecture). It was breathtaking at its time and remains one of the world’s architectural masterpieces.

Justinian’s building program extended beyond Constantinople into Jerusalem and Ravenna, Italy, the old capital of the western empire. In Ravenna, particularly notable is the Church of San Vitale, which features magnificent mosaics of Justinian and Theodora.

Even more influential than his building program was the emperor’s legal reforms (see Law, Canon). Shortly after becoming emperor, Justinian called together a commission of legal scholars to update the compilations of the old Roman laws. The resulting work, the Codex Justinianus, the Digest, and the Institutes together are called the Corpus Juris Civilis, or the Body of Civil Law. This was intended to serve all the legal needs of the empire, as well as be the official manual for law students. It was in this form that Roman law was passed on to the future in the West. The legal reform stands as Justinian’s greatest achievement.

The least successful enterprise of this emperor was his attempt to reunite the two parts of the empire. He was able to take North Africa from the Vandals and Italy from the Ostrogoths. However, these reconquests proved short sighted. Justinian raised the taxes in the reconquered territories, causing dissatisfaction. Furthermore, to hold these lands, Justinian had to rely on German mercenaries, and this strategy paved the way for the Lombards—a less tolerant tribe of Germans than the Ostrogoths—to conquer Italy in 568. Justinian could not maintain a firm grip on the western provinces, and the constant battling drained the eastern empire of needed resources. Justinians attempt to reunify the old Roman Empire would be the last—from his reign on, the Byzantine Empire would go its own way, divorced from the West.

Theodora died of cancer in 548, and her death marked the end of the productive part of Justinian’s reign. By the time Justinian died in 565, at the age of eighty-two, his people cheered his death. They hoped that the era of expansion and autocratic taxation would end, but their hopes were misplaced. Justinian and Theodora had no children, and Justinian made his nephew Justin his heir, and years of difficult, autocratic rule continued. See also Document 4.

Further Reading
Law, Feudal

People throughout medieval society were joined to each other in a system of mutual obligations. These relationships grew stronger in the violence of the ninth and tenth centuries and turned into a complex system in which people contracted with each other to fulfill certain tasks. Thus, the feudal ties that linked people together developed into sophisticated interpretations of contract law.

The early contracts of feudal ties illustrate the central components of these new contracts. One formula read as follows:

Since I had not wherewith to feed and clothe myself, I wish to commend myself to you and to put myself under your protection. I have done so . . . and as long as I live I shall never have the right to withdraw from your power and protection.

(Cheney, 3)

With these words, eighth-century noblemen placed themselves in a mutually binding, lifelong contract with their superior. What was the nature of this contract?

After signing this contract, a “vassal”—that is, a nobleman who entered into this contract—placed his hands between those of his lord and swore to be faithful to him. In return, the vassal received from the lord a “fief,” which offered the vassal his means of livelihood. A fief was usually a large piece of land complete with villagers to work it to provide for all the vassal’s needs, but later in the Middle Ages a fief could also mean a town or other job that provided income.

As appropriate to a contract, each party owed the other specific things. Lords owed their vassals “maintenance”—usually their fiefs—and protection. The lord was also to act as his vassal’s advocate in public court. Lords were also to treat the vassal with “good faith,” doing no harm to him and his family.

On their part, vassals owed lords “aid and counsel.” The primary “aid” took the form of military service, specifically periods of fighting time. These varied, but an average length of service might be 40 days a year. Vassals owed certain specified monetary “aid” as well: They had to contribute when their lords incurred extra expenses, such as a daughter’s wedding or a son’s knighting. Vassals also owed lords “counsel,” or advice when the lord required it. This seemingly simple requirement proved very important in the development of Parliament as vassals gathered to discuss the business of the land. Vassals also owed their lords “good faith.”

Over time, vassals took on other titles, like baron or duke, that showed their position relative to other greater or lesser vassals, but the word vassal remained a general term that applied to all noblemen bound in contract and loyalty to a lord. Theoretically, a vassal only held his fief as long as he was able to fight for his lord, but in fact, by the ninth century, vassals expected to be able to pass their fiefs on to their sons. A son was expected to place his hands between those of his lord and renew his father’s vows before he took full possession of the fief.

Because this was a legal system of mutual obligation, if either party breached the contract, the arrangement could be rendered null. For instance, if a vassal failed to fight or give counsel, the lord could declare his land forfeit and give it to someone else. Of course, enforcement became complicated when armies of
me were involved, but the system did establish the idea of the primacy of con-
tract law that bound people together in an ordered system.

Disputes about feudal obligations led to one of the most important documents
in the history of American legal developments: the Magna Carta, or “Great
Charter.” In the thirteenth century, King John of England (r. 1199–1216) ran
afoul of his vassals as he cut corners in the traditional feudal contract to raise
money and increase his power. His vassals revolted, and at a battle at Run-
ymeade outside London, John was forced to sign the Great Charter promising
to adhere to old feudal agreements. This document, signed in 1215, demon-
strated that the king was not above the law and recorded principles that formed
the core of many American liberties, like no “taxation without representation.”

One of the ironies of the Middle Ages is that the system of feudal law that
bound individuals together to field armies of mounted knights has been long
obsolete. Yet the legal contracts that formed the basis of these relationships
have formed the basis for modern democracies that place freely made con-
tracts above the whims of the powerful. See also Document 6.

Further Reading
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Law, Germanic

Long before the Germanic tribes had any contact with the Roman Empire
and its strong legal tradition, they had their own ways of trying to ensure that
their clans and tribes were not ruptured by violence and injustice. Through
centuries, principles of law were not written down or even legislated by lead-
ers; instead laws were thought of as customs of past, remembered by elders
and discussed in community.

When disputes arose, leaders gathered in assembly to assess the matters at
hand. The key to their deliberations was not necessarily any consideration of
abstract right and wrong or theoretical justice. They preferred to consider the
value of the tribal members. For, if a crime had been committed, whether it
was theft, assault, murder, or anything else, the main issue was not the injury
to an individual, but the injury or loss experienced by the clan or community.
Therefore, leaders in deliberation might consider the character of an accused,
or his or her value to the community. In a practice called “compurgation,”
twelve honorable men would testify to the character of the accused, even if
they had no knowledge of the facts of the matter under discussion. The most
important fact in ancient tribal society was the value of the accused, so a deci-
sion would likely go in favor of the most valuable member of the community,
regardless of any facts in evidence.

If compurgation could not resolve a dispute, the assembly might call for a
trial by “ordeal.” If the disputing parties were fighting men, they might en-
gage in a trial by combat, in which case the stronger was considered right—
demonstrating that the strongest was the most valuable to a community that
depended on strength and fighting ability for its survival.
Other kinds of ordeals appealed to the supernatural, allowing God to reveal guilt or innocence. There were several kinds of ordeals: Sometimes an accused had to grasp a red-hot poker and carry it a certain way, or plunge his or her hand in boiling water. Some days later, the wound would be examined, and a festering wound demonstrated guilt. Some trials by ordeal might leave people out of it altogether. For example, when priests in Spain were arguing about what was the correct form of liturgy to use, they brought two fighting bulls out. They named one “Toledo” and one “Rome” after the two varying types of liturgy and set them to fight. Toledo won, winning churches the right to use that form of prayer service.

Once the Germanic tribes established themselves in the old Roman Empire at the beginning of the Middle Ages, they brought this strong legal tradition with them. From the Romans, however, they learned the value of a written law code that was intended to last longer, and stand beyond, any living memory. When the tribes began to record their laws from the fifth century on, they brought with them all the elements that had shaped their oral traditions of justice, and these became part of the Western legal tradition.

In addition to recording accounts of ordeals and compurgation, the written law codes kept the value and integrity of the community as the overriding principle of justice. At the center of all the codes is the concept of “wergeld,” which means “man-gold,” literally the price or value of a man (or woman) to the community. In this system, the value of an individual, an animal, or a piece of property was set by law. When this value was violated (or diminished), then the offending party could make up for the violence by paying the price of the violated. This system was intended to restore the damaged community and to preclude family members from taking vengeance and perpetuating a cycle of violence that would further disrupt the community. The law codes used the techniques of ordeal and compurgation to determine who should pay the wergeld.

Early medieval law codes list a bewildering range of wergeld assessments. The Lombard laws (from Italy), for example, give a price for cutting off noses, ears, arms, hands, and fingers, and for knocking out teeth (Drew, 62–63). Laws also indicate the price of injury to women, children, animals, and trees in the forest. They even offered a price for such things as insults or watching a woman urinate behind a bush.

Despite all these law codes that preserve for us ideals of proper behavior, there was little mechanism for enforcement in an age when might made right. Throughout the eighth and ninth centuries, most of western Europe remained violent and lawless. The growth of feudal law would serve to offer the next step in bringing Europeans under the rule of law. See also Documents 2 and 3.

Further Reading

Law, Roman and Canon
The Romans made a significant contribution to medieval culture through its tradition of law, which was different from the Germanic legal customs.
Romans had developed abstract notions of justice, a respect for written laws, and a tradition of interpreting laws by lawyers and jurors. However, this long tradition of accumulated laws, commentaries (that is, explanations), and legal decisions left a body of work that was full of obscurities and internal contradictions. To be fully useful for medieval jurists (legal scholars), this legal heritage needed to be synthesized. This was accomplished in Byzantium in the early sixth century.

In 528, the Byzantine Emperor Justinian assigned his jurists to begin to codify the old and new laws of the Roman Empire. This formidable task was completed a few years later and included the *Codex Justinianus* and the *Digest*, fifty books of law. Justinian’s jurists completed the work by publishing the *Institutes*, a summary of the main principles of Roman law that was intended for use as a textbook. Justinian’s compilation was the highly influential text that preserved Roman legal principles for the future (up to today).

Justinian’s codification was rediscovered in western Europe at the end of the eleventh century, where it exerted a profound influence on the growing body of religious law, or “canon law.” Even in the early Middle Ages, church courts claimed jurisdiction over wills as part of their care for widows and orphans, but after the Investiture Controversy popes began to claim jurisdiction over many more areas of life, so church law became more developed. Justinian’s *Digest* and *Institutes* offered church lawyers a ready body of laws to shape their own work.

In about 1140, the church lawyer Gratian issued his “Decretum,” a collection of canon law that showed that church canons formed as complete a body of law as secular law. Gratian’s collection with commentaries became accepted as church law. Consistent with the growing power of the popes through the twelfth century, canon lawyers began to argue that the pope was the supreme judge and legislator for all of “Christendom,” and that he had jurisdiction over any religious matter. Interpreted broadly, “religious matter” encompasses every part of life: Marriage, a sacrament, was under papal jurisdiction. So was criminal law, since crimes were moral issues. Most controversial for medieval kings and nobles, canon lawyers claimed that contracts—including the all-important feudal ties—were under papal jurisdiction. Thus, the growing body of canon law placed religious leaders at the top of the social order.

Lawyers were trained at the University of Bologna, which was Europe’s premier law school, and as lawyers worked, they further developed the body of Roman law they inherited and made it increasingly relevant to the medieval church that was claiming more and more jurisdiction over everyday life. Late in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, groups of canon lawyers, called the “Decretalists,” reconciled old texts with new legislation and continued the growth of canon law.

Perhaps not surprisingly, toward the end of the Middle Ages there was a reaction against allowing the church to be the main arbiter of laws. Kings increasingly began to reclaim legal jurisdiction over church courts. Through this process, much of canon law became incorporated into secular law codes, which brought an unintended consequence: Much legislation of morality—such as prohibitions of some sexual activity—became part of secular law for the first time.

Our legal heritage from the Middle Ages is significant and complicated. Medieval lawyers and judges reconciled Roman, canon, Germanic, and feudal
laws in a dynamic way, and this legal heritage became the basis for modern western democracies.

Further Reading

Marco Polo (c. 1254–1324)

There were many travelers who went from Europe to Asia (and the reverse) during the Middle Ages. Most were anonymous traders who brought significant technical innovations to Europe from India and China; others were religious travelers trying to spread Christian ideas. The most famous traveler, however, was the Venetian Marco Polo, who with his father and uncle spent many years in China at the court of Kublai Khan. Marco’s enduring influence came because of his book of memoirs that captured the imagination of Europeans for centuries. Christopher Columbus carried a well-marked copy of Marco’s book with him as he crossed the Atlantic.

Marco Polo was born about 1254 in Venice to a leading merchant family. Venice was at the height of its influence, with its traders dominating the eastern part of the Mediterranean and merchants growing rich bringing in goods from the furthest reaches of Asia. At the same time, China was opening up for trade. The Mongol Empire ruled by Kublai Khan stretched from China to Russia, and the Great Khan happily received foreigners in his court because he was suspicious of Chinese who did not want to be ruled by a Mongol dynasty.

With this favorable trade atmosphere, a number of merchants ventured into the Mongol lands, including members of the Polo family. Around 1260, Marco’s father, Niccolo and his uncle Maffeo traveled all the way to China to the court of Kublai Khan. The Great Khan gave them a warm welcome, appointed them emissaries to the pope, and ensured their safe travel back to Europe. They were told to return to China with one-hundred learned men who could instruct the Mongols in Christian religion and western science. It was quite possible that the Khan was influenced in this by his favorite wife, who was a Nestorian Christian (see Heresies).

The Polos arrived back in Venice in 1269. Niccolo found that his wife had died during his absence, and their son, Marco, who was about 15 years old, was running free in the streets of Venice. Marco was eager to join his father in future adventures, and Niccolo believed his son needed the steadying hand of his father.

In about 1271, the Polos were ready to return to China. The pope did not send one hundred scholars, only two Dominican friars, who turned back at the first sign of difficulty in travel. The journey took 3½ years by horseback through some of the world’s most rugged terrain, such as the Gobi desert. If Marco’s account is to be believed, the Polos became great favorites of the khan, and Marco became one of his trusted ambassadors. The Polos stayed in Khanbalik (Beijing) for 17 years. The elder Polos engaged in trading while Marco worked for the Khan, but after 17 years the family looked for ways to return to Venice without alienating the aging Kublai.

Finally an opportunity to leave presented itself when Kublai needed trusted emissaries to accompany a Mongol princess to Persia where she was to marry the local khan. The Polos sailed from China with a fleet of fourteen ships and a
wedding party of six hundred people. The journey took 2 years, and most of the wedding party died along the way. Fortunately, the Polos and the princess survived, and she was duly delivered to Persia. From there the Polos went to Venice, arriving home in 1295 with rich goods.

Marco was not ready to settle down, and in his early forties he became involved in naval warfare between the Venetians and their trading rivals, the Genoese. He was captured and in 1298 found himself in prison in Genoa. While imprisoned, Marco met a man named Rustichello from Pisa, who was a writer of romances. To pass the time, Marco dictated an account of his travels in Asia and his many observations of strange lands. Marco and Rustichello were released from prison in 1299, and the book became an instant success.

After his prison experience, Marco was content to lead a quiet life in Venice. He married Donata Badoes, a member of the Venetian aristocracy, and they had three daughters, all of whom grew up to marry nobles. Marco died in 1324 at about 70 years of age. In his will, he left most of his wealth to his daughters, but more interestingly he set free a Chinese slave, named Peter, who had remained with him since his return from the court of the Great Khan.

The impact of Marco Polo was his book, translated into English as *The Travels of Marco Polo*. For centuries it was the main source of Western information about Asia, and it drew subsequent travelers. By 1300, there was a community of Italians living permanently in China. His life is a perfect example of the global interactions that shaped the Middle Ages. See also Documents 24 and 25.

**Further Reading**


**Marriage**

Long before the coming of Christianity, marriage was an essential element in society. Through marriage, families were aligned and the future assured through children. In medieval Europe, however, there was a significant change in the philosophy of marriage; it became joined to religion as a sacrament (a rite containing grace for salvation), and its nature changed in ways that continued to shape marriages into the modern world.

Throughout the Middle Ages, marriages were arranged, recognizing the importance of this alliance to the families and the economic units that were being joined. At the beginning of the Middle Ages, Germanic tribes practiced polygyny—the taking of multiple wives and concubines. This practice ensured that many families might be united to the powerful war leaders and chiefs, contributing to the cohesiveness of the society. Emperor Charlemagne, for example, married four wives and took six concubines. The difference between wives and concubines was small, and all the resulting children were legitimate.

As early as the fourth century, the Fathers of the Church had begun to offer a different view of marriage that differed from the practical alliances that had formed the basis for older forms of marriage. Some church authorities wrote that marriage is an earthly reflection of Christ’s union with the Church, and others argued that husbands and wives should love each other. Even nuns committed to lives of chastity began to phrase their vows in marital terms—they were Brides of Christ through a mystical marriage based on love. By the ninth
century, church leaders were able to impose monogamy on the previous polygynist rulers, and the first significant change in marriage had begun: It came under the province of religious authorities.

Church authorities also declared marriages to be indissoluble, changing previous fluid practices in which marriages were undone as easily as they had been performed. The Church also regulated who could marry, eventually declaring that a couple may not marry if they were related by four degrees. That meant that a couple who shared a great-great-grandparent could not marry. In practice, many aristocrats married within this level of consanguinity, and this formed the basis for dissolution of various marriages.

A turning point in Christian marital ideology came in the twelfth century with the development of canon law (see Law, Roman and Canon). Two authors, Gratian and Peter Lombard, addressed the theory and practice of marriage and established the rules that governed it. Both affirmed that marriage was monogamous and indissoluble, but both added that consent—even more than sexual consummation—was required for a marriage to be valid. This was a significant movement in the theory of marriage, because in theory it gave individuals some autonomy from pressure from family and feudal lords, and began a trend toward individualist nature of marriage that exists today. Ecclesiastical domination of the marriage rite was completed in the thirteenth century, when marriage was declared a sacrament.

Throughout the Middle Ages, marriage rituals consisted of two main parts: the betrothal and the marriage ceremony itself. The betrothal included the exchange of gift giving between the prospective families, and the fixing of the amount of the dowry—the money to be paid to the husband by the bride’s family. Theoretically, the dowry remained the property of the wife to be used for her and any children in the event of her husband’s death. However, because the dowry went into the control of the husband, this was not a certain source of income for a woman. Nuns, too, had to bring a dowry into a convent when they became brides of Christ, and this requirement often kept poor women from following a religious vocation.

The ceremony itself was celebrated at the door of the church, with a priest conducting the ceremony and the community serving as witness. At the ceremony, the couple gave their consent and the union was announced. After the ceremony, the couple entered the church for a nuptial mass.

After the wedding, the families celebrated the unions as lavishly as they could. Banquets were held often followed by dancing and other celebrations. In some regions, the couple was escorted to the marital bed with bawdy laughter. The consummation of the marriage, in which brides were proven to be virgin was considered as essential completion of the marital union.

Marriage was a sacrament controlled by the church therefore there was to be no divorce. In reality, wealthy people could appeal to the church for annulments of marriages, which means that the marriage had not been valid in the first place, so it didn’t exist. There were several reasons possible for annulment. Most commonly, partners claimed to have discovered an illegal consanguinity that would render the marriage invalid. This was often hypocritical, because usually partners knew in advance of the close ties between their families. Eleanor of Aquitaine, for example, had her first marriage annulled due to consanguinity, then married Henry II, to whom she was also related within the forbidden degrees.
Another reason to dissolve marriage was if one partner claimed coercion, or that he or she had not consented to the union. This was harder to prove because the marriage ceremony required a stated consent. The final reason for annulment—and hardest to prove—was that the husband was unable to consummate the marriage. This claim sometimes led to odd trials in which midwives were to try to stimulate the husband to see if he could be aroused sexually.

The difficulty of dissolving a marriage made it a serious central component of medieval life. Men and women were married for life even if they separated and lived apart. Families had to consider very carefully what ties they wanted to negotiate. Only after the Reformation in the modern era would marriage again move to the civil arena creating the marriage patterns we have in the modern United States. See also Documents 8 and 18.

**Further Reading**

**Medicine**

Medieval medicine in Europe was a mixture of several traditions: Germanic folk wisdom and classical understandings of medicine that had come from the Greco/Roman world. In addition, the advances made by Muslim physicians slowly made their way into Christendom. For all this study, however, diseases were rampant and health elusive.

Germanic women had traditionally been responsible for medical care, and this continued through the early medieval period. Medicines consisted primarily of herbs, as shown by the manuscripts from this era that preserve information about medicinal herbs and long-treasured medical recipes. Nasturtium, for example, was recommended for indigestion, wormwood for sleep disorders, and frankincense and oil for sore hands and fingers. Germanic women depended upon those with experience in treating illnesses to offer much-needed wisdom. For example, when someone was ill in the hill towns of northwestern Spain during the Visigothic era, he or she was placed outside by the pathways so that passersby might offer suggestions for a cure.

The most important source of information about classical medicine was Isidore of Seville, who was born around 560. He produced a prodigious amount of writing, including one of the most influential works in the Middle Ages, *The Etymologies*, which provided...
medieval people with much information from the classical world. Most signifi-
cantly, Isidore transmitted the beliefs of Galen (131–201), whose understand-
ings of the human body continued into the modern period.

Galen embraced the notion of balance and therefore saw disease as the re-
sult of an imbalance within the body. Galen believed that good health resulted
from a balance among the four “humors,” or bodily fluids: blood, bile, urine,
and phlegm. He argued that each of these humors had its own properties—
warm, cold, dry, and moist—and when a person was out of balance—that is,
when one humor dominated—the cure was to restore an appropriate equilib-
rium. For example, if a person were feverish and flushed, he or she was con-
sidered to have an excess of blood. An application of blood-sucking leeches or
the initiation of bleeding would reduce the blood and restore the balance.
These ideas may not have improved people’s health, but they made sense to
people and dominated the medical field for millennia.

Isidore of Seville transmitted Galen’s ideas, but he also included more prac-
tical knowledge in his encyclopedia. He described treatment of amputation
and cauterization to stop bleeding. He discussed the use of bandages, com-
presses, and other medicines. Indeed his work provides a fine description of
the practical medicine available to medieval physicians.

Even food was considered medicinal if prepared properly, and women were
in charge of designing a healthful diet. Just as our notion of a “balanced” diet
changes with the latest research, early medieval ideas about nutritious eating
relied on contemporary understandings of health. Consistent with Galen’s
views of health, people applied his idea of balance to menus that would be
medicinal. If bodies were supposed to be a balance of wet, dry, cold, and hot
humors, diets should be also. A proper diet must be “tempered”—that is, fea-
ture a balance of foods in each category of humor. For example, beans were
considered “cold,” so they were supplemented by “hot” spices to balance them.

Medicine in the West improved in the twelfth century when the writings of
the Muslim scientist Avicenna (also known as Ibn Sina) (980–1037) became ac-
cessible. Avicenna became a court physician to a sultan when he was only 18
and began his prolific writing career then. His famous work, Canon of Medi-
cine, served as the main medical text for more than six centuries and was cop-
ied throughout the Mediterranean world. In the West, the Canon was probably
second only to the Christian Bible in the number of times it was reproduced.
Although the Muslim physician argued for experimentation and observation,
nevertheless, the West remained wedded to Galen’s theoretical analysis of
disease.

Women’s health largely suffered under medieval understandings. Most phy-
sicians were men, and their theoretical studies were often informed by imper-
fect understandings of female anatomy. They drew from Aristotle in viewing
women as imperfect males, whose bodies in the womb were too “cool” to be
“cooked” into men. Two female medical writers form exceptions: Hildegard
of Bingen wrote a tract that integrated Galen’s understandings with her own
observations of women. Trotula of Salerno wrote on medical matters in general
and women’s health in particular.

Many anonymous women worked as healers in some capacity. We have al-
ready seen that women were expected to have knowledge of herbs and cook-
ing to bring health, but there were also women who practiced as surgeons. By
the twelfth century, surgeons were expected to be licensed to practice medicine,
and at least twenty-seven women have been documented as licensed in Naples and more elsewhere. As we might expect, most women participated in medicine as midwives who helped other women in childbirth.

By the thirteenth century, universities—particularly the University of Salerno—began to gain the exclusive right to train physicians. In doing so, they prevented many charlatans from practicing medicine, but they were also slowly moving women out of healing occupations because they were not allowed to attend universities.

The great visitations of **bubonic plague** of the fourteenth century showed the inadequacy of medieval medicine. Doctors, leeches, diets, and prayers could not stop the deaths that swept through Europe killing many and helping bring about the end of the Middle Ages.

**Further Reading**

**Military Orders**

The Crusades generated the need for a new kind of monk, one whose function was not simply to pray, but to protect pilgrims on their way to the visit the holy spaces of Jerusalem and its surroundings. In the twelfth century, then, new religious orders were established, called “Military Orders,” which created armies of skilled knights who took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience as they fought.

The Military Orders began in the early twelfth century, when a French knight, Hugh de Payen, and eight companions took religious vows and served as escorts for pilgrims. Soon they were given a house near the Temple of Solomon and became known as the Knights of the Temple. In 1128, the pope formally established the Knights of the Temple as a religious order whose chief purpose was to fight Muslims. They were also known as the Knights Templars, and were the most famous of the Military Orders.

Other Military Orders were established along the model of the Templars. For example in Spain, the pope established three Military Orders to fight against the Muslims in the Iberian Peninsula and to protect pilgrims going to Santiago de Compostella, the famous pilgrimage site in northwest Spain that purportedly held the bones of Saint James the Elder. The Teutonic Knights were founded in Germany along the same model. In the thirteenth century, the Teutonic Knights were used to convert the pagan Slavs beyond the borders of Germany. Thanks in large part to the force of their arms, Prussia became predominantly German and Christian in the thirteenth century.

In Jerusalem, men who had been serving in the Hospital of St. John to help sick pilgrims took the same vows as the Templars and became a fighting order of monks. They continued to serve in the hospital, but fighting became their main occupation, and they were called the “Hospitalers.”

The western crusader kings of Jerusalem depended heavily on the Military Orders to protect their lands. Consequently, they gave the orders vast tracts of land along the edges of the crusader kingdoms, where the Templars and
Hospitalers built fortified castles to guard the borders. The most famous of these fortifications was the Crac des Chevaliers, a castle whose walls rose high over the border with the Turks.

At their height, the Hospitalers could supply five hundred knights, and the Templars three hundred. They served as the backbone of the garrison guarding the Holy Land, and even the Muslims greatly respected their military strength.

The Military Orders soon began to serve another vital function for pilgrims: banking. The Templars and Hospitalers held larger properties all over western Europe and had the military might to protect possessions in their charge. Therefore, they accepted money in one country and paid it out in another. A pilgrim leaving from France could deposit his funds there and withdraw it in Jerusalem. This banking function helped make the Military Orders very rich.

When Acre fell to the Muslims in 1291, most of the Templars who bravely guarded the walls until the end were killed. The remaining Templars retired to live on their extensive estates in Europe. However, the wealth they had accumulated brought them to the attention of the French king, Philip IV (r. 1285–1314). Philip arranged to charge the Templars with terrible, secret vices: sodomy and devil worship. Some Templars confessed under torture, and some fifty Templars were burned as heretics. The order was dissolved, and its property confiscated. The other orders remained in a weakened state to fight Muslims in the Mediterranean, or on the borders of Germany. This significant feature of medieval military culture would die out at the end of this era. See also Documents 15 and 23.

Further Reading

Money

The Roman Empire had established a long tradition of using coins made of precious metals: silver for a denarius, bronze for a sestertius or smaller as, and more rarely, gold for an aureus. Over the long duration of the Empire, money changed in value, for example, becoming mixed with lesser metals as coins became scarce. Such mixing resulted in devaluation of the coins and inflation. Emperors carefully regulated the ability to mint gold coins; these mints were only permitted in the capitals, by the late empire this meant Constantinople in the east and Ravenna in the West. During the late empire in many regions money was so scarce that many people retreated to the barter system—trading goods and labor without using coins as intermediary currency.

As Germanic tribes settled on the borders of the Roman Empire, they began to see the value of coins and learned to trade for them. However, the traditional barter system remained strong within the tribes, and many people treated coins like jewelry—to wear rather than spend. This pattern reemerged with the Vikings in the tenth century, and archeologists have unearthed gold coins with holes drilled into them so they could be strung on necklaces for decoration. Coins are only useful when there are things to purchase; otherwise they were more useful as high-status jewelry.
In spite of the continuation of the barter system in pockets of society, by the late ninth century, coins were well established in Europe as the medium for trade. Precious metal was so rare that coins were silver until the thirteenth century, when gold coins were reintroduced. However, gold coins remained rare throughout the Middle Ages. Even silver was so precious that a single ounce of the precious metal was worth a week’s wages for even a skilled worker.

The advantage of using coins was that minted coins retained their value more than other things, such as agriculture produce or manufactured goods. However, unlike modern coins, medieval coins were less standardized. Modern money is almost always issued by national governments, but during the Middle Ages only the Byzantine emperor managed to maintain a monopoly on issuing coins, and by the thirteenth century, the English monarchy was also able to exert control over minting coins. In most of Europe, there were many local mints producing coins of varying amounts of silver, and thus of various values.

The main system of money of the Middle Ages was that of pounds, shillings (also called solidi), and pence, although the actual names of the coins varied by the language. The pound in France was called the livre, for example. Theoretically, it was worth a pound of silver coins, and the English monarchy was so proud of its ability to maintain the integrity of its pound that it was called a “pound sterling.” A pound was equivalent to 20 shillings (in French, sou), and the shilling was equal to 12 pennies (in French, denier). The pound was purely a theoretical amount, because it would be worth so much that no coin would actually be used for such a great value. In practice, the penny was the main form of coin. The English penny was the most stable coin in Middle Ages, weighing generally about 1.4 grams (about .05 oz) with a purity of silver of about 92 percent (Singman, 59).

As people began to use coins for even small, local transactions, the penny was too valuable. In about 1280, England issued a half-penny and even a quarter penny, called a “farthing.” These denominations are evidence of the spread of the use of coins throughout society.

At the macroeconomic level, as long-distance trade in luxury goods increased, there was a demand for larger coins. In the middle of the thirteenth century, Florence and Genoa began issuing medieval Europe’s first gold coins, and France soon followed. Extremely valuable gold coins allowed merchants to travel long distances with relatively small treasure chests filled with coins.

When Marco Polo and his relatives journeyed to China in the mid-thirteenth century, they witnessed what to them was a shocking innovation in currency—paper money circulated and was given the same value as coins made of precious metal. The Europeans brought back tales of this currency that was so light and convenient to move, but few believed them. Centuries would pass before the West was ready to take on this new kind of currency.

Instead of moving to paper money, western travelers looked to other innovations in banking and credit to facilitate the movement of goods and people over long distances. Credit had long been used by villagers and townsfolk, and in the thirteenth century, credit entered the world of long-distance trade. The Italians established networks of financial houses across Europe, so that a merchant with a letter of credit from a financier in one place might redeem it at another (Singman, 61). In this way, merchants could move safely without transporting valuable coins. The Military Order of Knights Templars performed
this service for pilgrims going to the Holy Land. A deposit made to the Templars in France could be redeemed safely in Jerusalem.

These banking innovations of the thirteenth century point the way to a new financial order that marked the early modern period beginning in the Renaissance. The early Middle Ages marked a retreat from the kind of global economy that had made the Roman Empire so prosperous. For centuries, people trading locally could use the coins in their pockets to satisfy their needs. However, at the end of the Middle Ages global trade and expansion required new forms of monetary transactions to fuel a growing prosperity. See also Document 9.

Further Reading

Mysticism

*Mysticism* is a technical term that refers to the feeling of becoming one with—or joined to—God while still alive. This feeling is often described as being a loss of self, while accompanied with an awareness of God that is incredibly sweet and joyful. Mystics usually experience this union while in a trance, so the experience is temporary but may be experienced again many times. The possibility of a mystic union with God (or Christ) was available from the beginning centuries of Christianity and offered one path to the Deity. Throughout history, mystics sometimes were considered to be heretics because their individual longings seemed at odds with the established church’s program for salvation. Nevertheless, we can trace a steady continuity of mysticism throughout the Middle Ages.

Many of the early Church Fathers embraced mystic experiences as part of their religious lives, arguing that God became man in the person of Jesus to show that humans can become godlike through union with the Holy Spirit. However, the most important early theologian to make explicit how this mystic union might happen was an author that is known as Pseudo-Dionysius, who was probably an anonymous Syrian monk writing sometime around 500. The most famous Pseudo-Dionysian texts are *On the Divine Names* and *Mystical Theology*, which describe the ascent of the soul and its ecstatic experience of union with God.

These writings established a threefold process that became almost universal in later Christian mysticism: Aspiring mystics had to experience purification, illumination, and finally perfection through union. Implicit in the search for divine union is an anti-intellectualism that argues that God must be “felt,” not “understood.” In this way, mysticism became a path to God that was alternative to *scholasticism* that argued that God could be known through study and logic. This tension may be seen in the struggle between the scholastic Peter Abelard and the great mystic *Bernard of Clairvaux*.

The thirteenth century saw a further flowering of mystic impulses that found its fullest expression in the life of *Francis of Assisi* (c. 1182–1226). Francis believed all animals and inanimate objects were imbued with God’s essence. Late in his life he was reputed to have had an intense mystic experience
in which he received the stigmata—wounds like those of Christ’s on his hands, feet, and side. The Franciscan movement was an order that spread widely and was influential in the church. Franciscans popularized a variety of devotions that were designed to help believers experience a mystical connection with God. For example, they advocated repetitious prayers and popularized the “stations of the cross,” a meditation on fourteen events in the passion of Christ ending with his burial. These devotions showed that slowly the ideal of mystical connection was being popularized rather than left to religious specialists. The great Franciscan Bonaventure (c. 1217–1274) wrote *The Journey of the Mind to God*, which was a masterpiece of mystical theology that showed that the mind is drawn to God by divine love, and it can be reached through prayer and meditation.

The Eastern Orthodox Church had also always embraced mystical connections. The popularity of icons in the Orthodox Church was in part a desire to achieve a connection with the divinity (see *Iconoclasm*). In the eleventh century, Eastern mysticism was further developed with the emergence of Hesychasm, a form of mystical prayer and contemplation that came to be associated primarily with the monks of Mt. Athos in northern Greece. These monks practiced a form of meditation that included controlled breathing, placing the chin on the chest, and reciting the “Jesus Prayer”—“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.” The hesychasts claimed to experience a divine light in the course of this meditation. By the thirteenth century, the Orthodox Church had embraced the hesychast experience sufficiently that they counted the divine light as God’s energies that are God, yet that are available to mystics in this life.

By the fourteenth century, there were more and more mystics who came to the fore. This rise of mysticism suggests a reaction against the institutional nature of the medieval Church and an increasing desire for a deeper and more personal religious experience than that which was afforded by formal worship in the Mass. The German mystic, Meister Eckhart (c. 1260–1327) described how everyone could cultivate an interior life and transform his or her soul. Although Eckhart had to defend himself against charges of heresy, his writings remained popular and led to many following his lead.

Women, excluded from institutional service in the Church, were drawn to mystical experiences and exerted an influence on Christianity through this venue. Women like Catherine of Siena, Julian of Norwich, and Margery Kempe left writings that continue to be read. Women’s mystic writings received great legitimacy in the early modern period when Catherine of Genoa and Teresa of Avila were declared “Doctors of the Church,” whose writings about their mystic experience were deemed worthy of study by all the faithful.

In the Netherlands, the practice of individual mysticism led to important movements. Communities were founded based on the ideas of combining mysticism with service to others, and this practice came to be known as the *devotio moderna* (“Modern Devotion”), and it emphasized a deep personal relationship with God and constant meditation on the life of Christ. The Modern Devotion spread quickly, and its most famous representative was Thomas a Kempis (1380–1471), who wrote *The Imitation of Christ*, which is the most widely read devotional book in the history of Christianity. The longing for a personal relationship with Christ that is implicit in the mystic journey would ultimately help lead to the Reformation of the early sixteenth century. See also Documents 21 and 29.
Further Reading

Parliament

The most important political institution in the modern world—representative governments—appeared in the Middle Ages. By the thirteenth century, representative assemblies were developing in many parts of Europe, Spain, Sicily, and Hungary for example gathered nobles and churchmen together in political assemblies. The French Estates General met for the first time in 1302, and the “Model Parliament” met in England during the reign of Edward I (r. 1272–1307). Even church councils, such as the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 were conceived of as representative bodies.

Because these representative councils are uniquely European, scholars have spent a great deal of time speculating on the origins of representative governments. Some argue that the tradition of tribal participation in the Germanic tribes led to an expectation of representation among the nobles. Others suggest that the requirement of “giving advice” within feudal law (see Law, Feudal) led to nobles gathering to their king. Still others see the origins of parliament in the gathering of nobles to render legal judgment. Whatever the origins, it is clear that by the thirteenth century it was an idea that was established.

The word parliament was first used in the thirteenth century, and at first it referred not to a particular institution, but any discussion (“parley”) among people. In the 1240s, the word began to refer to meetings of the English Great Council when the King and his advisers met with the nobles of the land.

The tradition of legal representation received a great boost in England in the reign of John I (r. 1199–1216). When John had money problems, he high-handedly departed from feudal custom and tread on the traditional rights of his vassals. In the spring of 1215, John’s barons staged a rebellion and forced the king to sign the Magna Carta (Great Charter). This document asserted that the king was not above the law and that he would preserve traditional feudal rights. However the charter also included principles that shaped the future of English (and North American) law: The king would impose no new taxes without the consent of the governed and would not violate the due process of law. This document warned future kings not to try to rule without consulting with his people.

In 1265, two knights from every shire and two burgesses (townsmen) from every borough were invited to meet with the barons and churchmen. This was the first time that elected representatives attended an English Parliament. Edward I made a practice of holding Parliaments regularly and of summoning representatives to them occasionally. In 1295, Edward held a particularly full assembly, which is usually called the “Model Parliament.” As this body gathered, the knights and the lower nobility sat with the burgesses and began to act together for their mutual benefit, while the clergy sat with the upper nobility. In time, the nobles would become the House of Lords, and the burgesses with the lower nobility the House of Commons. At first, the House of Commons did little more than approve the rulings of the Lords, but in time this institution came to rule England.

The rise of Parliament in France took a different path (in part due to the greater power of French kings over their barons). In 1302, King Philip IV “the
Fair" (r. 1285–1314) needed the support of the realm in his struggles against the pope as he tried to raise money from church lands. In response, he summoned representatives from church, nobility, and towns to the first meeting of the Estates General. As these men gathered to advise their king, they sat according to the medieval order: those who prayed, fought, and worked (including townsmen) deliberated separately. This triple arrangement, so different from the two houses of Parliament that grew up in England, helped diffuse each group’s power, allowing kings to maintain tight control. This had dramatic consequences for the future of France.

Further Reading

Peasant Revolts

In the fourteenth century, Europe was devastated by the *bubonic plague*, which reduced the population by between one-third and one-half. As an immediate result of the plague, the European countryside suffered a disabling shortage of labor. Lords desperate to get their work done tried to increase the amount of work serfs owed them by custom. Because serfs’ obligations were already excessive, that generated some anger. Free laborers seeing a chance to make more money began to demand higher wages, prompting some lords to pass laws freezing earnings. This policy enraged peasants across Europe. Determined to resist, they roamed the countryside, burning manor houses and slaughtering the occupants.

The first uprising came in France, where peasants faced the additional hardships of the *Hundred Years’ War* in which knights from England devastated the countryside. The French *Jacquerie*, as the peasant revolt was called, broke out in 1358, and it was a savage outburst. Peasants revolted against their lords, and there were even reports of cannibalism of the poor against the wealthy who had kept them hungry for so long.

The peasant revolt that broke out in England 1381 was a more organized affair. Not only did many well-armed and disciplined soldiers support the peasants in their revolt offering needed military leadership, but also popular preachers added a religious dimension to the revolt. The two most famous preachers in England were Wat Tyler and John Ball. They cast the revolt in apocalyptic terms, arguing that the many disasters of the fourteenth century presaged Christ’s Second Coming, and that revolting against wealthy landowners was their way of helping God redress the ills in the world. Peasants who believed God was on their side rallied vigorously to their cause. The English peasants burned houses of aristocrats, lawyers, and government officials, at times burning the records that they believed contributed to their oppression. Other peasant revolts broke out in Spain in 1395, and sporadic risings occurred in Germany and other regions of Europe. The final large-scale peasant revolt in Germany took place in 1524.

For all the popular violence, the peasants in all regions could not hold out for long against the aristocracy and its superior arms. Eventually, all the revolts were suppressed with many peasants and leaders massacred. Yet the violence,
the labor shortages, and the prevailing belief that things were changing had
begun to erode the old medieval manorial system. Over time, peasants who
owed only rent gradually replaced serfs who had owed labor as well as rents.
For these new peasants, their labor was now their own, giving them more
freedom and opportunities to work for their own profit.

Although the condition of many peasants improved, the trend was not uni-
form throughout Europe. The situation of the peasants in western Europe im-
proved more quickly than those in eastern Europe, where peasant revolts
would continue into the twentieth century. Nevertheless, in western Europe
the medieval order in the countryside was brought down in part by peasants
who had had enough of the old ways. See also Document 27.

Further Reading
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Scholasticism

Scholasticism is the term that is used to refer to medieval philosophy, and its
main goal was to reconcile faith with reason—that is, to understand with one’s
mind what one believed in one’s heart. The medieval thinkers applied a par-
ticular form of logic, called “dialectic,” to try to get at metaphysical truths. Di-
alectic involves using logic to explore various sides of an issue, so the scholastic
writings often take the form of questioning. This kind of exploration may be
contrasted with the scientific method, which involves testing hypotheses by
experimentation and observations; the scholastics—also called “schoolmen”—
did not observe, they thought about things. That was why they believed they
could understand faith, which defies observation.

The earliest medieval philosopher to explore the religious applications of
dialectic was Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109). Anselm’s famous “proof” of
God’s existence was that by definition, God was a being that is the greatest
that can be thought of. And, for Anselm, something that exists is greater than
something that does not exist, therefore God must exist. The flaws in this ar-

gument were quickly demonstrated, but there remain many who are still
drawn to Anselm’s logic.

The application of dialectic was continued at the University of Paris by the
brilliant scholar, Peter Abelard (see Education). Abelard is best known for his
love affair with Heloise, a talented 17-year-old girl he was hired to tutor. Teacher
and student were soon lovers, and Heloise became pregnant. Her infuriated
uncle had Abelard castrated in revenge. Ultimately, Heloise left her child
(named Astrolabe) to be raised by relatives, and Abelard and Heloise took re-
ligious vows and lived their lives in monasteries, where they each continued
brilliant careers of learning and influence.

Abelard established a method of applying critical reason to even sacred
texts. His most famous work, Yes and No (Sic et Non), assembled a variety of
authoritative sources, from the Bible to the Fathers of the Church, which
seemed to contradict each other. From these, the scholar compiled 150 theo-
logical questions and the passages relevant to each question, which allowed
scholars to consider the full range of the questions. Although his book has
such provocative chapters as “Is God the Author of Evil, or No?” Abelard had no desire to undermine faith; on the contrary he believed that this kind of inquiry would strengthen faith through the discovery of truth.

The progress of scholastic philosophy increased rapidly in the twelfth century, when Christian universities acquired advanced texts of Aristotle’s logic that had been preserved and commented on by Muslim and Jewish scholars from centers as far apart as Baghdad in the East and Toledo in Spain. The Muslim scholar Averroes (1126–1198) and the Jewish scholar Maimonides (1135–1204) left extensive commentaries on Aristotle’s sophisticated ideas, and these commentaries along with the advanced logic of Aristotle generated much intellectual excitement in the university communities of western Europe.

Scholasticism reached its height in the thirteenth century with the works of Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), an Italian churchman whom many regard as the greatest scholar of the Middle Ages. Aquinas wrote many works, from commentaries on biblical books and Aristotelian texts to essays on philosophical problems. However, his most important work was the *Summa Theologiae* (*Summary of Theology*), which was intended to offer a comprehensive summary of all knowledge available at the time.

Aquinas taught that faith and reason were compatible paths to a single truth, but that the mind by itself could grasp on the truth of the physical world. Faith, however, could help reason grasp spiritual truths such as the Trinity. This central understanding—that faith and nature cannot contradict each other, and that each can inform the other—has remained one of Aquinas’ most important contributions. The most famous examples of his use of nature to yield divine truth were his “proofs” of God’s existence in which, like Anselm, he wanted to use logic from the physical world to “understand” the mysteries of God.

Throughout the Middle Ages, there were always those who objected to the very enterprise of understanding faith through reason. These critics, who might be broadly called “mystics” (see Mysticism) claimed that the only way to reach God was through shutting down the mind and reaching with the heart through love. For example, the famous cleric Bernard of Clairveaux condemned Abelard for corrupting the mind of the young by false teaching and had him accused of heresy. So there was always a parallel path to God. Thomas Aquinas believed he had incorporated the concerns of the mystics in his *Summa*, but the final criticism of scholasticism would come from those who believed they could prove the shortcomings of logic by logic itself.

Scholasticism was generally based on the idea that philosophers could extract general truths (called “universals”) from individual cases. Franciscan thinkers, particularly in England, challenged this approach. They were called “nominalists” or “new nominalists,” because they said we cannot know anything about universals—things are only what we name them. (The term nominalism comes from “name.”) The greatest of the new nominalists was William of Ockham (c. 1300–c. 1349).

New Nominalists believed that it was impossible to know God or prove his existence through reason—because God was all-powerful, he did not have to act logically, so the scholastic enterprise at its core limited the understanding of God by eliminating anything illogical (like miracles). Ockham also founded a fundamental principle that has remained the basis of scientific analysis. Called “Ockham’s razor,” this principle says that between alternative explanations...
for the same phenomenon, the simpler is always to be preferred. Nominalists became popular in universities, and Ockhamite philosophy became known as the *via moderna* (modern way).

By freeing scholars from the enterprise of studying God, the nominalists, perhaps in an unintended fashion, encouraged the great minds of the age to focus on studying what was logical—the natural world. This fostered the growth of science that in the modern world separated the West from the Age of Faith that characterized the Middle Ages. *See also Document 21.*

**Further Reading**


**Warfare**

One way to define medieval culture is through warfare. At the beginning of the Middle Ages, mounted horsemen dominated the fields of battle, and much warfare was defensive in which armies worked to prevent attackers from taking their castles and other walled fortifications. The Middle Ages ended in the fifteenth century when gunpowder brought down castle walls and foot soldiers defeated knights in shining armor.

During the Roman Empire, armies had increasingly made use of mounted cavalry to provide a rapid deployment force. These mounted men were armed with bows and arrows and throwing spears and relied on supporting heavily armed foot soldiers who were the backbone of the fighting force. In about the eighth century, a technological innovation changed this fighting style. The armies of the Germanic Franks creatively figured out how to use a stirrup—an innovation that had spread from the East—perhaps China or India. By using a stirrup, riders were able to brace themselves on the back of the horse so they could directly engage an enemy instead of just riding by him. Now the rider could put the force of a horse behind the thrust of a lance or the strike of a sword. Shock troops of mounted cavalry, known as “men-at-arms” were born.

These mounted soldiers, who came to be called “knights,” were expensive to train and maintain. They needed heavy armor that might cost a laborer’s salary of one full year; they also needed expensive horses who were bred to be large enough to carry a heavily armored knight. (Modern draft horses like Percherons are the descendants of these medieval warhorses.) In addition, it took a long time to train these specialized soldiers. Boys were sent to train for years with skilled warriors until they could move from the ranks of squire to knight. In fact, estimates suggest it took about ten peasant families to support one mounted knight. It is easy to see how knights were at the top of the medieval military hierarchy.

The knight’s main body armor consisted on a long tunic of chain mail, called a “hauberk.” This chain mail consisted of rings of metal riveted together. This mail was expensive to make and during battle, winners were careful to strip the mail off losers as part of their booty. Chain mail offered a good deal of protection against the cut of a blade, but the flexible links did not protect from bruising or bones breaking from impact. To address this danger, knights wore padded cloth tunics, called “aketons,” under the mail to absorb the shock of a blow. On their legs, knights wore long stockings of mail, which by the thirteenth
century were covered with metal plate armor to further protect him from foot soldiers. During most of the Middle Ages, knights carried large metal shields as further protection.

The most vulnerable part of the knight’s body was his head. Therefore, in addition to padding and chain mail, a knight wore a steel helmet. Throughout the Middle Ages, the helmet grew more and more elaborate until it covered his face.

Although armies of well-armored knights remained the heart of medieval battle, they nevertheless were supported by other fighting men. The highest paid were the archers. Until the fourteenth century, archers used crossbows. They could not fire very quickly, but a clean shot from these bows could pierce armor, so these men were valuable for fighting from fixed positions or defending castle walls. Crossbows were so effective that the Second Lateran Church Council in 1139 banned their use in warfare in hopes of keeping warfare more humane, requiring men to kill each other without resorting to long-distance carnage (Marcus, 302). Of course, like many attempts to regulate warfare, this ban did not last, and crossbows remained part of medieval arsenals until they were displaced by more lethal weapons.

In the fourteenth century, the long Hundred Years’ War between England and France saw the development of new weapons and warfare techniques that would render the mounted knight obsolete. The English fought on French soil where their knights were outnumbered. They could, therefore, not rely on traditional fighting techniques in which large groups of knights charged into each other. Instead, the English brought with them archers armed with longbows, originally used by the Welsh. Longbows had a longer range than crossbows, and archers could fire many more arrows a minute, darkening the sky with their lethal projectiles. An experienced archer could pull a bow with 80 to 150 pounds of draw, giving a range of about 400 yards. English archers brought down crossbowmen and horses long before either was in range to cause the English damage.

The effectiveness of foot soldiers increased as fourteenth century as leaders saw new possibilities for using different weapons. Swiss pike men lined up with long lethal spears that effectively kept charging horses at bay. The real military innovation that ultimately ended the medieval age of knighthood was gunpowder. Gunpowder—a mixture of sulfur, charcoal, and saltpeter—spread from China and began to be used in warfare in the West in the mid-thirteenth century. Early attempts to use gunpowder in weapons were crude, but they were most successful in siege engines. Early cannons made short work of the thickest stonewalls—the great city of Constantinople fell to the Turks in 1453 when they used their cannons to breach the walls.

Early handguns were less reliable. Each consisted of a tube probably shorter than 10 inches long attached to a wooden stock (because the metal tubes grew too hot to touch). These early guns were loaded through their muzzles and ignited by a smoldering cloth used to ignite the gunpowder and fire the projectile. These early guns were inaccurate and posed dangers to the gunman himself. By 1500, however, Europeans had developed the arquebus, a reliable weapon. With weapons like guns, warfare was no longer limited to well-trained mounted knights; anyone could kill effectively from a distance, and early critics lamented the change in warfare: One wrote, “Often and frequently . . . a virile brave hero is killed by some forsaken knave with a gun.” Another
wrote, “Would to God that this unhappy weapon had never been invented” (Marcus, 299).

Medieval armorers tried to adapt to new lethal weapons by strengthening the armor that marked the knights. Plate armor was perfected and rounded to try to have bullets bounce off. For all their efforts, knights in shining armor were rendered obsolete. Warfare until the twenty-first century (when improved body armor of kevlar and new lightweight materials again enters the battlefields) was a matter of reach, not defensive armor. Guns that could kill, by keeping the soldier out of range, became the goal of modern armies, and the age of medieval armies of mounted knights was over. See also Document 23.

Further Reading

Women

Medieval women, like men, thought of themselves as placed within a particular social order. In this social organization, some people fought, some prayed, and the rest worked. Therefore, most women found solidarity and comfort with others in their social order rather than identifying themselves with women as a whole. To consider the roles of women in medieval Europe, it is necessary to separate the various orders.

Aristocratic women—members of the ruling order of “those who fight”—experienced the most restrictive lives. Their primary function was to provide heirs—new fighting men—and to ensure the children’s legitimacy; most
aristocratic women led lives that kept them close to home. They gathered with their ladies-in-waiting and spent a good deal of time spinning, weaving, and doing intricate needlework. Although this was the role of most aristocratic women, we can nevertheless find examples of extraordinary women who left their mark on the pages of even medieval chroniclers who were more interested in the deeds of men. Rulers like Eleanor of Aquitaine changed the political face of Europe, and other women like Marie de France transformed the literary landscape. Inevitably even anonymous aristocratic women had to take charge in their husbands’ absence—a frequent occurrence for those of the fighting order.

Women who entered a religious life made a significant impact on medieval society. Because women were not allowed to become priests, those who felt a call for a religious life entered convents, or after the thirteenth century joined one of the female orders associated with the mendicants like the Franciscans and Dominicans. Women had various motivations for becoming nuns. Women who were interested in intellectual pursuits and the arts could find an outlet for their interests in the cloister; families who had too many daughters to provide dowries sent some to the convents, and some women found the spiritual life deeply rewarding.

Religious women, famous and anonymous, transformed medieval culture. Early Christians like Radegund were influential in helping the Germanic peoples convert to Christianity and preserving learning during the violent years of invasions. The writings of mystics such as Hildegard of Bingen changed people’s view of God and the universe. Convents of women throughout Europe gained respect by their work caring for the hungry and sick, educating the young, and living pious lives. Although women from all walks of life could theoretically enter the monastic life, the very poor were usually excluded because they could not bring dowries to the monastic house.

Most women (like men) belonged to the broad order of “those who work.” These included everyone from wealthy merchants living in the burgeoning towns to poor peasants struggling to earn a living from small holdings. Regardless of the income or status, all women of these groups worked hard inside and outside the home.

Peasant women had to work as hard as their men (and children). In addition to maintaining the home—preparing food, spinning and making cloth—women also had to contribute to the household economy. They raised poultry, handled the dairy tasks, and tended the garden. In all these activities, a peasant woman tried to produce more than the family needed so she could sell or barter the remainder. Perhaps the most lucrative sources of income for a peasant woman were her skills in brewing beer or spinning wool to weave.

A peasant women could become a landholder, holding joint tenancy with her husband, or inheriting in her own right. In most regions of Europe, a daughter inherited land only if there were no surviving sons, but peasant households generally only had two or three children, so it was likely for only a girl to not survive until adulthood.

Some peasant women, again like some men, held no land, so they had to work as day laborers. They were hired in dairies, field work, sheep shearing, road repair, and even plowing, which was traditional thought of as man’s work. One thirteenth-century estate management document recommended that women be hired even as dairy managers because they could be paid a lower wage than men.
City women were also active participants in the town’s economic life. Like peasant women, urban women were responsible for running the household. However, they also earned money through a trade. For example, guilds allowed wives of journeymen to practice their husband’s craft. Some trades allowed women to be guild members in their own right, and some trades were practiced principally by women. For example, spinners and ribbon-makers were predominately women. City women could inherit shops from their fathers or husbands, and records indicate testify to some prosperous women.

A particularly poignant incident that shows how women were central to urban economies took place in the town of Douai in medieval Flanders (now in France). In the early fourteenth century, the town felt a shortage of food, and rumors spread that rich merchants were hoarding grain. Cloth workers took to the streets in protest and eighteen workers, including two women, were arrested. The women were charged with being especially vocal, and in punishment they had their tongues cut off before they were banished from the city for life. The women’s excessive penalty shows the prevailing misogyny that lay beneath medieval attitudes toward women.

Patristic writers had long argued that women had caused the fall of humankind. From the first temptation of Eve to every man’s seduction, writers argued that women tempted men to lust. In fact, the woman held up as the perfect model was the Blessed Virgin Mary who was what no other woman could be—mother and virgin at the same time. By the fourteenth century, the disconnect between perceptions of women and the actions of actual women had worked its way into the literary tradition.

The most famous advocate for women was Christine of Pizan, a famous woman writer of the late fourteenth century. Christine was a young widow who ended up supporting her family by her writing and has thus been often called the first professional writer in Europe. One of Christine’s most famous works is The Book of the City of Ladies, which she claims to have written to vindicate women to demonstrate that women were as virtuous and hard-working as men. The same kind of work was written in the fifteenth century by the Frenchman, Martin Le Franc whose long work, Le Champion des Dames (Champion of Women) also intends to rehabilitate views of women. The fourth book The Trial of Womankind is in the form of a dialogue with two lawyers arguing the merits and flaws of women. Here at the end of the Middle Ages theorists raise the question of women’s value, finally expressing the obvious, that the magnificent culture of the medieval world was built by men and women together. See also Documents 8, 18, and 29.

Further Reading
1. Augustine Writes of Childhood Sinning, 397

In 397, the Church Father, Augustine of Hippo, in North Africa, wrote his *Confessions*, in which he described his life and conversion to Christianity. Augustine had been born in 354, so his account came after much reflection. The *Confessions* were one of the most widely read books in the Middle Ages (and beyond) and served to establish the principle of "original sin," that is, that we are all born sinners. Notice how his account of infant sinning reinforces this idea.

Who can recall to me the sins I committed as a baby? For in your sight no man is free from sin, not even a child who has lived only one day on earth. Who can show me what my sins were? Some small baby in whom I can see all that I do not remember about myself? What sins, then, did I commit when I was a baby myself? Was it a sin to cry when I wanted to feed at the breast? I am too old now to feed on mother’s milk, but if I were to cry for the kind of food suited to my age, others would rightly laugh me to scorn and remonstrate with me. So then too I deserved a scolding for what I did; but since I could not have understood the scolding, it would have been unreasonable, and most unusual, to rebuke me. We root out these faults and discard them as we grow up, and this is proof enough that they are faults, because I have never seen a man purposely throw out the good when he clears away the bad. It can hardly be right for a child, even at that age, to cry for everything, including things which would harm him; to work himself into a tantrum against people older than himself and not required to obey him; and to try his best to strike and hurt others who know better than he does, including his own parents, when they do not give in to him and refuse to pander to whims which would only do him harm. This shows that, if babies are innocent, it is not for lack of will to do harm, but for lack of strength.

I have myself seen jealousy in a baby and know what it means. He was not old enough to talk, but whenever he saw his foster-brother at the breast, he would grow pale with envy. This much is common knowledge. Mothers and nurses say that they can work such things out of the system by one means or another, but surely it cannot be called innocence, when the milk flows in such abundance from its source, to object to a rival desperately in need and depending for his life on this one form of nourishment? Such faults are not small or unimportant, but we are tender-hearted and bear with them because we know that the child will grow out of them. It is clear that they are not mere
peccadilloes, because the same faults are intolerable in older persons. . . . But if I was born in sin and guilt was with me already when my mother conceived me, where, I ask you Lord, where or when was I, your servant ever innocent?


2. Ordeals under the Law

Under Germanic law, one of the ways to determine the guilt or innocence of an accused was to appeal to God’s judgment. The following rules for ordeals are drawn from German sources of the tenth century and show how tightly united faith were influenced laws for medieval jurists. Notice also how much discretion is given the person interpreting the results of the ordeals. Notice in the third case, how simple the ordeal is!

1. Ordeal by Hot Water.
   a. When men are to be tried by the ordeal of hot water, they shall first be made to come to church in all humility, and prostrate themselves, while the priest says these prayers: . . .
   b. The man who is to undergo the ordeal shall say the Lord’s prayer and make the sign of the cross; then the caldron shall be taken from the fire, and the judge shall suspend a stone in the water at the prescribed depth in the regular manner, and the man shall take the stone out of the water in the name of the Lord. Then his hand shall be immediately bound up and sealed with the seal of the judge, and shall remain wrapped up for three days, when it shall be unbound and examined by suitable persons.

2. Ordeal by Hot Iron.
   a. First the priest says the prescribed mass; then he has the fire lighted, and blesses the water and sprinkles it over the fire, over the spectators, and over the place where the ordeal is to be held; then he says this prayer: . . .
   b. Then the priest approaches the fire and blesses the pieces of iron, saying: O God, the just judge, who art the author of peace and judgest with equity, we humbly beseech thee so to bless this iron; which is to be used for the trial of this case, that if this man is innocent of the charge he may take the iron in his hand, or walk upon it, without receiving harm or injury; and if he is guilty this may be made manifest upon him by thy righteous power; that iniquity may not prevail over justice, nor falsehood over truth. . . .
   c. Then he who is about to be tried shall say: In this ordeal which I am about to undergo, I put my trust rather in the power of God the omnipotent Father to show his justice and truth in this trial, than in the power of the devil or of witchcraft to circumvent the justice and the truth of God.
   d. Then the man who is accused takes the sacrament and carries the [hot] iron to the designated place. After that the deacon shall bind up his hand and place the seal upon it. And until the hand is unwrapped [at the
end of three days] the man should put salt and holy water in all his food and drink.

3. Ordeal by Bread and Cheese.

a. [The Priest prays] . . . O God, I beseech thee, hear the words of my prayer, that this bread and cheese may not pass the jaws and the throat of him who has committed the theft . . .

b. Then bread and cheese to the weight of nine denarii shall be given to each man. The bread shall be of barley and unleavened; the cheese shall be made in the month of May of the milk of ewes. While the mass is being said, those who are accused of the theft shall be in front of the altar, and one or more persons shall be appointed to watch them that they do not contrive any trick. When the communion is reached the priest shall first take the communion of the body of Christ, and then shall bless the bread and cheese, which has been carefully weighed out as above, and shall immediately give it to the men. The priest and the inspectors shall watch them carefully and see that they all swallow it. After they have swallowed it, the corners of the mouth of each shall be pressed to see that none of the bread and cheese has been kept in the mount. Then the rest of the mass shall be said.


3. King Clovis Kills His Kinsmen (fifth and sixth centuries)

Clovis was the first to unite the Germanic tribes of the Franks and establish the dynasty of the Merovingians. Gregory, bishop of Tours, wrote a chronicle called The History of the Franks that recounts Clovis’s achievement. Notice the violence that introduced the medieval period and formed the background for the subsequent establishment of laws to try to restrain the carnage.

When King Clovis was dwelling at Paris he sent secretly to the son of Sigibert saying: “Behold your father has become an old man and limps in his weak foot. If he should die,” said he, “of due right his kingdom would be yours together with our friendship.” Led on by greed the son plotted to kill his father. And when his father went out from the city of Cologne and crossed the Rhine and was intending to journey through the wood Buchaw, as he slept at midday in his tent his son sent assassins in against him, and killed him there, in the idea that he would get his kingdom. But by God’s judgment he walked into the pit that he had cruelly dug for this father. He sent messengers to king Clovis to tell about his father’s death, and to say: . . . “Send men to me, and I shall gladly transmit to you from his treasures whatever pleases you.” And Clovis replied: “I thank you for your good will, and I ask that you show the treasures to my men who come, and after that you shall possess all yourself.” When they came, he showed his father’s treasures. And when they were looking at the different things he said: “It was in this little chest that my father used to put his gold coins.” “Thrust in your hand,” said they, “to the bottom, and uncover the whole.” When he did so, and was much bent over, one of the
lifted his hand and dashed his battle-ax against his head, and so in a shameful manner he incurred the death which he had brought on his father. Clovis heard that Sigibert and his son had been slain, and came to the place and summoned all the people, saying: “Hear what has happened, [father and son are dead] . . . Now I know nothing at all of these matters. For I cannot shed the blood of my own kinsmen, which it is a crime to do. But since this has happened, I give you my advice. . . ; turn to me that you may be under my protection.” They listened to this, and giving applause with both shields and voices, they raised him on a shield, and made him king over them.

And having killed many other kings and his nearest relatives, of whom he was jealous lest they take the kingdom from him, he extended his rule over all the Gauls. However he gathered his people together at one time, it is said, and spoke of the kinsmen whom he had himself destroyed. “Woe to me, who have remained as a stranger among foreigners, and have none of my kinsmen to give me aid if adversity comes.” But he said this not because of grief at their death but by way of a ruse, if perchance he should be able to find some one still to kill.


### 4. A Historian Slanders Empress Theodora (sixth century)

In 550, Procopius (c. 500–c. 565), a historian of the reign of Justinian, wrote a “Secret History” that attacked the Empress Theodora. Historians assume Procopius did not intend this to be published until after the emperor’s death. We do not know if this is true or simply a way to slander a powerful woman. Notice what charges he uses to shock the audience. Notice also how this text gives information about entertainment in Byzantium.

But as soon as she arrived at the age of youth, and was now ready for the world, her mother put her on the stage. Forthwith, she became a courtesan, and such as the ancient Greeks used to call a common one, at that: for she was not a flute or harp player, nor was she even trained to dance, but only gave her youth to anyone she met, in utter abandonment. Her general favors included, of course, the actors in the theater; and in their productions she took part in the low comedy scenes. For she was very funny and a good mimic, and immediately became popular in this art. There was no shame in the girl, and no one ever saw her dismayed: no role was too scandalous for her to accept without a blush.

She was the kind of comedienne who delights the audience by letting herself be cuffed and slapped on the cheeks, and makes them guffaw by raising her skirts to reveal to the spectators those feminine secrets here and there which custom veils from the eyes of the opposite sex. With pretended laziness she mocked her lovers, and coquetishly adopting ever new ways of embracing, was able to keep in a constant turmoil the hearts of the sophisticated. And she did not wait to be asked by anyone she met, but on the contrary, with inviting jests and a comic flaunting of her skirts herself tempted all men who passed by, especially those who were adolescent.
On the field of pleasure she was never defeated. Often she would go picnicking with ten young men or more, in the flower of their strength and virility, and dallied with them all, the whole night through. When they wearied of the sport, she would approach their servants, perhaps thirty in number, and fight a duel with each of these; and even thus found no allayment of her craving. Once, visiting the house of an illustrious gentleman, they say she mounted the projecting corner of her dining couch, pulled up the front of her dress, without a blush, and thus carelessly showed her wantonness. And though she flung wide three gates to the ambassadors of Cupid, she lamented that nature had not similarly unlocked the straits of her bosom, that she might there have contrived a further welcome to his emissaries.

But when she came back to Constantinople, Justinian fell violently in love with her. At first he kept her only as a mistress, though he raised her to patriarchal rank. Through him Theodora was able immediately to acquire an unholy power and exceedingly great riches. She seemed to him the sweetest thing in the world, and like all lovers, he desired to please his charmer with every possible favor and requite her with all his wealth. The extravagance added fuel to the flames of passion. With her now to help spend his money he plundered the people more than ever, not only in the capital, but throughout the Roman Empire.


5. Bede Describes the Conversion of the English (sixth and seventh centuries)

In 596, Pope Gregory I sent a group of monks led by Augustine (not the Church Father) to convert the British. This important incident was described by Bede the Venerable in his Ecclesiastical History. Notice that the Queen was already a Christian, yet Bede gives the credit for the conversion to Augustine’s virtues.

Then St. Gregory sent a letter to them [Augustine], and advised them in that letter: that they should humbly go into the work of God’s word, and trust in God’s help; and that they should not fear the toil of the journey, nor dread the tongues of evil-speaking men; but that, with all earnestness, and with the love of God, they should perform the good things which they by God’s help had begun to do; and that they should know that the great toil would be followed by the greater glory of everlasting life; and he prayed Almighty God that he would shield them by his grace; and that he would grant to himself that he might see the fruit of their labor in the heavenly kingdom’s glory, because he was ready to be in the same labor with them, if leave had been given him.

Then Augustine was strengthened by the exhortation of the blessed father Gregory, and with Christ’s servants who were with him returned to the work of God’s word, and came into Britain. Then was at that time Ethelbert king in Kent, and a mighty one... [The mission landed on an island off the coast and sent word to Ethelbert.]

When the King heard these words, then ordered he them to abide in the isle on which they had come up; and their necessaries to be there given them until
he should see what he would do to them. Likewise before that a report of the Christian religion had come to him, for he had a Christian wife, who was given to him from the royal kin of the Franks—Bertha was her name; which woman he received from her parents on condition that she should have his leave that she might hold the manner of the Christian belief, and of her religion, unspotted, with the bishop whom they gave her for the help of that faith; whose name was Luidhard.

Then [it] was after many days that the King came to the isle, and ordered to make a seat for him out of doors, and ordered Augustine with his fellows to come to his speech [conference]. He guarded himself lest they should go into any magic whereby they should overcome and deceive him. But they cam endowed—not with devil-craft, but with divine might. They bore Christ’s rood-token—a silver cross of Christ and a likeness of the Lord Jesus colored and delineated on a board; and were crying the names of holy men; and singing prayers together, made supplication to the Lord for the everlasting health of themselves and of those to whom they come. [Augustine then preached to him. . . .

Then answered the King, and thus said: Fair words and promises are these which ye have brought and say to us; but because they are new and unknown, we cannot yet agree that we should forsake the things which we for a long time, with all the English nation, have held.

But because ye have come hither as pilgrims from afar, and since it seems and is evident to me that ye wished to communicate to us also the things which ye believed true and best, we will not therefore be heavy to you, but will kindly receive you in hospitality, and give you a livelihood, and supply your needs. Nor will we hinder you from joining and adding to the religion of your belief all whom you can through your lore. Then the King gave them a dwelling and a place in Canterbury, which was the chief city of all his kingdom. . . .

Then came it about through the grace of God that the King likewise among others began to delight in the cleanest life of holy men and their sweetest promises, and they also gave confirmation that those were true by the showing of many wonders; and he then, being glad, was baptized.


6. Documents of Feudal Law (seventh and eighth centuries)

These documents are taken from books of documents that serve as examples for drawing up contracts. They are taken from the collection of Germanic Laws, Monumenta Germaniae, volume v. In the first form, a vassal turns himself over to a lord, and in the second the lord promises his protection. Notice the mutual nature of the contract.

Form for Commendation. Middle of Eighth Century

To my great lord, (name), I, (name). Since, as was well known, I had not wherewith to feed and clothe myself, I came to you and told you my wish, to commend myself to you and to put myself under your protection. I have now done so, on the condition that you shall supply me with food and clothing as
far as I shall merit by my services, and that as long as I live I shall perform
such services for you as are becoming to a freeman, and shall never have the
right to withdraw from your power and protection, but shall remain under
them all the days of my life. It is agreed that if either of us shall try to break
this compact he shall pay ___ solidi, and the compact shall still hold. It is also
agreed that two copies of this letter shall be made and signed by us, which
also has been done.

Form for the creation of a vassal by the king, seventh century

It is right that those who have promised us unbroken faith should be re-
warded by our aid and protection. Now since our faithful subject (name) with
the will of God has come to our palace with his arms and has there sworn in
our hands to keep his trust and fidelity to us, therefore we decree and com-
mand by the present writing that henceforth the said (name) is to be numbered
among our antrustiones (vassals). If anyone shall presume to slay him, let him
know that he shall have to pay 600 solidi as a wergild for him.

Source: Thatcher, Oliver, ed. A Source Book for Mediaeval History. New York: Charles
Scribner’s Sons, 1905, pp. 342–344.

7. Charlemagne Promotes Education (eighth and ninth centuries)

Charlemagne enacted educational reforms as part of reform of churches
in his realm. In the following letter that Charlemagne wrote to the clergy
of his lands, we can see how he valued texts and scholars. In his letter,
the emperor refers to himself as “Karl.”

Karl, by the aid of God king of the Franks and Lombards and patricius of
the Romans, to the clergy of his realm. . . . Now since we are very desirous
that the condition of our churches should constantly improve, we are endeav-
oring by diligent study to restore the knowledge of letters which has been al-
most lost through the negligence of our ancestors, and by our example we are
encouraging those who are able to do so to engage in the study of the liberal
arts. In this undertaking we have already, with the aid of God, corrected all
the books of the Old and New Testament, whose texts had been corrupted
through the ignorance of copyists. Moreover, inspired by the example of our
father, Pippin, of blessed memory, who introduced the Roman chants into the
churches of his realm, we are now trying to supply the churches with good
reading lessons. Finally, since we have found that many of the lessons to be
read in the nightly service have been badly compiled and that the texts of
these readings are full of mistakes, and the names of their authors omitted,
and since we could not bear to listen to such gross errors in the sacred lessons,
we have diligently studied how the character of these readings might be im-
proved. Accordingly, we have commanded Paul the Deacon, our beloved sub-
ject, to undertake this work; that is, to go through the writings of the fathers
carefully, and to make selections of the most helpful things from them and put
them together into a book, as one gathers occasional flowers from a broad
meadow to make a bouquet. And he, wishing to obey us, had read through
the treatises and sermons of the various catholic fathers and has picked out
the best things. These selections he has copied clearly without mistakes and
has arranged in two volumes, providing readings suitable for every feast day throughout the whole year. We have tested the texts of all these readings by our own knowledge, and now authorize these volumes and commend them to all of you to be read in the churches of Christ.


8. A Jewish Merchant Writes to His Wife

Many Jewish merchants traveled long distances to engage in global trade, leading to long separations from their family. A journey from Europe to India could take 2 years or more. This excerpt of a letter from a Jewish merchant in India to his wife in Egypt indicates the stress such separations placed on family life. Notice that Jews, unlike Christians, could obtain divorces, and he was willing to let his wife make the decision.

Would I try to describe the extent of my feelings of longing and yearning for you all the time, my letter would become too long and the words too many. But he who knows the secrets of the heart has the might to bring about relief for each of us by uniting us in joy. . . .

In your letters you alternately rebuke and offend me or put me to shame and use harsh words all the time. I have not deserved any of this. I swear by God, I do not believe that the heart of anyone traveling away from his wife has remained like mine, all the time and during all the years—from the moment of our separation to the very hour of writing this letter—so constantly thinking of you and yearning after you and regretting to be unable to provide you with what I so much desire: your legal rights [for intercourse] on every Sabbath and holiday, and to fulfill all your wishes, great and small, with regard to dresses or food or anything else. . . .

Now, if this [divorce] is your wish, I cannot blame you. For the waiting has been long. And I do not know whether the Creator will grant relief immediately so that I can come home, or whether matters will take time, for I cannot come home with nothing. Therefore I resolved to issue a writ which sets you free. Now the matter is in your hand. If you wish separation from me, action the bill of repudiation and you are free. But if this is not your decision and not your desire, do not lose these long years of waiting: perhaps relief is at hand and you will regret at a time when regret will be of no avail.

And please do not blame me, for I never neglected you from the time when those things happened and made an effort to save you and me from people talking and impairing my honor.


9. Lords Create Markets (ninth and tenth centuries)

The Champagne Fairs were the largest of the medieval fairs, but other lords saw the profit in establishing markets. No one had the right to set up a market without the king’s permission, and the following documents
are examples of royal permissions to establish markets. Notice the necessities that come with markets—mints and safety.

Lothar II (855–869) Grants a Market to the Monastery of Prum, 861

Therefore, let all our faithful subjects, both present and future, know that Ansbald, abbot of the monastery of Prum, has told us that that place suffers great disadvantage because it is so far distant from a market and mint. On this account, he begged us to grant his monastery our permission for the establishment of a market and mint in a place which is called Romarivilla, which is not far from his monastery. Out of reverence for the Lord Jesus Christ, and for the salvation of our soul, we gladly grant his petition, and have ordered this document to be written, by which we decree and command that hereafter that monastery may have an ordinary market in the above-named place and a mint for coining denarii of the proper weight and quality. And no public official shall levy a tax of any sort on the monastery for this market and mint, but they shall be wholly for the profit of the monastery and its inmates. And that this concession may never be violated, we have ordered it to be sealed with our ring and we have signed it with our own hand.

Otto I Grants a Market to and Archbishop, 965

In the name of the undivided Trinity. Otto by the favor of God emperor, Augustus. If we grant the requests of clergymen and liberally endow the places which are dedicated to the worship of God, we believe that it will undoubtedly assist in securing for us the eternal reward. Therefore, let all know that for the love of God we have granted the petition of Adaldagus, the reverend archbishop of Hamburg, and have given him permission to establish a market in the place called Bremen. In connection with the market we grant him jurisdiction, tolls, a mint, and all other things connected therewith to which our royal treasury would have a right. We also take under our special protection all the merchants who live in that place, and grant them the same protection and rights as those merchants have who live in other royal cities. And no one shall have any jurisdiction there except the aforesaid archbishop and those to whom he may delegate it. Signed with our hand and sealed with our ring.


10. Asser’s Life of Alfred the Great, King of Wessex (tenth century)

A biography of King Alfred was written by his bishop Asser, who was his companion through many of his achievements. After the king’s death, Asser purportedly wrote this biography to preserve the account of his deeds. Asser died in 910. Scholars have disputed whether the biography was actually written by Asser, but the text remains an important source for early England. This excerpt describes his childhood and his love of learning that marked his reign.

Now, he was loved by his father and mother, and indeed by everybody, with a united and immense love, more than all his brothers, and was always
brought up in the royal court, and as he passed through his childhood and boyhood he appeared fairer in form than all his brothers, and more pleasing in his looks, his words and his ways. And from his cradle a longing for wisdom before all things and among all the pursuits of this present life, combined with his noble birth, filled the noble temper of his mind; but alas, by the unworthy carelessness of his parents and tutors, he remained ignorant of letters until his twelfth year, or even longer. But he listened attentively to Saxon poems day and night, and hearing them often recited by others committed them to his retentive memory. A keen huntsman, he toiled unceasingly in every branch of hunting, and not in vain; for he was without equal in his skill and good fortune in that art, as also in all other gifts of God, as we have ourselves often seen.

When, therefore, his mother one day was showing him and his brothers a certain book of Saxon poetry which she held in her hand, she said: “I will give this book to whichever of you can learn it most quickly.” And moved by these words, or rather by divine inspiration, and attracted by the beauty of the initial letter of the book, Alfred said in reply to his mother, forestalling his brothers, his elders in years though not in grace: “Will you really give this book to one of us, to the one who can soonest understand and repeat it to you?” And, smiling and rejoicing, she confirmed it, saying: “To him will I give it.” Then taking the book from her hand he immediately went to his master, who read it. And when it was read, he went back to his mother and repeated it.


11. Serfs Struggle for Freedom (tenth and thirteenth centuries)

Serfs, who owed their labor and other dues to their lord, had two main ways they could become free: Their lord might free them, and they might run away to a city and hide for a year and a day. These documents show these two possibilities. The first is a form by which Henry I of Germany freed a serf in 926. The second document comes from 1224 and claims that the King will give protection to those nobles who searched in a city for their runaway serfs. Both documents reveal the tensions in the medieval social structure.

Henry I frees a serf, 926

In the name of the holy and undivided Trinity. Henry, by the divine clemency king. Let all our faithful subjects, both present and future, know that at the request of Arnulf, our faithful and beloved duke, and also to increase our eternal reward, we have freed a certain priest, named Baldmunt, who is our serf, born on the land of the monastery of Campido. We freed him by striking a penny out of his hand in the presence of witnesses, according to the Salic law, and we have thereby released him entirely from the yoke of servitude. And by this writing we have given a sure proof of his freedom and we desire that he shall remain free forever. We ordain that the said Baldmunt, the reverend priest, shall enjoy such freedom and have such rights as all those have who up to this time have been set free in this way by the kings or emperors of the franks.
The Recovery of Fugitive Serfs, 1224

When a quarrel arose between our cities of Elsass and the nobles and ministerials of the same province in regard to the serfs who had run away and gone to the cities, or might hereafter do so, . . . it was settled by the following decision: If a serf belonging to a noble or ministerial runs away and goes to one of our cities and stays there, his lord may recover him if he can bring seven persons who are of the family of the serf’s mother, who will swear that he is a serf, and belongs to the said lord. If the lord cannot secure seven such witnesses, he may bring two suitable witnesses from among his neighbors, who will swear that before the serf ran away the said lord had been in peaceable possession of him, . . . and he may then recover his serf. We also decree and command that all nobles and ministerials who wish to recover their serfs may enter a city for this purpose with our permission and protection, and no one shall dare injure them. At their request a safe conduct shall be furnished them by the . . . council of the city.


12. Vikings Trade with Natives in North America (eleventh century)

The Viking explorer, Leif Erikson, discovered North America in the early eleventh century, and there were several subsequent Viking expeditions to this bountiful land that they called “Vinland.” Inevitably, they encountered Natives, whom they called by the insulting name, Skraelings. At times they traded, at other times they fought, and it is likely that the presence of hostile natives prevented the Vikings from settling North America. This account from the Greenland Saga recounts the explorations and describes the trade goods that interested the natives. Notice that women took part in these explorations.

That same summer a ship arrived in Greenland from Norway. Her captain was a man called Thorfinn Karlsefni. He was a man of considerable wealth. He spent the winter with Leif Eiriksson at Brattahlid. . . . There was still the same talk about Vinland voyages as before, and everyone, . . . kept urging Karlsefni to make the voyage. In the end he decided to sail and gathered a company of sixty men and five women. He made an agreement with his crew that everyone should share equally in whatever profits the expedition might yield. They took livestock of all kinds, for they intended to make a permanent settlement there if possible. . . . [They successfully make the crossing.]

The first winter passed into summer, and then they had their first encounter with Skraelings, when a great number of them came out of the wood one day. The cattle were grazing near by and the bull began to bellow and roar with great vehemence. This terrified the Skraelings and they fled, carrying their packs which contained furs and sables and pelts of all kinds. They made for Karlsefni’s houses and tried to get inside, but Karlsefni had the doors barred against them. Neither side could understand the other’s language.

Then the Skraelings put down their packs and opened them up and offered their contents, preferably in exchange for weapons; but Karlsefni forbade his
men to sell arms. Then he hit on the idea of telling the women to carry milk out to the Skraelings, and when the Skraelings saw the milk they wanted to buy nothing else. And so the outcome of their trading expedition was that the Skraelings carried their purchases away in their bellies, and left their packs and furs with Karlsefni and his men.

[At a later trading exchange, a Skraeling was killed when he tried to steal a weapon, so the Vikings prepared for further attacks.]

[After a few more skirmishes] Karlsefni and his men spent the whole winter there, but in the spring he announced that he had no wish to stay there any longer and wanted to return to Greenland. They made ready for the voyage and took with them much valuable produce, vines and grapes and pelts. They put to sea and reached Eiriksfjord safely and spent the winter there.


13. The Pope Claims Supremacy in the Investiture Controversy (eleventh century)

During the Investiture Controversy of the late eleventh century, Pope Gregory VII claimed rule over Christendom. In this famous document, called the *Dictatus Papae* (Dictate of the pope), he, or his officers, laid out astonishing claims of supremacy. Notice how these claims would take away lords’ authority (paragraph 27) and make the popes emperors on earth (paragraph 8), and that they claim the authority comes from God. Notice also in paragraph 22, that this is the first claim of papal infallibility. This text was written about 1090.

That the Roman church was established by God alone.
That the Roman pontiff is rightly called universal
That he alone has the power to depose and reinstate bishops.
That his legate [representative], even if he be of lower ecclesiastical rank, presides over bishops in council, and has the power to give sentence of deposition against them.
That the pope has the power to depose those who are absent [i.e, without giving them a hearing.
That, among other things, we ought not to remain in the same house with those whom he has excommunicated.
That he alone has the right, according to the necessity of the occasion, to make new laws, to create new bishoprics, to make a monastery of a chapter of canons, and vice versa, and either to divide a rich bishopric or to unit several poor ones.
That he alone may use the imperial insignia.
That all princes shall kiss the foot of the pope alone.
That his name alone is to be recited in the churches.
That the name applied to him belongs to him alone.
That he has the power to depose emperors.
That he has the right to transfer bishops from one see to another when it becomes necessary.
That he has the right to ordain as a cleric anyone from any part of the church whatsoever.
That anyone ordained by him may rule [as bishop] over another church, but cannot serve [as priest] in it, and that such a cleric may not receive a higher rank from any other bishop.
That no general synod may be called without his order.
That no action of a synod and not book shall be regarded as canonical without his authority.
That his decree can be annulled by no one, and that he can annul the decrees of anyone.
That he can be judged by no one.
That no one shall dare to condemn a person who has appealed to the apostolic seat [pope].
That the important cases of any church whatsoever shall be referred to the Roman church [pope].
That the Roman church has never erred and will never err to all eternity, according to the testimony of holy scriptures.
That the Roman pontiff who has been canonically ordained is made holy by the merits of St. Peter, according to the testimony of St. Ennodius, bishop of Pavia, which is confirmed by many of the holy fathers, as is shown by the decrees of the blessed pope Symmachus.
That by his command or permission subjects may accuse their rulers.
That he can depose and reinstate bishops without the calling of a synod.
That no one can be regarded as catholic who does not agree with the Roman church.
That he has the power to absolve subjects from their oath of fidelity to wicked rulers.


14. Anna Comnena Describes the First Crusade (twelfth century)

The Emperor Alexius Comnenus’ daughter Anna (1083–1153) was an historian who offers a valuable description of the first crusade in the eleventh century. She is the first to describe the growing suspicion between East and West that you can see in this account that describes the emperor’s irritation at Crusaders like Tancred and Bohemund who seized land he thought was his own. Notice the arguments made by both sides.

Soon the Emperor learnt of the seizure of Laodicea by Tancred, and therefore sent a letter to Bohemund which ran as follows: “You know the oaths and promises which not only you but all the Counts took to the Roman Empire. Now you were the first to break them, by retaining possession of Antioch, and then taking more fortresses and even Laodicea itself. Therefore withdraw from Antioch and all the other cities and do what is just and right, and do not provoke more wars and troubles for yourself.” Now Bohemund after reading the Emperor’s letter could not reply by a falsehood, as he usually did, for the facts openly declared the truth, so outwardly he assented to it, but put the blame
for all the wrong he had done upon the Emperor and wrote to him thus, “It is not I, but you, who are the cause of all this. For you promised you would follow us with a large army, but you never thought of making good your promise by deeds. When we reached Antioch we fought for three months under great difficulty both against the enemy and against famine, which was more severe than had ever been experienced before, with the result that most of us ate of the very foods which are forbidden by law. We endured for a long time and while we were in this danger even Taticius, your Majesty’s most loyal servant, whom you had appointed to help us, went away and left us to our danger. Yet we captured Antioch unexpectedly and utterly routed the troops which had come from Chorosan to succour Antioch. In what way would it be just for us to deprive ourselves willingly of what we gained by our own sweat and toil? “ When the envoys returned from him the Emperor recognized from the reading of his letter that he was still the same Bohemund and in no wise changed for the better, and therefore decided that he must protect the boundaries of the Roman Empire, and as far as possible, check his impetuous advance.


15. The Founding and Decline of the Knights Templars (twelfth century)

The twelfth-century chronicler, William of Tyre, describes the founding of the Knights Templars who were so essential during the Crusades. He also describes how their success began to corrupt their ideals, which foreshadows their destruction in the fourteenth century.

In the same year [1118–1119] certain nobles of knightly rank, devout, religious, and God-fearing, devoting themselves to the service of Christ, made their vows to the patriarch [of Jerusalem] and declared that they wished to live forever in chastity, obedience, and poverty, according to the rule of regular canons. . . . Since they had neither a church nor a house, the king of Jerusalem gave them a temporary residence in the palace which stands on the west side of the temple. The canons of the temple granted the, on certain conditions, the open space around the aforesaid palace for the erection of their necessary buildings, and the king, the nobles, the patriarch, and the bishops, each from his own possessions, gave them lands for their support. The patriarch and bishops ordered that for the forgiveness of their sins their first vow should be to protect the roads and especially the pilgrims against robbers and marauders. . . . Up to their ninth year they had only nine members, but then their number began to increase and their possessions to multiply. Afterward, in the time of Eugene III, that their appearance might be more striking, they all, knights as well as the other members of a lower grade, who were called serving men, began to sew crosses of red cloth on their robes. Their order grew with great rapidity, and now [about 1180] they have 300 knights in their house, clothed in white mantles, besides the serving men, whose number is almost infinite. They are said to have immense possessions both here [in Palestine] and beyond the
sea [in Europe]. There is not a province in the whole Christian world which has not given property to this order, so that they may be said to have possessions equal to those of kings. . . .

For a long time they were steadfast in their purpose and were true to their vows, but then they forgot their humility, which is the guardian of all virtues, and rebelled against the patriarch of Jerusalem who had assisted in the establishment of their order and had given them their first lands, and refused him the obedience which their predecessors had shown him. They also made themselves very obnoxious to the churches by seizing their tithes and first-fruits and plundering their possessions.


16. The Great Pilgrimage Church of Saint James in Spain (twelfth century)

Throughout the Middle Ages, pilgrimage remained at the heart of popular worship. Travelers went to the great shrines that held relics of saints, and the most famous pilgrimage site throughout the period (even today) is Santiago de Compostella in northwest Spain. According to the faithful, this shrine holds the bones of James the Elder, and once they were discovered in the ninth century, Santiago lured people from all over Europe. A magnificent Romanesque cathedral was built to hold the relics. This source describes the church and is an excerpt from a medieval work designed to guide pilgrims to Santiago and relate the wonders they would see. Notice its information on building the cathedral as well as its emphasis on hospitality for pilgrims.

The master stonecutters that first undertook the construction of the basilica of the Blessed James were called Master Bernard the elder—a marvelously gifted craftsman—and Robert, as well as other stonecutters, about fifty in number, who worked assiduously under the most faithful administration of Don Wicart, the head of the chapter . . . during the reign of Alphonso king of Spain during the bishopric of Don Diego I, a valiant soldier and a generous man.

The church was begun in the year 1116 of the era. From the year it was started until the death of Alphonso, valiant and famous king of Aragon, there are fifty-nine years, . . . And from the year that the first stone of the foundations was laid down until such a time that the last one was put in place, forty-four years have elapsed.

This church, furthermore, from the moment it was started until today, has shined by the refulgence of the miracles of the Blessed James: in fact, the sick have been restored to health in it, the blind have been rendered their eyesight, the tongue of the dumb has been untied, the ear of the deaf unplugged, movement has been restored to the lame, the possessed has been delivered and, what is more, the prayers of the faithful have been fulfilled, their wishes granted, the afflicted have been given consolation, and the foreign people of all parts of the world have rushed in in large masses bringing in laudation their gifts to the lord. . . .
Pilgrims, whether poor or rich, who return from or proceed to Santiago, must be received charitably and respectfully by all. For he who welcomes them and provides them diligently with lodging will have as his guest not merely the Blessed James, but the Lord himself, who in His Gospels said: “He who welcomes you, welcomes me.” Many are those who in the past brought upon themselves the wrath of God because they refused to receive the pilgrims of Saint James or the indigent.

Two valiant Frenchmen, returning one day from Santiago destitute of all, kept asking for lodging, by the love of God and Saint James, all about the city of Poitiers... and they could find none. And having finally been put up by some poor man in the last house of that street... by divine vengeance, a violent fire burned to the ground that very night the entire street, starting from the house where they first asked for lodging and up to the one which had welcomed them. And these were about one thousand houses in all. But the one in which the servants of God had been put up remained, by divine grace, untouched.

This is the reason why it should be known that the pilgrims of Saint James, whether poor or rich, have the right to hospitality and to diligent respect.


17. The Life of Godric, Merchant Saint (twelfth century)

The “Life of Saint Godric,” written by a friend and monk, describes the life of a merchant who lived during the twelfth century. Godrick became a prosperous merchant who ended his life by going on pilgrimage to Jerusalem and giving his wealth to the church. It is a rare source of information on the life of merchants.

He chose not to follow the life of a husbandman, but rather to study, learn and exercise the rudiments of more subtle conceptions. For this reason, aspiring to the merchant’s trade, he began to follow the chapman’s [trader's] way of life, first learning how to gain in small bargains and things of insignificant price; and thence, while yet a youth, his mind advanced little by little to buy and sell and gain from things of greater expense. For, in his beginnings, he was wont to wander with small wares around the villages and farmsteads of his own neighborhood; but, in process of time, he gradually associated himself by compact with city merchants. Hence, within a brief space of time, the youth who had trudged for many weary hours from village to village, from farm to farm, did so profit by his increase of age and wisdom as to travel with associates of his own age through towns and boroughs, fortresses and cities to fairs and to all the various booths of the marketplace, in pursuit of his public chaffer [trading].... At first, he lived as a chapman for four years in Lincolnshire, going on foot and carrying the smallest wares; then he traveled abroad, first to St. Andrews in Scotland and then for the first time to Rome. On his return, having formed a familiar friendship with certain other young men who were eager for merchandise, he began to launch upon bolder courses, and to coast frequently by sea to the foreign lands that lay around him. Thus, sailing often to and fro between Scotland and Britain, he traded in many diverse wares and,
amid these occupations, learned much worldly wisdom. . . . For he labored not only as a merchant but also as a shipman . . . to Denmark and Flanders and Scotland; in all which lands he found certain rare, and therefore more precious, wares, which he carried to other parts wherein he know them to be least familiar, and coveted by the inhabitants beyond the price of gold itself; wherefore he exchanged these wares for others coveted by men of other lands; and thus he chaffered most freely and assiduously. Hence he made great profit in all his bargains, and gathered much wealth in the sweat of his brow; for he sold dear in one place the wares which he had bought elsewhere at a small price.


**18. Hildegard of Bingen Discusses Marriage (twelfth century)**

Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) was a remarkable visionary who wrote on many subjects of everyday interest. This excerpt from her visions describes marriage. Notice how she keeps a standard Biblical interpretation while offering a woman’s perspective that insists marriage is a mutual relationship.

Because a mature woman was given not to a little boy but to a mature man, namely Adam, so now a mature woman must be married to a man when he has reached the full age of fertility, just as due cultivation is given to a tree when it begins to put forth flowers. For Eve was formed from a rib by Adam’s ingrafted heat and vigor, and therefore now it is by the strength and heat of a man that a woman receives the semen to bring a child into the world. For the man is the sower, but the woman is the recipient of the seed. Wherefore a wife is under the power of her husband because the strength of the man is to the susceptibility of the woman as the hardness of stone is to the softness of earth.

But the first woman’s being formed from man means the joining of wife to husband. And thus it is to be understood: this union must not be vain or done in forgetfulness of God, because he who brought forth the woman from the man instituted this union honorably and virtuously, forming flesh from flesh. Wherefore, as Adam and Eve were one flesh, so now also a man and woman become one flesh in a union of holy love for the multiplication of the human race. And therefore there should be perfect love in these two as there was in those first two. For Adam could have blamed his wife because by her advice she brought him death, but nonetheless he did not dismiss her as long as he lived in this world, because he knew she had been given to him by divine power. Therefore, because of perfect love, let a man not leave his wife except for the reason the faithful church allows. . . .

But if either husband or wife breaks the law by fornication, and it is made public either by themselves or by their priests, they shall undergo the just censure of the spiritual magisterium. For the husband shall complain of the wife, or the wife of the husband, about the sin against their union . . . , but not so that the husband or wife can seek another marriage; either they shall stay together in righteous union, or shall both abstain from such unions, as the discipline of church practice shows. And they shall not tear each other to pieces by viperous
rending, but they shall love with pure love, since both man and woman could not exist without having been conceived in such a bond.


19. Guibert of Nogent Studies at Home (twelfth century)

In the early twelfth century, Guibert, abbot of Nogent in France, wrote an autobiography that gives rare insight into child-rearing and educational practices. In this text we can see how difficult it was to get suitable tutors to teach children. Notice how it was customary to beat students. Guibert’s parents had promised at his birth that he would grow up to be a monk, so his education pointed him in this direction.

There was a little before that time, and in a measure there is still in my time, such a scarcity of grammarians that in the towns hardly anyone, and in the cities very few, could be found, and those who by good hap could be discovered, had but slight knowledge and could not be compared with the itinerant clerks of these days. . . .

Placed under him [his tutor] I was taught with such purity and checked with such honesty in the excesses which are wont to spring up in my youth, that I was kept well-guarded from the common wolves and never allowed to leave his company, or to eat anywhere without his leave; in everything I had to show self-control in word, look or act, so that he seemed to require of me the conduct of a monk rather than a clerk. For whereas others of my age wandered everywhere at will and were unchecked in the indulgence of such inclinations to their age, I [was] hedged in with constant restraints. . . .

Although, therefore, he crushed me by such severity, yet in other ways he made it quite plain that he loved me as well as he did himself. . . . As for me, considering the dull sensibility of my age and my littleness, great was the love I conceived for him in response, in spite of the many weals [marks] with which he marked my tender skin so that not through fear, as is common in those of my age, but through a sort of love deeply implanted in my heart, I obeyed him in utter forgetfulness of his severity.


20. The Legendary King Arthur Is Born (twelfth century)

In the twelfth century, the English historian Geoffrey of Monmouth, who was influenced by the new movements of courtly love and romance, elaborated on the story of an early English king named Arthur. Geoffrey’s account served as the basis for future tales of the romantic King Arthur. In this section, Geoffrey describes the conception of Arthur, surrounded by magic and passionate love. Notice also the description of the impregnable castle that was typical of those that had begun to dominate the twelfth-century landscape.
Finally, after a week had gone by, the King’s [Uther Pendragon] passion for Ygerna became more than he could bear. He called to him Ulfín of Ridcaradoch, one of his soldiers and a familiar friend, and told him what was on his mind. “I am desperately in love with Ygerna,” said Uther, “and if I cannot have her I am convinced that I shall suffer a physical breakdown. You must tell me how I can satisfy my desire for her, for otherwise I shall die of the passion which is consuming me.” “Who can possibly give you useful advice,” answered Ulfín, “when no power on earth can enable us to come to her where she is inside the fortress of Tintagel? The castle is built high above the sea, which surrounds it on all sides, and there is no other way in except that offered by a narrow isthmus of rock. Three armed soldiers could hold it against you, even if you stood there with the whole kingdom of Britain at your side. If only the prophet Merlin would give his mind to the problem, then with his help I think you might be able to obtain what you want.” The King believed Ulfín and ordered Merlin to be sent for, for he, too, had come to the siege.

Merlin was summoned immediately. When he appeared in the King’s presence, he was ordered to suggest how the King could have his way with Ygerna. When Merlin saw the torment which the King was suffering because of this woman, he was amazed at the strength of his passion. “If you are to have your wish,” he said, “you must make use of methods which are quite new and until now unheard-of in your day. By my drugs I know how to give you the precise appearance of Gorlois, [Ygrain’s husband], so that you will resemble him in every respect. . . . In this way you will be able to go safely to Ygerna in her castle and be admitted.”

The King agreed. . . . The King spent that night with Ygerna and satisfied his desire by making love with her. He had deceived her by the disguise which he had taken. He had deceived her, too, by the lying things that he said to her, things which he planned with great skill. . . . She naturally believed all that he said and refused him nothing that he asked. That night she conceived Arthur, the most famous of men, who subsequently won great renown by his outstanding bravery.


21. Bernard of Clairvaux Condemns Abelard and Scholasticism, 1140

Bernard of Clairvaux was horrified when Peter Abelard presumed to use reason to understand faith. For Bernard, a great mystic, the path to God was through faith only. In this letter that Bernard wrote to Pope Innocent II in 1140, he attacks Abelard and medieval philosophy in general, praising faith over reason.

We have in France an old teacher turned into a new theologian, who in his early days amused himself with dialectics [logic], and now gives utterance to wild imaginations upon the Holy Scriptures. He is endeavoring again to quicken false opinions, long ago condemned and put to rest, not only his own, but those of others; and is adding fresh ones as well. I know not what there is in heaven above and in the earth beneath which he deigns to confess ignorance of: He raises his eyes to Heaven, and searches the deep things of God, and
then returning to us, he brings back unspeakable words which it is not lawful for a man to utter, while he is presumptuously prepared to give a reason for everything, even of those things which are above reason; he presumes against reason and against faith. For what is more against reason than by reason to attempt to transcend reason? And what is more against faith than to be unwilling to believe what reason cannot attain? For instance, wishing to explain that saying of the wise man: “He who is hasty to believe is light in mind (Eccles., xix, 4), he says that a hasty faith is one that believes before reason; when Solomon says this not of faith towards God, but of mutual belief amongst ourselves. For the blessed Pope Gregory denies plainly that faith towards God has any merit whatever if human reason furnishes it with proof. But he praises the Apostles, because they followed their Savior when called but once. He knows doubtless that this word was spoken as praise: “At the hearing of the ear he obeyed me” (Ps., xviii, 44), that the Apostles were directly rebuked because they had been slow in believing (Mark, xvi, 14). Again Mary is praised because she anticipated reason by faith, and Zacharias punished because he tempted faith by reason (Luke, I, 20, 45), and Abraham is commended in that “against hope he believed in hope” (Romans, iv, 18).

But on the other hand our theologian says: “What is the use of speaking of doctrine unless what we wish to teach can be explained so as to be intelligible?” An so he promises understanding to his hearers. Even on those most sublime and sacred truths which are hidden in the very bosom of our holy faith.


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**22. An Agricultural Instruction Manual (thirteenth century)**

The prosperity of the late Middle Ages stemmed from agricultural innovations. Nevertheless, agriculture remained a difficult, skill-intensive task.

This source is from a thirteenth-century agricultural manual written by Walter of Henley to help landowners make a profit from the land, and it offers a valuable glimpse into medieval farm life.

At the beginning of fallowing and second fallowing and of sowing let the bailiff, and the messer, or the provost, be all the time with the ploughmen, to see that they do their work well and thoroughly, and at the end of the day see how much they have done, and for so much shall they answer each day after unless they can show a sure hindrance. And because customary servants neglect their work it is necessary to guard against their fraud; further, it is necessary that they are overseen often; and besides the bailiff must oversee all, that they all work well, and if they do not well let them be reproved.

With a team of oxen with two horses you draw quicker than with a team all horses if the ground is not so stony that oxen cannot help themselves with their feet. Why? I will tell you: the horse costs more than the ox. Besides a plough of oxen will go as far in the year as a plough of horses, because the malice of ploughmen will not allow the plough [of horses] to go beyond their pace, no more than the plough of oxen. Further, in very hard ground, where the plough of horses will stop, the plough of oxen will pass. And will you see how the horse costs more than the ox? I will tell you. It is usual and right that
plough beasts should be in the stall between the feast of St. Luke and the feast of the Holy Cross in May, five-and-twenty weeks, and if the horse is to be in a condition to do his daily work, it is necessary that he should have every night at the least the sixth part of a bushel of oats, price one halfpenny, and at the least twelve pennyworth of grass in summer. And each week more or less a penny in shoeing, if he must be shod on all four feet. The sum is twelve shillings and fivepence in the year, without fodder and chaff.


23. Crusaders Besiege a Tower during the Fifth Crusade (thirteenth century)

In the Fifth Crusade, 1217–1222, Europeans attacked Egypt in hopes of approaching the Holy Land from the south. This crusade failed, but the detailed accounts of the battles offer vivid details about warfare and the challenges of taking fortified positions. Notice the important role played by the Military Orders who supported the crusaders.

A tower located in the middle of the river [Nile] had to be captured before crossing. The Frisians, however, who were impatient of delay, crossed the Nile and carried off the animals of the Saracens [Muslims]. Wishing to pitch camp on the farther shore, they held their ground, fighting against the Saracens who came out of their city to oppose them. They were recalled through obedience because it did not seem wise to our leaders that a tower filled with pagans should be left behind the Christians. Meanwhile the Duke of Austria and the Hospitallers of Saint John prepared two ladders on two ships, and the Teutons and Frisians fortified a third ship with bulwarks, setting up a small fortress on the top of the mast without hanging a ladder. . . . The ladder of the Hospitallers was shattered and crashed with the mast, hurling its warriors headlong; the ladder of the Duke, being broken in like manner at almost the same time, sent up to heaven soldiers who were vigorous and well armed, wounded in body to the advantage of their souls, crowned with a glorious martyrdom. The overjoyed Egyptians, mocking us violently, raised their voices, beating drums and sounding sackbuts [a kind of trumpet]; gloom and sadness invaded the Christians. . . .

Thus our men, with renewed vigor, manfully fought with the defenders of the tower by means of swords, pikes, club, and other weapons. A certain young knight of the diocese of Liege was the first to ascend the tower; a certain young Frisian, holding a flail by which grain is usually threshed, but which was prepared for fighting by an interweaving with chains, lashed out bravely to the right and to the left, knocked down a certain man holding the saffron standard of the Sultan and took the banner away from him. One came after another, vanquishing the enemy, who were known to be hard and cruel in their resistance. . . . [The Crusaders develop new ships for besieging the tower while fighting against the flooding of the Nile. Finally they make another attack.]

Meanwhile the Saracens, who had withdrawn to the inner part of the tower, having put fire under the top part of the tower, burned it; our men, though
victorious, retreated over the ladder, not being able to stand the heat. But the bridge, which had been prepared in the lower part of the fortification, was let down to the narrow foot of the tower, with deep waters surging about on all sides. With iron hammers the victors attacked the door while the Saracens who were within defended it. Both fortifications remained impregnable; the rungs of the ladder, in part, and the circuit of the work which was held together by very strong ropes were pierced by blows of the machines. . . . Finally, being enclosed in the tower, the Saracens sought a conference, and, under a guarantee that their lives would be spared, they surrendered to the Duke of Austria.


24. Marco Polo Describes Religious Toleration in the Mongol Empire, 1271

Marco Polo’s account remains one of our main sources for information about the Yuan Empire of the Great Khan. In this account, Marco describes the uprising of one of Kublai’s relatives, named Nayan, who had been defeated. Nayan fought under the banner of Christianity, and this account shows the religious toleration that marked the Mongol empire.

At length, however, Nayan, perceiving that he was nearly surrounded, attempted to save himself by flight, but was presently made prisoner, and conducted to the presence of Kublai, who gave orders for his being put to death. This was carried into execution by enclosing him between two carpets, which were violently shaken until the spirit had departed from the body; the motive for this peculiar sentence being that the sun and the air should not witness the shedding of the blood of one who belonged to the imperial family. Those of his troops which survived the battle came to make their submission and swear allegiance to Kublai.

Nayan, who had privately undergone the ceremony of baptism, but never made open profession of Christianity, thought proper, on this occasion, to bear the sign of the cross in his banners, and he had in his army a vast number of Christians, who were among the slain. When the Jews and the Saracens [Muslims] perceived that the banner of the cross was overthrown, they taunted the Christian inhabitants with it, saying: “Behold the state to which your vaunted banners, and those who followed them, are reduced!” On account of these desirions the Christians were compelled to lay their complaints before the Grand Khan, who ordered the former to appear before him, and sharply rebuked them. “If the cross of Christ,” he said, “has not proved advantageous to the party of Nayan, the effect has been consistent with reason and justice, inasmuch as he was a rebel and a traitor to his lord, and to such wretches it could afford its protection. Let none therefore presume to charge with injustice the God of the Christians, who is himself the perfection of goodness and of justice.”

The Grand Khan, having obtained this signal victory, returned with great pomp and triumph to the capital city of Kanbalu. This took place in the month of November, and he continued to reside there during the months of February and March, in which latter was our festival of Easter. Being aware that this
was one of our principal solemnities, he commanded all the Christians to attend him, and to bring with them their book, which contains the four gospels of the evangelists. After causing it to be repeatedly perfumed with incense, in a ceremonious manner, he devoutly kissed it, and directed that the same should be done by all his nobles who were present. This was his usual practice upon each of the principal Christian festivals, such as Easter and Christmas; and he observed the same at the festivals of the Saracens, Jew, and idolaters. Upon being asked his motive for this conduct, he said: "There are four great prophets who are reverenced and worshipped by the different classes of mankind. The Christians regard Jesus Christ as their divinity; the Saracens, Mahomet [Muhammad]; the Jews, Moses; and the idolaters, Sogomombar-khan [Buddha], the most eminent of their idols. I do honor and show respect to all the four, and invoke to my aid whichever among them is in truth supreme in heaven."


25. Marco Polo Describes the Mongol Capital, 1271

Marco Polo gave a detailed description of Khanbaliq (“Khan’s City”) near modern Beijing. The city was laid out in a grid pattern (unlike the cities of Western Europe, which were unplanned) and dominated by his great palace, which served as the prototype for the Forbidden City of subsequent dynasties. During the Renaissance, Italians began city planning on a grid plan; some historians suggest that this might have been in imitation of China.

The Grand Khan usually resides during three months of the year—December, January, and February—in the great city of Kanbalu, situated toward the northeastern extremity of Cathay; and here, on the southern side of the new city, is the site of his vast palace, in a square enclosed with a wall and deep ditch; each side of the square being eight miles in length, and having at an equal distance from each extremity an entrance gate. Within this enclosure there is, on the four sides, an open space one mile in breadth, where the troops are stationed, and this is bounded by a second wall, enclosing a square of six miles. The palace contains a number of separate chambers, all highly beautiful, and so admirably disposed that it seems impossible to suggest any improvement to the system of their arrangement. The exterior of the roof is adorned with a variety of colors—red, green, azure, and violet—and the sort of covering is so strong as to last for many years.

The glazing of the windows is so well wrought and so delicate as to have the transparency of crystal. In the rear of the body of the palace there are large buildings containing several apartments, where is deposited the private property of the monarch, or his treasure in gold and silver bullion, precious stones, and pearls, and also his vessels of gold and silver plate. Here are likewise the apartments of his wives and concubines; and in this retired situation he dispatches business with convenience, being free from every kind of interruption. [He describes how the Khan also built a new city across the river from the palace.] . . .
This new city is of a form perfectly square, and twenty-four miles in extent, each of its sides being neither more nor less than six miles. It is enclosed with walls of earth that at the base are about ten paces thick, but gradually diminish to the top, where the thickness is not more than three paces. In all parts the battlements are white. The whole plan of the city was regularly laid out by line, and the streets in general are consequently so straight that when a person ascends the wall over one of the gates, and looks right forward, he can see the gate opposite to him on the other side of the city. In the public streets there are on each side, booths and shops of every description. All the allotments of ground upon which the habitations throughout the city were constructed are square and exactly on a line with each other; each allotment being sufficiently spacious for handsome buildings, with corresponding courts and gardens. One of these was assigned to each head of a family; that is to say, such a person of such a tribe had one square allotted to him, and so of the rest. Afterward the property passed from hand to hand. In this manner the whole interior of the city is disposed in squares, so as to resemble a chess-board, and planned out with a degree of precision and beauty impossible to describe.


26. Giovanni Boccaccio Describes the Plague, 1350

In 1348, the bubonic plague (also known as the Black Death) swept through Europe devastating the population. Boccaccio, who was born in 1313 in Florence, Italy, was a witness to the scourge. When he wrote his famous (and funny) collection of stories, The Decameron in about 1350, he described the plague, and his description is one of our best first-hand accounts, and it reveals the fear that accompanied this epidemic. Here is only a short excerpt of his long, detailed account.

But what made this pestilence even more severe was that whenever those suffering from it mixed with people who were still unaffected, it would rush upon these with the speed of a fire racing through dry or oily substances that happened to be placed within its reach. Nor was this the full extent of its evil, for not only did it infect healthy persons who conversed or had any dealings with the sick, making them ill or visiting an equally horrible death upon them, but it also seemed to transfer the sickness to anyone touching the clothes or other objects which had been handled or used by its victims. . . .

The plague I have been describing was of so contagious a nature that very often it visibly did more than simply pass form one person to another. In other words, whenever an animal other than a human being touched anything belonging to a person who had been stricken or exterminated by the disease, it not only caught the sickness, but died from it almost at once. To all of this, as I have just said, my own eyes bore witness on more than one occasion. One day, for instance, the rags of a pauper who had died from the disease were thrown into the street, where they attracted the attention of two pigs. In their wonted fashion, the pigs first of all gave the rags a thorough mauling with their snouts after which they took them between their teeth and shook them against their
cheeks. An within a short time they began to write as though they had been poisoned, and they both dropped dead to the ground, spreadeagled upon the rags that had brought about their undoing.

These things, and many others of a similar or even worse nature, caused various fears and fantasies to take root in the minds of those who were still alive and well. And almost without exception, they took a single and very inhuman precaution, namely to avoid or run away from the sick and their belongings, by which means they all thought that their own health would be preserved.

It was not merely a question of one citizen avoiding another, and of people almost invariably neglecting their neighbors and rarely or never visiting their relatives, addressing them only from a distance; this scourge had implanted so great a terror in the hearts of men and women that brothers abandoned brothers, uncles their nephews, sisters their brothers, and in many cases wives deserted their husbands. But even worse, and almost incredible, was the fact that fathers and mothers refused to nurse and assist their own children, as though they did not belong to them.


27. Jean Froissart Describes a Peasant Revolt, the Jacquerie in France (fourteenth century)

In 1358, French peasants revolted in an uprising called the Jacquerie, named for the nickname of peasants—Jacques. The chronicler Froissart described the violent revolt. Notice how his description would have been particularly frightening to his noble audience. Notice also how the nobles and peasants alike saw this as a movement that would engulf all Europe, not just France.

They [peasants] had no leaders and at first they numbered scarcely a hundred. One of them got up and said that the nobility of France, knights and squires, were disgracing and betraying the realm, and that it would be a good thing if they were all destroyed. At this they all shouted: “He’s right! He’s right! Shame on any man who saves the gentry from being wiped out!”

They banded together and went off, without further deliberation and unarmed except for pikes and knives, to the house of a knight who lived near by. They broke in and killed the knight, with his lady and his children, big and small, and set fire to the house.

They did similar things in a number of castles and big houses, and their ranks swelled until there were a good six thousand of them. Wherever they went their numbers grew, for all the men of the same sort joined them. The knights and their squires fled before them with their families. They took their wives and daughters many miles away to put them in safety, leaving their houses open with their possessions inside. And those evil men, who had come together without leaders or arms, pillaged and burned everything and violated and killed all the ladies and girls without mercy, like mad dogs. Their barbarous acts were worse than anything that ever took place between Christians and Saracens [Muslims]. Never did men commit such vile deeds. They were
such that no living creature ought to see, or even imagine or think of, and the
men who committed the most were admired and had the highest places among
them. I could never bring myself to write down the horrible and shameful
things which they did to the ladies. But among other brutal excesses, they
killed a knight, put him on a spit and turned him at the fire and roasted him
before the lady and the children. . . . They tried to force her and the children to
eat the knight’s flesh before putting them cruelly to death.

They had chosen a king from among them who came, at it was said, from
Clermont in Beauvaisis; and they elected the worst of the bad. This king was
called Jack Goodman. Those evil men burned more than sixty big houses and
castles in the Beauvais region. . . . [After much devastation, the noblemen
rally.]

The foreign noblemen joined forces with those of the country who guided
and led them, and they began to kill those evil men and to cut them to pieces
without mercy. Sometimes they hanged them on the trees under which they
found them. . . . When they were asked why they did these things, they re-
plied that they did not know; it was because they saw others doing them and
they copied them. They thought that by such means they could destroy all the
nobles and gentry in the world.

Source: Froissart, Jean. Chronicles. Translated by Geoffrey Brereton. Harmondsworth,

28. John Hus Is Burnt for Heresy, 1415

In 1415, the Czech priest John Hus was brought to the attention of the
Council of Constance because of his writings that supported John Wycliffe. These writings challenged the authority of the church and were
quickly condemned by the Council. Hus was sentenced to death by burn-
ing, and the eyewitness account of his death is given below. Hus’s death
launched a fierce uprising in Bohemia. Notice how Hus appeals to the
authority of Scripture, foreshadowing the Reformation that will come
with the ending of the Middle Ages.

When therefore all the articles offered against him were completed and read,
a certain old and bald auditor, a prelate of the Italian nation commissioned
thereto, read the definitive sentence upon Master John Hus. And he, Master
John responded, replying to certain points in the sentence, although they for-
bade it. And particularly when he was declared to be obstinate in his error and
heresy, he replied in a loud voice: “I have never been obstinate, and I am not
now. But I have ever desired, and to this day I desire, more relevant instruc-
tion from the scriptures. . . .”

And having come to the place of execution, bending his knees and stretch-
ing his hands and turning his eyes toward heaven, he most devoutly sang
psalms, and particularly, “Have mercy on me, God,” . . . His own friends who
stood about then heard him praying joyfully and with a glad countenance. . . .

When the executioners at once lit the fire, the Master immediately began to
sing in a loud voice, at first “Christ, Thou son of the living God, have mercy
upon us,” and secondly, “Thou Who are born of Mary the Virgin.” And when he
began to sing the third time, the wind blew the flame into his face. And thus
praying within himself and moving his lips and the head, he expired in the Lord. While he was silent, he seemed to move before he actually died for about the time one can quickly recite “Our Father” two or at most three times.

When the wood of those bundles and the ropes were consumed, but the remains of the body still stood in those chains, hanging by the neck, the executioners pulled the charred body, along with the stake, down to the ground and burned them further by adding wood from the third wagon to the fire. And walking, they broke the bones with clubs so that they would be incinerated more quickly.

Thus I have described briefly but very clearly the sequence of the death and agony of the celebrated Master John Hus, the eminent preacher of the evangelical truth, so that in the course of time his memory might be vividly recollected.


29. Margery Kempe Has a Vision of Jesus, 1436

Margery Kempe was an English mystic who wrote the first autobiography to be written in English in 1436. In this Book of Margery Kempe, she detailed how she received visions of Christ and how her religious expressions often took the form of ecstatic shouting and crying in church. This remarkable autobiography reveals much about late medieval religious sensibilities, mysticism, and the experience of women. In this excerpt, Margery has her first vision that sets her onto her religious path.

When this creature [Margery] was twenty years old or somewhat more, she was married to an honorable townsman and she conceived a child after a short time, as these things happen. And, after she conceived, she was troubled by severe illness until the child was born, and then, on account of the trouble she had in childbirth and the illness before, she despaired of her life, thinking she might not live.

And day and night during this time she thought she saw devils with open mouths all a-flame with burning waves of fire as though they would swallow her, sometimes raging at her, sometimes threatening her, sometimes pulling her and grabbing her. And the devils also cried out dire threats and demanded that she forsake her Christianity and her faith, and deny her God, his Mother, all the saints in Heaven, her good works and all the virtues, her father, her mother and all her friends. And so she did. She slandered her husband, her friends and her own self; she spoke many hard and scolding words; she knew no virtue or goodness; she desired all wickedness. Exactly what the spirits tempted her to say and do, she said and did. She would have destroyed herself many times and been damned with them in Hell, and to show that, she bit her own hand so hard that the mark could be seen for the rest of her life. And she would have done worse but she was bound and restrained both night and day so she could not have her way.
[Then Jesus Christ appeared to her.] In the likeness of a man, the most handsome and beautiful and amiable that might ever be seen, wearing a purple cloak, sitting on her bedside, looking upon her with such a blessed expression that she felt strengthened in her spirits, he said these words to her: “Daughter, why have you forsaken me and I never forsook you?” And as soon as he said these words, she actually saw the sky open like a flash of lightning; and he climbed up into the air, not too quickly or hastily, but gracefully and easily, so that she could see him in the sky until it closed again.

And immediately this creature was as sound in her wits and her reason as she had ever been before.

Appendix: Dynasties of Medieval Europe

England

Anglo-Saxon Kings
- Egbert (802–839)
- Ethelwulf (839–857)
- Ethelbald (857–860)
- Ethelbert (860–866)
- Ethelred I (866–871)
- Alfred the Great (871–899)
- Edward I the Elder (899–924)
- Ethelstan (924–940)
- Edmund I (940–946)
- Edred (946–955)
- Edgar I (959–975)
- Edward II the Martyr (975–978)
- Ethelred II (978–1016)
- Edmund II Ironsides (1016)

Danish Kings
- Canute (1016–1035)
- Harald Harefoot (1035–1040)
- Harthacanute (1040–1042)

Anglo-Saxon Kings
- Edward III the Confessor (1042–1066)
- Harold (1066)

Norman Dynasty
- William I (1066–1087)
- William II (Rufus) (1087–1100)
- Henry I (1100–1135)
- Stephen (1135–1154)

Plantagenet Dynasty
- Henry II (1154–1189)
- Richard I (1189–1199)
- John (1199–1216)
- Henry III (1216–1272)
- Edward I (1272–1307)
- Edward II (1307–1327)
- Edward III (1327–1377)
- Richard II (1377–1399)

France

Merovingian Dynasty
- Clovis I (481–511)
- Lothair (511–561)
- Chilperic I (561–584)
- Lothair II (584–629)
- Dagobert I (629–639)
- Clovis II (639–657)
- Lothair III (656–660)
- Childeric (662–675)
- Theodoric III (675–691)
- Clovis III (691–695)
- Childeric III (695–711)
- Dagobert III (711–716)
- Childeric II (719–720)
- Theodoric IV (721–737)
- Childeric III (743–752)

Carolingian Dynasty
- Pepin III the Short (747–768)
- Charlemagne (768–814)
- Louis the Pious (814–840)
- Lothair I (840–855)
- Louis II the Stammerer (855–875)
- Charles the Bald (875–877)
- Arnulf (887–899)
- Guido (891–894)
- Labert (892–898)
- Charles III the Simple (898–922)
- Louis III (901–905)
- Berenger (915–924)
- Rudolph (923–936)
- Louis IV from Overseas (936–954)
- Lothair (954–986)
- Louis V the Fat (986–987)

Capetian Dynasty
- Hugh Capet (987–996)
- Robert II the Pious (996–1031)
- Henry I (1031–1060)
Philip I (1060–1108)
Louis VI the Fat (1108–1137)
Louis VII (1137–1180)
Philip II Augustus (1180–1223)
Louis VIII (1223–1226)
Louis IX (1226–1270)
Philip III (1270–1285)
Philip IV the Fair (1285–1314)
Louis X (1314–1316)
John I (1316)
Philip V (1316–1322)
Charles IV (1322–1328)

Valois Dynasty
Philip VI (1328–1350)
John II (1350–1364)
Charles V (1364–1380)
Charles VI (1380–1422)
Charles VII (1422–1461)

Holy Roman Emperors of Germany

Salian (Frankish) Dynasty
Conrad II (1027–1039)
Henry III (1046–1056)
Henry IV (1084–1105)
Henry V (1111–1125)

Supplinburger Dynasty
Lothair III (1133–1137)

Hohenstaufen Dynasty
Frederick I Barbarossa (1155–1190)
Henry VI (1191–1197)

Welf Dynasty
Otto IV of Brunswick (1209–1215) (d. 1218)

Hohenstaufen Dynasty
Frederick II (1211–1250)

Luxembourg Dynasty
Henry VII (1312–1313)

Wittelsbach Dynasty
Louis IV the Bavarian (1328–1347)

Luxembourg Dynasty
Charles IV (1355–1378)

Ottonian (Saxon) Dynasty
Otto I the Great (962–973)
Otto II (973–983)
Otto III (996–1002)
Henry II the Saint (1014–1024)
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Chronology

30,000 B.C.E. | First humans cross the Bering land bridge from Asia into the Americas
6000–1500 B.C.E. | Archaic Age in Mesoamérica: domestication of agricultural plants, such as corn and beans, occurs in Central Mexico
1500–400 B.C.E. | Olmec and Oaxacan civilizations flourish in Central Mexico
1500–250 B.C.E. | Early May civilization flourishes
900–200 B.C.E | Early Horizon Period in Peru: Chavín artistic style popular
300 B.C.E. | The earliest known solar calendars carved in stone come into use among the Maya
400–200 B.C.E. | Earliest carved monuments appear among the Maya
300 B.C.E. | Maya adopt the idea of a hierarchical society ruled by nobles and kings
200 B.C.E.–400 C.E. | Hopewell culture flourishes in northeastern and midwestern North America
150 B.C.E. | City of Teotihuacán is founded in Central Mexico and for centuries is the cultural, religious, and trading center of Mesoamérica
100 C.E. | Decline of the Gulf Coast Olmec civilization
150–1350 | Mogollon culture flourishes in the American Southwest
200–600 | Early Intermediate Period in Peru: Moche and Nasca cultures flourish
200–900 | Classic Period in Mesoamérica; characterized by the development of great urban civilizations and progress in art, astronomy, mathematics, medicine, and the development of writing systems
250–900 | Middle Maya civilization: population increases and the cities of Tikal and Calakmul are prominent
400 | Maya highlands fall under the domination of Teotihuacán, and the disintegration of Maya culture and language begins in some parts of the highlands
450 | Teotihuacán begins to decline
500 | Tikal becomes the first great Maya city, as immigrants from Teotihuacán introduce new ideas involving weaponry, captives, ritual practices, and human sacrifice
583–604 | Maya queen Lady Kanal Ikal rules Palenque
c. 600  An unknown event destroys the civilization at Teotihuacán, along with the empire it supported; Tikal becomes the largest city-state in Mesoamérica

600–1000  Middle Horizon Period in Peru: Tiahuanaco and Huari civilizations flourish

650–1350  Cahokia flourishes along the Mississippi in what is today southwestern Illinois

683  Pakal, ruler of the Mayan state of Palenque dies at the age of 80 and is buried in the Temple of the Inscriptions at Palenque

700–1300  Classic period of Anasazi culture in the American Southwest

c. 750  Long-standing Maya alliances begin to break down; trade between Maya city-states declines, and interstate conflict increases

800–1500  Mississippian culture flourishes in midwestern and southeastern North America

869  Construction ceases in Tikal, marking the beginning of the city’s decline

899  Tikal is abandoned

c. 900  Classic Period of Maya history ends, with the collapse of the southern lowland cities; Maya cities in the northern Yucatán continue to thrive

900–1524  Late Maya civilization: Rise of Mayapán and eventual fragmentation of Mayan polities into various warring groups

950–1150  Toltec civilization flourishes in Central Mexico

c. 1000  Viking Leif Erikson travels to North America

c. 1050  Mound building begins at Cahokia under the influence of Mississippian culture

1150–1450  Classic Period of the Hohokam culture in the American Southwest

c. 1200  Northern Maya cities begin to be abandoned; manufacture of earliest surviving Inca artifacts in Peru

1224  City of Chichén Itzá in the Yucatán is abandoned by the Toltecs; Itzá people settle in the deserted area

1244  Itzá abandons Chichén Itzá for unknown reasons

1263  Itzá begin building the city of Mayapán

1283  Mayapán becomes the capital of Yucatán and the League of Mayapán rules the country

c. 1300  Mexico (Aztec) groups migrate from the north into the Valley of Mexico

1325  Tenochtitlán, the future Aztec capital is founded on an island in the Valley of Mexico

1375–1396  Acamapichtli reigns as first tlatoani (ruler) of the Aztecs

1428–1440  Reign of Itzcoatl, tlatoani of the Aztecs, who brings the Aztecs to political prominence in the Valley of Mexico by sacking the previously dominant Tepanec city of Azcapotzalco

1438  Chanca tribe attacks Inca at Cuzco; King Inca Urcon flees, but Inca Yupanqui saves city, claims Inca kingship, and takes name Pachacuti
1438–1463  King Pachacuti leads expansion of Inca Empire, taking Lake Titicaca and Lake Junin
1440–1469  Reign of Moctezuma Ilhuicamina, which sees the beginning of Aztec military expansion
1441    Rebellion within Mayapán leads to abandonment of the city by 1461
c. 1460–1500  Political union is lost in Yucatán; various rival groups strive for power
1463    Topa Inca, son of Pachacuti, extends Inca Empire to include northern and central Peru and western Ecuador
1471    Topa Inca brings most of Chile, Bolivia, and northwestern Argentine into the Inca Empire
1486–1502  Reign of the Aztec tlatoani Ahuitzotl, who rebuilt the great temple in Tenochtitlán and dedicated it by sacrificing over twenty-thousand victims
1493    Huayna Capa become Inca ruler and brings empire to its greatest extent
1500    First Maya contact with Spaniards
1502–1520  Moctezume Xocooyotzin rules as ninth tlatoani of the Aztecs; thinking Cortés might be the god Quetzalcoatl returned, Moctezuma allows him to come to Tenochtitlán, where the Spanish take the Aztec ruler prisoner
1517    Spanish first arrive on the shores of Yucatán under Hernández de Córdoba, who later dies of wounds received in battle against the Maya; arrival of the Spanish ushers in Old World diseases unknown among the Maya, including smallpox, influenza, and measles, which eventually kill off a large percentage of the Mayan population
1519    Hernan Cortés arrives in Mexico
1521    Spanish under Cortés conquer Tenochtitlán, the Aztec capital
1524–1527  Pedro de Alvarado conquers the Southern Maya
1527    Inca ruler Huayna Capac dies; civil war erupts between two rivals for the Incan throne: Huascar and Atahuallpa
1527–1547  Spanish conquest of the northern Maya
1531    Virgin of Guadalupe appears to Juan Diego, a Mexican Indian
1532    Atahuallpa defeats Huascar to become Inca ruler; Spaniards arrive in Peru, kill Atahuallpa, and install a puppet ruler as Inca king
1537    Manco Inca leads a revolt against the Spanish, but his defeat marks the end of large-scale resistance to Spanish rule in Peru
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South and Mesoamérica, c. 900 C.E.
The Rise of the Aztec Empire A.D. 1200 to 1500
Mayan States, 300 B.C.–A.D. 1500
1. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

In the Americas, the centuries between 400 and 1400 were characterized by a proliferation of complex, urban societies whose rise and fall are documented by the archaeological record and—in the case of Mesoamérica—indigenous written sources. Between the two, we can gain insight into the lives of the original inhabitants of the Americas and appreciate the ways in which they addressed (and continue to address) the problems all societies share. Although this volume is largely concerned with the events prior to 1400, there are many societies which flourished before and after this arbitrary date; this situation is perhaps best exemplified by the Aztec or the Inca Empires, both of which had their origins in the centuries leading up to 400 but generally flourished after that date. As a result, such societies have been included here and can be seen as inheritors of broad, sweeping and ancient cultural traditions in the Americas.

Scholars geographically divide the Americas into different culture areas, or regions in which the societies therein are more like one another than they are with those of a different region. To draw such lines across the Americas is by no means a perfect endeavor, but overall it allows us to view and understand social, political, artistic, religious, and economic regional trends. As such, the essays in this volume are divided into several regions: (1) Eastern Woodlands and the Great Plains; (2) American Southwest and the Great Basin; (3) Arctic and Subarctic; (4) Mesoamérica; (5) Lower Central America and the Andes; and (6) Amazonia and the Caribbean. Some of these regions are further subdivided into different cultures, such as the Teotihuacanos of Mesoamérica or the Mississippians of the Eastern Woodlands. These are but a sample of the numerous civilizations flourishing in the Americas between 400 and 1400 and are chosen to represent some of the largest—geographically, politically, or both—and most complex societies in the Americas. Where possible, the perspectives and situations of other cultures, such as the Zapotecs of Mesoamérica or the Taíno of the Caribbean, are also included and stand testament to the great diversity of the Americas before the period of European contact.

In addition to defining distinct culture areas of the Americas, scholars typically divide each of the culture areas into different time periods. These time periods are usually bounded by major events, such as the rise and fall of a given society, a major technological development, or an artistic style. Unfortunately, each culture area often has its own set of time periods, or chronology, and scholars like to use the same terms for different cultures areas (e.g., the use of
“Classic” to describe time periods in Mesoamérica and South America). This situation can be confusing, especially to individuals trying to compare the different civilizations with one another.

Moreover, there is sometimes more than one chronology for a given culture area, such as with the Hohokam and Ancestral Puebloan societies of the Southwest. This reflects modern scholarship among these societies as well as the recognition of significant differences between them. In other cases, the chronological time periods are so vast as to entirely encompass the years between 400 and 1400 or are restricted to smaller areas within the broad geographic regions discussed for this work (e.g., within Lower Central America, the Gulf of Chiriquí, Panama, has its own chronology). In such situations, the 400 to 1400 range has been employed in this volume for ease of understanding.

Keeping all of these limitations and nuances in mind, however, one can find the production of such time periods and categories useful. Chronology is the framework against which each of the civilizations described can ultimately be set, allowing us to make comparisons between groups and even different culture areas. Thinking about time periods in this way allows us to look at what is happening in a place like the American Southwest around 1000 and see the larger picture. One must remember that for most of the Americas, the vast majority of geographically removed, major cultural events are unrelated (save, perhaps, some environmental effects). But no part of the Americas was ever in complete isolation.

**Eastern Woodlands and the Great Plains**

In the Eastern Woodlands and the Great Plains, the year 400 conveniently falls at the end of one time period traditionally used by archaeologists: the Middle Woodland (200 B.C.E.–400 C.E.). The subsequent phase, known as the Late Woodland (400–1000), was dominated by societies who had abandoned the tradition of mound-building. Mounds, as centers of social and political activities as well as burial sites, seem to have largely fallen out of fashion in the Late Woodland. Likewise, long-distance trade had all but ceased, and although individual villages were increasing in population (and, in the case of the Great Plains, people were becoming more sedentary), warfare was escalating. A few settlements in the latter half of the Late Woodland, most notably Toltec, Arkansas, seem to have become powerful and anticipate a trend which was to last for the next 500 years. This trend, represented by the subsequent Mississippian phase (1000–1500), saw the birth of urbanism in the Eastern Woodlands, with the largest towns like Cahokia and Moundville becoming the paramount economic, religious, and possibly political powers in Eastern Woodlands. Their gradual collapse between the years 1300 and 1500 was largely the result of societal woes as well as climatic deterioration: A long period of global cooling, termed the “Little Ice Age,” seems to have affected these and other parts of the Americas in a negative way, resulting in problems that some societies simply could not deal with adequately. Despite these internal and external problems, however, there were some populous Mississippian centers in the Eastern Woodlands as well as villages on the Great Plains at the time of European contact.
American Southwest and the Great Basin

In the Great Basin, the major culture explored in this volume is the so-called Fremont Culture, a collection of societies from 400 to 1300 that exhibit many similarities as well as regional differences; the idea of Fremont Culture stems from the fact that it was during this period that peoples of the Great Basin became more sedentary and, in some ways, much like the American Southwest. The agricultural way of life in the Great Basin was, archaeologically, a brief phenomenon, however, by 1300 most of the peoples collectively termed “Fremont Culture” had abandoned intensive agriculture in favor of hunting and gathering. This was perhaps due to the effects of the Little Ice Age, as mentioned earlier.

The American Southwest is dominated by two culture areas and thereby two major chronologies. The first of these involve the Hohokam of the Sonoran Desert, and consists of Preclassic (700–1150) and Classic (1150–1450) Hohokam. The Preclassic Hohokam Period was largely characterized by numerous settlements, indirect connections with Mesoamerica in terms of materials and culture, and a preference for cremation as the main form of burial. The Classic Hohokam Period saw the intensification of settlements in a few areas and the abandonment of others; likewise, architecture as well as burial practices changed (from cremation to inhumation) and connections with Mesoamerica became less pronounced.

The second chronology for the American Southwest involves a series of periods known as Pueblo I (750–950), Pueblo II (900–1150), Pueblo III (1150–1300), and Pueblo IV (1300–1500). The people who occupied the Colorado Plateau and correspond to these time periods are known as the Ancestral Puebloans and are colloquially known as the Anasazi. Pueblo I saw the development of towns and villages on the plateau as well as the emergence of “great kivas,” or multipurpose structures used for such things as religious rituals or political events. Pueblo II is characterized by the development of major urban centers in and around Chaco Canyon, which seems to have become a place of religious pilgrimage during that time; for whatever reason, Chaco was abandoned around 1150, as people moved north and into the fabled “cliff dwellings” of the Southwest. This Pueblo III phenomenon was most pronounced at the site of Mesa Verde, Colorado, where the dwellings could have as many as two-hundred rooms, all built in shallow caves and rock shelters on the sides of steep cliffs. Drought, combined with the influx of hunting and gathering groups from the Great Plains and the Great Basin, seems to have lead to the near-complete abandonment of the Colorado Plateau between 1450 and 1500.

Pacific Coast

The historical trajectory for the Pacific Coast is much like that of other parts of North America: People living in sedentary or semisedentary conditions eventually conglomerated into larger and larger social groupings. Chiefdoms emerged along the coast between 1000 and 1300, with people continuing to rely on combinations of agriculture, hunting and gathering, and fishing to survive. Chronologically, the periods that scholars use are quite broad, and for the years 400 to 1400 there is only one generally accepted time period, the Late Pacific (c. 400–1600).
**Arctic and Subarctic**

Like the Pacific Coast, the chronological sequence of the Arctic and Subarctic is quite broad for the period between 400 and 1400 and consists of two phases corresponding to periods when either the Dorset or their successors, the Thule, were dominant in the region. The first of these, Dorset (500 B.C.E.–1000 C.E.), saw the spread of the Dorset culture throughout most of the Arctic and Subarctic. These peoples were hunter-gatherer-fishers who created some of the finest art in bone and ivory ever made in the Americas. Unfortunately, they began to be replaced around 1000 by the Thule, a people from the western Arctic who had a few major technological advances: Using bows, specialized spears, and seaworthy craft, they were able to outperform the Dorset in nearly every environment. Able to hunt whales and other sea mammals on a regular basis, the Thule gradually replaced the Dorset until the latter were all but extinct in the Arctic. The ultimate fate of the Dorset remains unknown.

**Mesoamérica**

The Mesoamerican chronology is relatively streamlined to include three major phases associated with agricultural societies: Preclassic (2400 B.C.E.–250 C.E.), Classic (250–909), and Postclassic (909–1519). Each of these major time periods, however, is further divided into subphases; this is largely because of the enormous time depth as well as a result of the growing body of knowledge about Mesoamerican societies. Although the Preclassic is divided into three phases—Early (2400–1200 B.C.E.), Middle (1200–400 B.C.E.) and Late (400 B.C.E.–250 C.E.)—for the purposes of this volume the final part of the Preclassic is the most important. The Late Preclassic saw the beginnings of most of the societies that were to dominate the period between 400 and 1400.

The Classic Period in Mesoamerica is so defined because it is associated with the florescence of two great civilizations in Mesoamerica: the Teotihuacanos and the Classic Maya. The former dominated Mesoamerica from the latter half of the Late Preclassic to the middle of the Classic Period, or around 600. These peoples, based in Central Mexico, created what was at one time the sixth largest city in the world: Teotihuacán. From this city, the Teotihuacanos appear to have wielded great political influence over Mesoamerica, successfully invading some areas—including the Classic Maya lowlands—and establishing trading centers in others. The great metropolis of Teotihuacán collapsed around 600, and although the precise nature of this collapse is not clear, what is certain is that it was violent: Parts of the city were burned.

The reign of Teotihuacán in Mesoamerica during this time defines what is known as the Early Classic (250–600 C.E.). Although the Maya created vast cities and kingdoms during that time, it was during what is known as the Late Classic (600–909) that they truly flourished: Art, architecture, social complexity, and population levels reached their peak at this time. Great kings of this era such as K’ínich Janaab’ Pakal of Palenque or Jasaw Chan K’awiil I of Tikal wielded enormous political influence, commissioning many of the great masterpieces of sculpture and architecture for which the Maya are famous. Maya civilization collapsed between 760 and 909, however, with the kingdoms of the southern lowlands—comprising southern Mexico, northern Guatemala, western Honduras, and parts of El Salvador and Belize—abandoned to the
jungle. Scholars continue to debate the reasons for the Maya collapse, which were many and probably all related. The final inscription on a monument in the lowlands was carved in 909, marking the end of the Classic Period.

The Postclassic Period in Mesoamérica is defined by great societal disruption as well as, somewhat paradoxically, the forging of ties to societies internal and external to Mesoamérica. In Yucatán and along the Caribbean coast, new Maya kingdoms—albeit far less absolute than those of the past—arose; members of one of these would be the first peoples of the mainland that Christopher Columbus encountered on his fourth voyage to the Americas between 1502 and 1503. Stronger Maya kings bent on empire-building arose in the Maya highlands of contemporary Guatemala, most notably those belonging to the kingdom of the K’ichee; the K’ichee managed to unify much of highlands under their rule—either through conquest or alliance—until the early sixteenth century, when the Aztecs, internal divisions, and finally the Spanish brought an end to their state.

Likewise, the Postclassic Period saw the resurgence of Central Mexico as the most powerful region of Mesoamérica, with first the Toltecs (950–1170) and then the Aztecs (1345–1521) dominating the Basin of Mexico—then a vast lacustrine region—and beyond. The Aztecs created a conquest-oriented, tribute-based empire stretching from Central Mexico to coastal Chiapas, incorporating many different civilizations into a larger sociopolitical and economic system. The other major development of the Postclassic was the introduction of metallurgical technologies into Mesoamérica from Lower Central America and South America; gold, silver, copper, and even alloys like bronze were being worked at the time of European contact. Most scholars place the end of the Postclassic either at 1519, when Hernan Cortés and his conquistadores first encountered the Aztecs, or in 1521, when the Aztec Empire became the first major urban civilization in the Americas to fall to the Spanish.

### Lower Central America and the Andes

The chiefdoms of Lower Central America between 400 and 1400 were heavily engaged in trade with their neighbors. Although no states or large urban centers arose in this region at that time, the peoples of Lower Central America—sometimes called the “Intermediate Area”—were well versed in metalworking at a time when the societies of Mesoamérica were not, having probably imported this technology from their neighbors to the south. One of the most famous ceremonial centers of this region was the site of Rivas, Costa Rica, where peoples from surrounding villages would migrate to feast and engage in sociopolitical maneuvering. The peoples of Lower Central America became even more integrated into the larger world of the Americas after 1000 and appear to have had sporadic contact with peoples as far as West Mexico by that time. The chronology used in this volume for Lower Central America is the arbitrary 400 to 1400 sequence.

In the Andes (including the desert Pacific Coast), the chronological sequence is quite complex, stretching as far back as 5000 B.C.E. with numerous phases and subphases. For the purposes of this volume, however, there are five major time periods in Andean prehistory: (1) Initial Period (1800–400 B.C.E.), (2) Early Intermediate Period (400 B.C.E.–650 C.E.), (3) Middle Horizon (650–1000), (4)
Late Intermediate Period (1000–1476), and (5) Late Horizon (1476–1533). During what is known as the Initial Period, the intensive agriculture, weaving, pottery, and animal husbandry (camelids like llamas, for example) became common for the first time. Large monuments and temple pyramids were also built on a much broader geographic scale than ever before, and sites such as Chavín—which were to become extremely important at the beginning of the Early Intermediate—were settled.

The Early Intermediate Period (sometimes stretched to 1000) saw the growth and spread of religious traditions like those employing the Staff God, a deity derived from the site of Chavín de Huantar in the Andes. On the desert coast of Peru, moreover, two major civilizations developed that have since captured the popular imagination: Moche and Nazca. The Moche, erecting their grand mud-brick pyramids as well as creating some of the most detailed and ornate pottery in the Americas, are most famous for their massive tombs: The discovery of the gold-laden tombs at Sipán, for example, ranked as one of the greatest archaeological finds of the twentieth century. The Nazca, for their part, are most famous for creating the Nazca lines: These were enigmatic designs created on the desert floor of the south coast of Peru. Both civilizations appear to have suffered greatly from climatic disasters, including droughts, flooding, or both, and had largely vanished by 650. New civilizations, such as the city-states of the Lambayeque Region (the largest of which was Batán Grande), followed in the region before its conquest by the empire of Chimor in the fourteenth century.

During the Middle Horizon, two empires rose and fell in the Andes. They were Tiwanaku and Wari. Tiwanaku, originally based around Lake Titicaca in Bolivia, appears to have adopted many of the traditions of prior civilizations of the Andes: The Staff God, born of Chavín, may have been one such tradition. Building temples, sunken plazas, and other monumental architecture from stone, Tiwanaku appears to have been the leader of a loose confederation of states in the southern Andes. Although much less is known about Wari, it too created an empire in the Andes, but one that appears to have been more centralized and hierarchical. Like some of their forebears in the Americas, Tiwanaku and Wari suffered greatly from climatic problems, including a long drought beginning around 1050. Neither appears to have been able to mitigate these problems successfully, and both began a decline that resulted in sociopolitical fragmentation.

One of these fragments appears to have been the Inca, who were to become dominant during the Late Horizon. Before this happened, however, South America saw an empire rise on the desert coast: Chimor. During the Late Intermediate Period, the Chimor conquered and consolidated the region once occupied by the Moche, eventually expanding to become the second largest empire ever created in South America. At their capital of Chan Chan, they built massive mud-brick and adobe palace compounds. Their religious traditions appear to have been precursors to those of the Inca, who would conquer them in 1476. The Inca, in turn, created an empire stretching along the Pacific Coast and the Andes, from Ecuador to Chile; building almost twenty-five thousand miles of roads, palaces, temples, and mountain retreats, the Inca Empire was an impressive sight. Disease, warfare, and trickery—the latter on the part of Francisco Pizarro and his small band of conquistadores—brought this last empire of the Americas to ruin in 1533.
Amazonia and the Caribbean

The time between 400 and 1400 in the Caribbean, as the period used in this volume, was one that saw settlements of Arawak-speaking peoples from coastal South America becoming more complex and exhibiting connections with other parts of the Americas. For example, the dominant Taino peoples appear to have had some ties—at the very least, indirect ones—with Mesoamérica: Ball courts ultimately derived from that region appear at Taino sites. Around 1400, the Taino became threatened by newcomers to the Caribbean from Venezuela, the Carib, who were successfully overrunning Taino sites at the time Christopher Columbus encountered the Caribbean peoples in 1492.

As with some other parts of the Americas, the Amazonian chronological sequence is more defined by the individual cultures within it than a broad regional chronology. Thus far, sequences such as Formative (1000 B.C.E.–500 C.E.), Developmental (1–1000 C.E.), and Classic (1000–1533) have been used in different parts of Amazonia, but for the purposes of this volume they have been disregarded in favor of time periods associated with individual sites. The overall trajectory for the Amazon involves widespread population diasporas of Arawak- and Tupiguarani-speaking peoples, between 1000 B.C.E. and 500 C.E., from northeast and southwest Amazonia, respectively. These people came to dominate what had probably been sparsely occupied regions of Amazonia by 500 C.E. The Arawak speakers were dominant, however, for the entire period covered by this volume; Tupiguarani speakers began a second diaspora around 1500, replacing Arawak speakers in many areas.

Between 400 and 1400, several parts of the Amazon saw the development of towns and villages. Although they are not nearly as well understood as those of North America, Mesoamérica, or the Andes, they do appear to have been based on agriculture. The largest of these were located in the Lower and Central Amazon, at places like Marajó Island and Acutuba. There is considerable disagreement among scholars as to the nature of Amazonian urbanism, however, and much more exploration of this region will be necessary to determine how similar Amazonia was to some of the other densely populated regions of the Americas before European contact—and colonization—in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Further Reading


2. RELIGION

Religious expression in the Americas between 400 and 1400 took near innumerable forms, from the strong, centralized “state” religions of Mesoamérica and Andean South America to the generalized belief systems embodied by such loose religious traditions as the Southern Cult, in the Eastern Woodlands. Despite this variability, a number of general themes in Pre-Columbian religions and religious expression emerge: (1) a focus on the creation of earthen mounds, masonry temples, or similar architecture for mortuary purposes and for public ceremony; (2) a set of deities or ritual behaviors tied to agricultural fertility; (3) the practice of ancestor veneration in a variety of forms, such as the use of mummies in ritual or the creation of shrines to prominent antecedents; and (4) a belief in sacred locations (natural or built), many of which were places of pilgrimage and centers where groups would congregate for sociopolitical or religious functions. These themes were by no means common to all religions of the Americas, however.

One final common theme in the religions of the Americas involves change: As with most things, religion and expressions of it change over time. Thus indigenous deities of Mesoamérica or the Andes, like Quetzalcoatl and the Staff God, respectively, saw many different incarnations over the period between 400 and 1400. They witnessed the births and deaths of states as well as empires and were adopted and adapted by different peoples to suit their needs and the conditions of their day.

**Eastern Woodlands and the Great Plains**

The beginning of the Late Woodland Period in the Eastern Woodlands around 400 saw the demise of long-distance relationships between settlements. Prior to this era, elaborate burial mounds and associated ceremonies—including the ritual destruction or burial of precious materials—were common at sites such as Hopewell, Fort Ancient, and other centers in the Midwest and Southeast. After 400 the construction of these burial mounds had all but ceased, and mound-building as a social and religious phenomenon would only reemerge
around 1000 with the development of large chiefdoms and towns at places like Toltec, Arkansas, and Lake George, Mississippi. These towns became not only the centers of redistributive networks—places where food and other economically important items were collected and then distributed to surrounding peoples—but also places for ceremony and pilgrimage.

This trend ushered in the beginning of the Mississippian Period (1000–1600), a time defined by distinctive trends in artifacts, architecture, and dense settlement. Flat-topped, earthen mounds were a part of this: Modified gradually over time, they often housed the remains of elites and were a constant, visible reminder of elite ancestry to the occupants of the Mississippian chiefdoms. Although most centers had only a few mounds, some of the largest—including Cahokia, Illinois—had over one hundred such buildings. Human sacrifice seems to have been occasionally practiced as part of these burials; a particularly important individual might be interred with one or more decapitated or otherwise dispatched individuals. Precious items, inscribed or otherwise decorated with symbols that are collectively known as the Southern Cult or the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex, were a more common feature of elite burials in Mississippian mounds.

Designs decorating objects of shell, copper, polished stone, wood and ceramic vessels include forked or weeping eyes, sunbursts, winged humans, eyes set within the palms of open hands, and other supernatural phenomena. In general the Southern Cult seems to have focused on ancestors, the power of elites, warfare, cardinal directions, and death. Some have suggested a vague Mesoamerican connection on the basis of some religious similarities, but these motifs are general enough to make any commonalities coincidental. Overall, the Southern Cult appears to have been a loosely homogenous set of symbols and ideas that reinforced the power of elites at Mississippian centers. It seems to have peaked between 1200 and 1300. Although many of the major Mississippian centers were in decline by 1400, the basic ideas and practices represented by the Southern Cult continued well into the era of European contact.

To the west, over the Great Plains, there is some evidence that elements of the symbolic systems of the Eastern Woodlands were popular, particularly in the period before 400. Though smaller than those of the Eastern Woodlands, mounds from Oklahoma to the Dakotas occasionally bear evidence of these ties: Shells, cut bones, and other objects are occasionally found that show traces of religious influence. Overall, however, this region of small settlements and villages probably saw a combination of local and nonlocal religious expression both before and after 400. There does not seem to be much evidence for artifacts emphasizing the power of elites or the great quantities of prestigious funerary offerings so characteristic of Mississippian societies, for example. Moreover, the wealth of evidence for long-distance contact and trade with the Pacific Coast, Southwest, and Eastern Woodlands suggests that the peoples of the Great Plains were in touch with a variety of religious ideas. As this region was not densely settled and instead characterized by small, sedentary agricultural communities as well as hunter-gatherers, there was likely no one overarching religion similar to the Southern Cult in this region.

**American Southwest and the Great Basin**

It is difficult to generalize the religious practices of the Great Basin, as the groups here appear to have been influenced by nearly all their neighbors with
much regional variation. The one major sedentary society from the Great Basin, the Fremont Culture, likewise appears to have had regional varieties with influences from all over the Southwest and the Great Plains; rock paintings by these peoples may have had a religious component, however. For the peoples of the Southwest, however, there are a number of discernable religious practices.

**The Hohokam (700–1450)**

Isolated pockets of farmers had been present in the Southwest since at least 1300 B.C.E., but it was not until the eighth century C.E. that these individuals coalesced into communities sharing readily identifiable common cultures. For the Hohokam, some of the most easily identified cultural traits are religious: During the Preclassic (700–1150) and Classic Periods (1150–1450), marine shells etched with naturalistic designs and clay figurines were more or less standardized by design. They seem to have been used by religious leaders in ritual activities, although the precise nature of these activities is unclear. Like the shells, which were imported from the Pacific Coast and then worked locally, the preferred materials for Hohokam religious rituals were rare or imported from great distances. Copper bells and tropical feathers from West Mexico, occasionally found at Hohokam sites, may have served just this function.

Further insight into the religious practices of the Hohokam comes from ball courts, dated to the Preclassic, and a switch from inhumation to cremation as the dominant form of burial in the Classic Period. Ultimately derived from Mesoamérica, Hohokam ball courts almost certainly had a ritual component to them; what is not clear is whether that component was, like the form, carried from Mesoamérica into the Southwest (see Ballgame). Social and political changes likely led to the abandonment of ball courts as the dominant public architectural feature; similar factors may have been involved in the shift to cremation at the beginning of the Classic Period.

**Ancestral Pueblo (750–1450)**

Like the situation described for the Hohokam, identifiable common cultural patterns emerged on the Colorado Plateau in the eighth century C.E. Perhaps the most striking facet of religious life to emerge during the period known as Pueblo I (750–900) was the architectural development of the “great kiva”: a centrally located, often circular, multipurpose public room in a settlement used for political and religious purposes. One of the earliest of these is found at Grass Mesa Pueblo, Colorado, and appears to have been used by several settlements as a focal point for political and religious activities. Kivas continue to play a major role within indigenous societies of the Southwest today and are employed in rites involving natural phenomena as well as ancestors. Their early development in the eighth century was a major event and perhaps signifies the beginning of these modern practices.

A second major religious development was the growth and collapse of Chaco Canyon during Pueblo II (900–1150). From 900 to 1140 the population of this settlement swelled into the thousands, and enormous house compounds composed of hundreds of rooms and up to four stories were constructed. Some of these houses had multiple kivas inside them and may even have served as temples; the houses themselves were linked throughout the canyon by roads. Although models for the agricultural productivity of the area surrounding Chaco are constantly in flux, archaeologists generally agree that one of the reasons
why Chaco became the focal point for population density in this part of the Southwest involves religion: The canyon appears to have become a major pilgrimage center, with buried caches of precious objects (including turquoise) and remains of other ritual activities suggestive of a religious component to the sudden growth of the site. Although Chaco Canyon itself appears to have been abandoned in the twelfth century, collapsing by 1150, elements derivative of Chaco would continue on the Colorado Plateau until the thirteenth century.

The third major religious development in this part of the Southwest was the development of what is called the “Southwest Cult,” a shared set of symbols on pottery emphasizing agricultural productivity, the control of water, and fertility. Following a period of sustained population growth on the Colorado Plateau in Pueblo III (1150–1300), the end of the thirteenth century saw droughts and incursions by foreign groups into the region. By the beginning of Pueblo IV (1300–1542), the Colorado Plateau had been abandoned by the Ancestral Puebloans. Immigrating to the Rio Grande and Little Colorado rivers, they merged with local populations and created the largest towns yet seen in the Southwest. The Southwest Cult seems to have been the result of these population upheavals and migrations. Although its origins can be traced to approximately 1275, it gained widespread popularity by 1400 and was used by many different ethnic groups. Designs reminiscent of the Southwest Cult continue to proliferate on traditional ceramics from this region.

Pacific Coast

Societies along the Pacific Coast, like their contemporaries elsewhere in North America, lived between 400 and 1400 in permanent and seasonal villages. Along the coast of California, chiefdoms had arisen by 1300; with them came social distinctions represented in mortuary customs, such as an increase in prestige items—most notably objects made from shell—buried with elites. Chiefdoms seem to have emerged at about 1000 in the Pacific Northwest, with similar variability in mortuary practices emerging at that time. What makes any generalization about the religious practices in these areas difficult is that the media of choice for ritual expression may have been wood. Given what we know about historic populations of these regions and sites like Ozette—a fifteenth-century village in Washington where wooden ritual and utilitarian goods were preserved through historical accident—such a scenario seems likely. Some of the most visible and ritually significant remains of this region, such as totem poles or other elaborately carved objects, may simply not have survived the test of time.

Arctic and Subarctic

The religious practices of the Dorset and Thule, who dominated the Arctic and Sub-Arctic regions of the Americas between 400 and 1400, are similarly obscure. Certainly carved images of animals—and even Norse—appear in the archaeological record, but in large part there is not enough material culture to create an adequate picture of religious life for this period. Like the Pacific Coast, a more complete image emerges at the beginning of the historic era. However, it is likely that many of the ideas and ceremonial practices encountered in recent times have antecedents in the distant past.
Mesoamérica

One can trace the development of Mesoamerican belief systems to the Early Preclassic Period (2500–1000 B.C.E.), with some of the earliest characteristics represented among civilizations like the Olmec. By 400, Mesoamerican societies shared a number of religious traits derived from these earlier periods, including practices like autosacrifice, human sacrifice, public ritual display atop massive temple pyramids, astronomical observances, and the conjuring of gods and ancestors. All continued well past the year 1400. Likewise, most Mesoamerican religious traditions were characterized by themes of and ideas about agricultural fertility, world renewal, death and the afterlife, ancestor veneration, quasi-historical metropolises, oppositional forces, semidivine rulers, and anthropomorphic conceptions of the earth. There are two important things to remember about Mesoamerican gods, moreover: (1) most were believed to have more than one aspect or “personality” and, at the very least, could appear as male or female (or both) depending upon the situation; and (2) most Mesoamerican gods could overlap in their dominant associations (e.g., sun, wind, moon, etc.) with other gods, to the extent that they were identified more by their host of attributes than their individual names. As an example of these two considerations, one could theoretically have the Aztec god Quetzalcoatl (traditionally male and associated with knowledge and wisdom) appearing as the wind god, Ehecatl, in a predominantly feminine context wearing imagery borrowed from even more Aztec gods. Although he would still be understood as Quetzalcoatl, with a host of traits identifying the “base” as such, he would be employing the powers of other entities. These ideas took different forms over time but were some of the common threads by which Mesoamerica as a culture area was woven. Some elements of Pre-Columbian ideas (as well as indigenous ideas postdating the Spanish Conquest) can be found in contemporary, Christian contexts within Mesoamerica.

The Teotihuacanos (100 B.C.E. to 600 C.E.)

Like all Mesoamerican civilizations, the Teotihuacanos practiced many of the behaviors outlined above: Themes of agricultural fertility, death and the afterlife, and other shared concepts were key facets of the art and activities of the Teotihuacanos in 400.

In addition to this, however, Teotihuacanos appear to have been responsible for the spread—and possibly the origin—of two deities that were to echo all the way through Mesoamerican prehistory to the Aztecs. Not all deities popular at Teotihuacán were enjoying such distribution: The Teotihuacan fertility goddess seems to have had a limited impact in Mesoamerica, for example. On the other hand, the deity that the Aztecs would later call Tlaloc saw a distribution stretching all the way to the Maya lowlands. This god was associated with rain, water and agricultural fertility. In Mesoamerican art, Tlaloc appears with characteristic “goggle” eyes and a missing lower jaw.

Quetzalcoatl, called “the Feathered Serpent” by the Aztecs, was perhaps even more important. Although the Aztecs saw Quetzalcoatl as a wise figure, opposed to human sacrifice and supremely knowledgeable, this was almost certainly not the way in which Quetzalcoatl operated among the Teotihuacanos. On a pyramid at Teotihuacán known to archaeologists as the Temple of the Feathered Serpent, repetitive images of this deity appear alongside those of Tlaloc. Beneath the pyramid, a massive, partially looted tomb housed the
remains of a lord interred with approximately forty sacrificial victims. Surpris-ingly, these victims do not appear to have been captives but rather warriors drawn from the Teotihuacán military. This military, as noted in other essays, was extremely effective and spread Teotihuacán political influence in many directions. It was probably through martial interactions with Teotihuacán that the Classic Maya came into contact with Tlaloc and Quetzalcoatl; although the name of the Maya version of Tlaloc is unknown, Quetzalcoatl came to be known in the Maya area as Kukulkan “the Feathered Serpent.”

The Maya (Classic [250–909] and Postclassic [909–1697] Periods)

The Classic Maya pantheon consisted of a host of gods, many of whom em-bodied forces of the natural world. Some of the most popular were the Sun God (K’ínich Ajaw, or “Sun-Faced Lord”), the Maize God and the Storm God (Chaak), with the god Tlaloc—a god of storms, rain, and agriculture—being the most popular deity imported from Teotihuacán in Central Mexico. Other gods or god-like entities of note included Itzamnaaj, a creator deity associated with knowledge, and K’awiil, a god-like individual who was the embodiment of royal power and an intermediary between rulers and the supernatural world.

Likewise, there were a whole host of gods and creatures associated with the Underworld, a place where the dead were believed to go for trials. Although its full nature is not understood, there seems to have been a general belief—among the Maya elites, at the very least—that passing those trials allowed individuals to be reborn as ancestors, who would then play a significant role in the fortunes of the living. Much like with Mesoamerican conceptions of gods, prominent royal ancestors (but even then, probably not all of them) could overlap in aspect and ability with deities of the Maya pantheon. As an example, K’ínich Yax K’uk’ Mo’, one of the most famous rulers of Copan, was portrayed after death not only as a guiding ancestor but also as an aspect of the Sun God. These ancestors were central to the authority of Maya kings in the Classic and the Postclassic Periods; ancestor veneration was then, as now, a major component of Maya religious life.

As mentioned earlier, during the later Postclassic Period, a version of the Central Mexican deity Quetzalcoatl became popular in the Maya area, most notably at the site of Chichén Itzá. Called Kukulkan “the Feathered Serpent,” his growth in popularity coincided with the decline of some other gods of the Maya pantheon (K’awiil was perhaps the most noteworthy example of this, following the Maya collapse). Most of the mentioned gods of the Maya area, however, persisted until the era of European contact.

The Toltecs (950–1170) and the Aztecs (1345–1521)

The Toltecs and the Aztecs continued many of the prominent religious traditions and practices of Teotihuacán, although at least one of the gods—Quetzalcoatl—appears to have undergone a radical transformation. Appearing as one of the central gods of Teotihuacán engaged in human sacrifice, Quetzalcoatl was now associated with knowledge, wisdom, and opposition to that practice. Such opposition was significant in light of the fact that the Aztecs were particularly engaged in human sacrifice, on a scale seemingly unsurpassed in the Americas. In fact, human sacrifice was, for the Aztecs, a central part of public religious expression; it was designed not only as entertainment or ritual but also as dramatic, state-sanctioned theater where victories of the state could
be demonstrated and the powers of the ruling class exalted. The chief deity of
the Aztecs, a war god named Huitzilopochtli, was a new introduction to the
Mesoamerican pantheon and his worship demanded human sacrifice.

Individuals to be sacrificed at the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán, for example,
were usually war captives who were prepared for death up to a year in ad-
vance. Death by sacrifice was considered a “good death” by the Aztecs, who
believed that the manner of one’s death determined where they would live in
the afterlife: Individuals who died a warrior’s death, including death on the
battlefield, sacrifice, or death in childbirth (women died providing warriors
for the state), would ascend to an exalted paradise. The worst way to die, in
the Aztec mind-set, was to expire as a result of natural causes like disease or
infirmity; such individuals would be sent to an afterlife that was far from
ideal.

Lower Central America (Intermediate Area) and the Andes

Ceremonial centers built for the communal feasts, rituals, and other activi-
ties of surrounding villages, such as the one at Rivas, Costa Rica, were one of
the hallmarks of religious expression in Lower Central America. Although this
area never saw the growth of state religions or the construction of massive
temple architecture, it was characterized by many centers involved in the pro-
duction of metal items—particularly gold—for ultimate interment with the
burials of high-ranking individuals. Large cemeteries, sometimes divided or
separated geographically by social rank or lineage, were common in this re-
region. Unfortunately, given the quantities of gold interred in such cemeteries,
might have been heavily damaged by looting activities.

On the Pacific Coast and in the Andes, the material remains of religious ex-
pression are dominated by ruling elites (curacas), who built temples and simi-
lar structures either of mud-brick, as on the coast, or of the readily available
stone in the Andes. Most took the form of colossal platform mounds with at-
tached plazas, with some mirroring or augmenting natural features in the land-
scape. Solar and agricultural themes predominated in religious pantheons of
these regions, with mythological creature also playing a major role in sacred
imagery. Perhaps the most ubiquitous feature of coastal and Andean religious
ideology, however, was the concept of a huaca: These were sacred places, from
mountains to temples, which served as locations for pilgrimage and even (occ-
casionally) human sacrifice. The centrality of huacas to religious expression in
these regions continues today.

Moche (200–600) and Nazca (200 B.C.E.–650 C.E.)

Moche society revolved largely around the worship of solar, feline, and
other types of deities derived from the natural world, as evidenced by stucco
portraits and other images of gods on Moche temples. Most of what we know
about Moche religion does not derive from temple contexts, however, but from
elite ceramics: As depicted on bottles, vases, and bowls, the Moche nobility
appear to have had a rich mythology involving anthropomorphic animals,
warring gods, and ritual sacrifice. One of the most popular of the mythological
themes appears to have been the Presentation Theme, where war captives were
sacrificed for the good of the gods and of society. Their blood was apparently
consumed by Moche elites in elaborate ceremonies. Such elites have been

recovered at Moche sites such as Sipán, where individuals from high-status burials were dressed like specific characters from Moche ceramics.

Some parallels between Moche and Nazca religions exist, particularly with regard to the types of deities worshipped: emphases on anthropomorphic beings and a warrior ideology are in evidence on Nazca ceramics. Unlike the Moche, the Nazca appear to have had a ceremonial center, Cuachi, where individuals from nearby villages would gather for sociopolitical and religious functions. It is not clear if the Nazca lines, for which that civilization is most famous, served a religious purpose; in general, the reasons for the geometric, animal, vegetative, and other designs in the desert are not clear.

**Tiwanaku (650–1000), Chimor (1000–1476), and the Birth of the Inca Empire (c. 1000–1532)**

Like many of the other societies of the Andes, Tiwanaku civilization was characterized by masonry buildings, stelae, and megalithic archways, with platform mounds and other forms of monumental architecture designed to convey the power of the nobility and the dominant religious ideology. As in some other parts of the Americas, the architecture was built to make an impression upon visitors to Tiwanaku sites and to stir the public in ceremonies involving elite ritual display. At Tiwanaku, the dominant deity appears to have been a late version of a deity whose origins stretched back to Chavin (1200–400 B.C.E.) times, the Staff God. A composite of human, animal, and solar attributes, the Tiwanaku Staff God appears to have been associated with natural phenomena, particularly with regard to agricultural fertility.

Religious behavior at Chimor appears to have been a continuation of the traditions of previous peoples of the north coast of Peru, including the Moche, as well as an anticipation of Inca customs. In addition to practicing human sacrifice and bearing a mythology dominated by anthropomorphic creatures and natural phenomena, particularly with regard to marine creatures and the sea, there seems to have been an emphasis on ancestor veneration in Moche society. Mummified nobles occupied privileged positions in royal ceremonial behavior and may have been viewed as actively participating in the affairs of state. By the birth of the Inca Empire in the early fifteenth century, mummies were paramount players in political affairs, the mummies of emperors continuing to “own” land and property; they were also brought forth to participate in important state rituals. In part, their prominence was due to the general belief that Inca emperors were direct, lineal descendents of the paramount Inca deity, the sun god Inti. As gods themselves, the Inca emperors thus retained their divine nature even after death! Like their antecedents in coastal and Andean South America, the Inca believed in sacred nature of mountains and ritually significant places (huacas) and would provide these places with offerings in the forms of material goods or humans specially chosen to be sacrificed.

**Amazonia and the Caribbean**

The Arawak-speaking peoples who spread from the northern parts of South America to the Caribbean between 500 B.C.E and 500 C.E. were characterized by theocratic chiefdoms; chiefs in these societies built monuments to their power and created earthen and stone ceremonial buildings. Ball courts similar to those found in Mesoamérica and the Southwest were erected in the Caribbean, as
were large circular plazas designed for political and religious use. Like their contemporaries elsewhere, peoples of the Caribbean held certain areas of their islands to be sacred and continued in all of these practices and beliefs well past 1400.

The Arawak- and Tupiguarani-speaking peoples of Amazonia, by comparison, followed a different political trajectory: Strongly hierarchical chiefdoms emerged much later, as at Santarem in the sixteenth century, or not at all. At the same time, however, religious expression took similar forms. At Marajó Island, on the Amazonian estuary, the Marajóara people erected large earthen mounds housing burial urns; the largest of the mounds seem to have been reserved for the burials of elites and were focal points for political and religious activities between 400 and 1400. Acutuba, in the Central Amazon, saw the construction of a large amphitheater thought to have served similar political and religious purposes during this time period. As more research is done in this area we may find that, like their contemporaries in the Eastern Woodlands, the Amazonians engaged in the building of mounds and other public architecture as a social and religious activity.

Further Reading

3. ECONOMY

The various economies of the Americas were largely based on agriculture or, in the case of hunter-gatherers, highly specialized food-procurement technologies.
Although nearly all societies of the Americas refrained from using metal or the wheel for tools, implements, or modes of transportation (see Pacific Coast, Arctic, and Subarctic), their economies were able to involve goods from far-flung locations. Some of these were traded across continents through local exchanges, whereas others were directly imported from great distances. Elites in the societies of the Americas particularly relied on such long-distance trade, as imports of prestige items were vital to maintaining status distinctions. They were likewise valuable to elites because of their varied functions in ritual: broad regional religious ideologies, such as the Southern Cult of the Eastern Woodlands or the system of divine kingship employed by the Classic Maya, required certain objects and materials for religious efficacy (and the politics that went with such rituals).

**Eastern Woodlands and the Great Plains**

The Eastern Woodlands and the Great Plains were, in 400 C.E., undergoing a decline in regional trade. Between the Early and Middle Woodland Periods (800 B.C.E.–400 C.E.), sites such as Fort Ancient and Hopewell, Ohio, had seen the vigorous trading of copper, chert, shell, and obsidian artifacts as well as raw materials; they were part of an economic network stretching from Wyoming to the Atlantic to the Gulf Coast of Louisiana. By 400, such activities had largely ceased: Although village populations continued to increase in nearly all areas, economies became far more localized. Warfare—in part a cause as well as a result of this economic decline—among the members of these local economies was a major facet of life between 400 and 1000 C.E. Likewise, the sudden adoption of maize as the staple crop and its replacement of most native cultigens was a key development in the latter years of the first millennium C.E.

The economic and social instability of these times, coupled with increasing reliance on maize as well as booming populations, led around 1000 to the birth of Mississippian chiefdoms (1000–1500) over much of the Eastern Woodlands and the Great Plains. How did this happen? In these turbulent times, enterprising, ambitious individuals and their supporters appear to have taken permanent control of favorable locations at places such as Cahokia, Illinois, and Moundville, Alabama, lending stability at the cost of permanent, hierarchically arranged as well as hereditary leadership. Economically, long-distance trade as well as the exploitation of wild food sources appears to have resumed, although the primary mode of subsistence in most areas continued to be maize agriculture and supporting crops like squash or beans. Although the Mississippian chiefdoms would begin their long decline around 1400, in many areas related to the colder temperatures of the Little Ice Age (1400–1850), they were not extinct at the time of European colonization. New social and economic systems would emerge to deal with problems such as increased warfare, mass population movements, and other issues leading to social unrest, although around 1400 the situation in the Eastern Woodlands and the Great Plains certainly seemed dire.

**American Southwest and the Great Basin**

The economies of the American Southwest and the Great Basin were somewhat linked together through the exchange of goods and ideas. The Great Basin
was a crossroads for peoples from the American Southwest and the Great Plains (and, from there, the Eastern Woodlands), as best evidenced by the Fremont Culture (400–1300 C.E.). The American Southwest, by comparison, had intermittent economic ties not only with the Great Plains but also with the Pacific Coast as well as Mesoamérica. Most notably, turquoise from the Southwest is occasionally found in Mesoamerican contexts. The specifics of such trade—and whether it was direct or simply local exchange moving such items gradually north or south—are unknown, but sites like Casas Grandes, Mexico, may hold the key: Casas Grandes appears to have been an intermediary between these regions, most notably during the era of the Toltecs in Central Mexico.

**The Hohokam (750–1450)**

Although the foundations of the Hohokam economy certainly predate 750—irrigation, for example, had been practiced in the American Southwest since 1000 B.C.E.—the Hohokam were the first cohesive cultural group in the area to engage in the long-distance export and import of ideas as well as materials. From what has been reconstructed archaeologically, the Preclassic Period (700–1150) was characterized by intensive irrigation, village organization, and population increase as well as exchange with northern Mexico (and perhaps Mesoamérica). Such long-distance ties are evidenced by Mexican-style ball courts at Preclassic sites such as Snaketown. As mentioned in the Arts section, the subsequent Classic Period (1150–1450) was characterized by further long-distance trade from areas throughout the continent, although the majority of the foreign objects found in Classic sites appear to have been procured for ritual purposes rather than economic display. The entire economic system appears to have been agrarian, with vast canals being dug to support a burgeoning population. Drier conditions as well as environmental degradation seem to have taken a major toll on this economy by the end of the fifteenth century, such that most Hohokam settlements were abandoned by the time of Spanish colonization.

**Ancestral Pueblo (750–1450)**

The Ancestral Puebloan societies between 750 and 1450 went through several phases in which different parts of the Colorado Plateau and surrounding regions gained political, religious, or economic ascendancy. Throughout these periods the agrarian economy was largely based upon staples ultimately derived from Central Mexico—such as maize, beans, and squash—as well as local cultigens and wild resources. During Pueblo I (750–900), the first true villages appeared on the Plateau; likewise, the first “great kivas” (or large, multi-purpose rooms used for political and religious functions) were built at this time. The economy centered on the production capacities of these villages as well as remote communities on the Colorado Plateau. Pueblo II (900–1150) saw increasing numbers of centralized villages and towns, including massive constructions at Chaco Canyon, a pilgrimage center for many of the peoples in the region; economically, it may have also been an agriculturally favorable oasis in arid times, drawing people not only for religious but also subsistence purposes. Pueblo III (1150–1300) and Pueblo IV (1300–1450) saw massive population movements, first to cliff dwellings in New Mexico and Colorado followed by the abandonment of the Colorado Plateau entirely. By the early phase of Pueblo IV, Ancestral Puebloan societies had rebounded from massive
drought and social upheaval, immigrating to the Rio Grande Valley. Villages reached their socioeconomic heights, with densely packed populations engaged in intensive agriculture along the Rio Grande and Little Colorado rivers. Unfortunately, by 1400 the negative consequences of such urbanism were also taking their toll. Increased warfare, endemic diseases, and malnutrition in the region contributed to broad population decline and even the collapse of several major centers of Ancestral Puebloan society. Nevertheless, many communities did manage to weather the troubles of the fifteenth century and survive Spanish colonization.

**Pacific Coast, Arctic, and Subarctic**

The subsistence economies of the Pacific Coast and the Arctic were shaped by the ocean. Peoples on the Pacific, from Alaska to California, largely relied upon marine resources such as seals, whales, fish, shellfish, and birds. Although these communities were not all directly connected through coastal trade, there is plenty of evidence for indirect long-distance exchange in precious or utilitarian items such as obsidian, copper, and shell. The Dorset and Thule peoples of the Arctic, meanwhile, depended upon seals, walruses, and—particularly with regard to the Thule—whales in addition to fish. In terms of access to resources, the Thule eventually gained an economic and numerical advantage over the Dorset in their ability to exploit deep-water resources: They were skillful whale hunters and eventually overran the Dorset to extinction. The Dorset were, however, around to encounter the Vikings in their brief exploration of the Americas; some remains of their presence, in the form of carvings and other small items (as well as a settlement, L’Anse aux Meadows, in Newfoundland), may have been traded with these Arctic peoples. Likewise, the Thule were engaged in the long-distance trade and distribution of a limited number of copper and even iron objects (meteoric and terrestrial); they produced tools from these objects or, in the case of terrestrial iron, largely traded with the Norse for them.

**Mesoamérica**

Our picture of Mesoamerican economies between 400 and 1400, although more detailed than some other parts of the Americas, is far from clear. Although we can pinpoint the types of goods traded; differences between royal, elite, and commoner consumption; local and regional trade networks, mines, or quarries; and the various modes of subsistence (e.g., slash-and-burn agriculture, terracing, raised-field agriculture, and the other forms of irrigation that supported a maize-based agrarian lifestyle) that formed the economic backbones of societies like the Teotihuacanos or the Classic Maya, it is difficult to identify the methods of exchange within individual sites. That is to say, although there is much detail provided by the archaeological record on Mesoamerican economies, it is difficult to say how much control Mesoamerican rulers and their subordinates actually had over trade. Some scholars have suggested strong, centralized market exchange as the predominant mode of economic activity in ancient Mesoamerica, particularly within large cities such as Teotihuacán or Tenochtitlán. Others promote a looser model of exchange, with gift
giving and redistributive networks managed among locals—in such a model, the ruler might manage prestige goods while basic subsistence items were managed by elites and even commoners in different situations. There is probably no one model that fits a given civilization or situation, with combinations of centralized and decentralized economic activities likely being the norm in ancient Mesoamérica.

Furthermore, there is no one model for currency in Mesoamérica between 400–1400: Cacao (chocolate) beans and thin, copper axes were clearly used as currency by the Postclassic Period, depending upon their availability. Other goods, ranging from jaguar pelts to textile bundles to jade boulders, were bartered, gifted, sent as tribute, or otherwise combined with these currencies. By the tenth century, even gold and silver were being traded or otherwise exchanged—but not specifically as “currency.”

**The Teotihuacános (100 B.C.E. to 600 C.E.)**

Teotihuacán, being a vast, meticulously planned city, was the hub of economic activity in Central Mexico between 100 B.C.E and 600 C.E. In addition to the tremendous, daily flow of agricultural products into the city from the Valley of Mexico, Teotihuacán obtained clay for ceramics as well as salt from nearby Lake Texcoco. Somewhat further afield, to the north and east at Pachuca and Otumba, respectively, Teotihuacán imported obsidian for tool making. Teotihuacán also maintained political and economic ties with several civilizations to the south, east, west, and southeast, importing materials such as chocolate, cinnabar, cotton, feathers, incense, jade, onyx, feathers, and shell from the Maya area, for example. Such items were brought by merchants who may have lived in the eastern part of the site, an area dubbed the “Merchant’s Barrio” by archaeologists.

Teotihuacán was also home to hundreds of craft workshops, where goods were made for local consumption as well as export. Although many of the artisans who worked in these shops were local, it is clear that some were from various parts of the Mesoamerican world. Ethnic enclaves of peoples from West Mexico, the Gulf Coast, the Valley of Oaxaca, and possibly the Maya area have been identified at the site, providing evidence that Teotihuacán was a cosmopolitan place in its heyday.

Unfortunately, we do not know as much as we would like about the government at Teotihuacán, largely because there are few surviving written records. Nevertheless, it is clear that Teotihuacán was governed by kings living in palaces, and given the level of organization which would have been needed to design and maintain a city of this size (about one hundred twenty-five thousand people), it seems likely that rulers and their subordinates played more than just a minor role in administering the economy at Teotihuacán. At least one ruler, Spearthrower Owl, appears to have been involved in the conquest of several cities in the Maya area, installing rulers friendly to Central Mexico. In part, the motivations for this were almost certainly economic.

**The Maya (Classic [250 to 909] and Postclassic [909–1697] Periods)**

The many cities of the Maya Lowlands during the Classic and Postclassic Periods were never politically unified. Likewise, each of the cities was variable in its degree of centralized authority, making a universal image of the ancient Maya economy almost impossible to create. Like Teotihuacán, the major goods
being traded at Maya centers can be divided into two categories: prestige and utilitarian. Chocolate (cacao beans), feathers, jade, shell, sumptuous textiles, and other prestige goods were near-ubiquitous features of royal and/or elite consumption at Classic Maya centers, whereas utilitarian goods such as chert, cotton, foodstuffs, obsidian, salt, stone, and plainer textiles had a much wider distribution among the masses. In addition to trade, some of these goods were obtained through threat of force or force itself: Maya monuments show defeated or subordinate rulers bringing tribute, in the form of cacao beans or other items, to their new (and likely temporary) masters. Although the political situation for the Maya changed during the Postclassic, there is good evidence that all of these goods—and more—were imported and exported in large numbers.

Although certain goods, such as foodstuffs, were often obtained locally via intensive agriculture or hunting-gathering, many of these items—prestige and utilitarian—were traded at great distances. For example, the obsidian used at lowland Classic Maya sites came from several locations in highland Guatemala (El Chayal or Ixtepeque, for example) or even Central Mexico (Pachuca). Likewise, the major source of jade in all of Mesoamerica was the Motagua River Valley, on the present-day Guatemalan–Honduran border. As the material most prized by Mesoamerican rulers and elites, jade was one item that required extensive trade networks: Traded over land, sea, and rivers, jade was even exported out of the Maya area as far south as Lower Central America. During the Late Classic and especially the Postclassic, long-distance trade with this and other regions flourished, to the extent that gold and other nonlocal items filtered into the Maya economy. Perhaps the greatest Maya city of the Postclassic, Chichén Itzá, owed its florescence between about 750 and 1250 in part due to such long-distance trade: As the largest Maya city of its time, it was a major center for pilgrimage as well as a hub for the salt trade in Yucatán.

One of the great questions in Maya archaeology is, as mentioned above, whether site economies were highly centralized. One way to answer this question would be to further explore the degree of craft specialization at Classic and Postclassic sites. Workshops have not been encountered in great numbers at Maya sites, as they have been at Teotihuacán, in large part because archaeologists are only beginning to look at the mechanics of ancient Maya economies. This is a big gap in our knowledge of this civilization. Nevertheless, workshops have been occasionally found: Shops dedicated to the working of shell bone, jade, and obsidian are evident at the major Classic Maya city of Copan, for example. What such activity areas reveal is that the Maya, like the Teotihuacanos, were engaged in the production and consumption of goods for local consumption as well as export. Time will tell if this activity was heavily centralized, as is suspected for Teotihuacán, or decentralized, with Maya kings engaged primarily with the prestige economy and paying far less attention to the day-to-day trade of utilitarian items.

The Toltecs (950–1170) and the Aztecs (1345–1521)

Although the Toltecs were never as politically or economically powerful as their Teotihuacán predecessors, their capital—Tula—can be compared with Teotihuacán. Like that site, Tula had many workshops dedicated to the working of obsidian and stone as well as to the production of ceramics. Likewise, the Toltecs established long-distance trading relationships with other parts of Mesoamerica, including the Gulf Coast and Yucatán: The political and economic
fortunes of the Postclassic Maya site of Chichén Itzá, for example, seem to have been tied to events at Tula. In one economic respect, the Toltecs even surpassed the Teotihuacános: They appear to have traded with peoples well outside of Mesoamérica, from Lower Central America in the south to northern Mexico.

So great was their influence upon the material culture of Central Mexico at this time that their successors, the Aztecs, believed the Toltecs to have been superior craftsmen. The Aztecs often invoked the Toltecs when describing skilled workmanship; they believed the Toltecs were wealthy, wise traders and artisans; they attributed nearly all major scientific and technological discoveries to these ancient peoples. The reality is that the Toltecs created a small, likely tribute-based, empire comprising cities in the Basin of Mexico as well as several centers to the north. In 1400, the Toltecs were the civilization that many ethnic groups in the Basin, including the Mexica, aspired to be. The Aztec’s would soon create an even larger, tribute-based empire. Nearly every item of value in Mesoamérica, whether bought, sold, or brought as spoils of war, would find its way to the Aztec marketplace.

Lower Central America and the Andes

By 400, the peoples of Lower Central America had long been trading metals with peoples to the south; groups from Ecuador and Peru had independently invented metallurgy in the Americas, and such metals as gold or silver had become common in exchanges between the elites of these areas. Jade and other Mesoamerican goods likewise filtered into the chiefdoms of Lower Central America, who economically became intermediaries for coastal trade between the dense urban populations of that region and the Andes. Peoples from Lower Central America were at least in part (if not totally) responsible for the dissemination of metallurgy to Mesoamérica, for example, with the first gold reaching the Maya area around 600. By 1400, several places in Lower Central America, including villages in present-day Costa Rica and Panama, had become vital ports in a burgeoning, vast network of trade along the Pacific Coast. Cotton, tropical feathers, root crops, marine shell, medicinal plants, and other goods flowed in and out of these ports linking Mesoamérica, the Andes, and Amazonia in turn. Although direct contact between these distant regions was sporadic at its very best, Lower Central America was in many ways an economic hub through which indirect contact was possible.

The Andes, home to several urban civilizations between 400 and 1400, had previously seen the growth and development of an agrarian economy as well as an established elite class: the curaca. Economically, the curaca nobles fostered the development of several industries dedicated to the production of prestige goods, ranging from ceramics and textiles to gold, silver, and alloyed ornaments. Depending upon time and location, these intensive, agrarian economies were based on maize cultivation (similar to Mesoamérica), root crops such as potatoes, or a combination of both. All the societies discussed were characterized by compounds of artisans; workshops for the production of ceramics, for example, have been encountered at many Andean sites.

Moche (200–600 C.E.) and Nazca (200 B.C.E.–650 C.E.)

The Moche culture, often regarded as the first true state of South America, produced some of the most ornate, detailed pottery and metalworking in the
Americas. Whole mud-brick compounds at Moche sites, sometimes housing large, extended families, were dedicated to the production of high-quality ceramics: For example, stirrup-spouted drinking vessels, decorated with historical and mythological events, were produced using moulds and presented to curaca nobles on a massive scale. Other compounds were home to master gold-smiths: Metallurgy was well developed in the Moche world, and metallurgists cast objects and produced alloys of gold, copper, and silver using a variety of techniques. Somewhat less-prestigious workshops were dedicated to the production of mud-bricks, used in the construction of temples and other buildings on the north coast of Peru. Some archaeologists believe that these bricks were produced as part of a labor tax exacted by the curaca nobles.

The nature of the Moche political system, as it related to the economy and economic control, is unclear. However, the Moche were certainly players in a vast trade network stretching from Chile to Ecuador: Lapis lazuli from Chile and spiny oyster shells from Ecuador have been recovered at Moche sites. The natural disasters of the sixth century temporarily disrupted these trade networks, although some remnants of Moche society—and these networks—continued to exist until the eighth century.

Unfortunately, the Nazca economy is somewhat difficult to describe. As a cluster of dispersed farming communities, the Nazca seem to have been ceremonially unified around the pilgrimage center of Cahuachi; the economic role of Cahuachi in Nazca life is not well understood. The Nazca did have a developed craft industry, however: Nazca textiles and ceramics were among the most colorful and iconographically abstract goods produced on the Pacific Coast of South America. In the seventh century, Nazca society may have coalesced into a larger political unit; certainly this would have brought with it no small measure of economic change. Unfortunately, the region was invaded by another rising civilization, Wari, and Nazca civilization ceased to exist as an independent entity (see Nazca Lines).

Tiwanaku (650–1000), Chimor (1000–1476), and the Birth of the Inca (1300–1532)

Tiwanaku and its rival, Wari, mark the beginning of empire in the Andes. In many ways, Chimor represents its refinement before the eventual conquest of all of these regions by the Inca in the late fifteenth century. Unfortunately, the absence of written records for all three, and the degree to which the Inca purposefully destroyed Chimor, has made understanding the political nature of these empires difficult. Archaeologists are divided as to the degree of control exerted by the rulers of Tiwanaku, Wari, and Chimor. Some see Tiwanaku, for example, as a loose confederation of curaca families, ethnic groups, and lineages; others see a distinct hierarchy, with a strong central government at Tiwanaku. Of course, such differences have major implications for the ways in which Andean economies worked during these periods. Each had colonies and client-cities, networks of roads linking cities politically and economically, and llama caravans to facilitate exchange. Tiwanaku and Chimor are the best understood of the three Andean empires prior to the Inca.

One of the reasons why Tiwanaku remained powerful for so long is that it was able to control many of the Andean grazing lands for llamas and alpacas. Llamas were the only domesticated animal in the Americas able to carry heavy loads, whereas alpacas provided fibers for textile production. Control over
land able to support these populations enabled the Tiwanaku curaca to economically dominate other peoples. Another factor contributing to the power of Tiwanaku was its multivariate approach to empire. Some regions were incorporated directly into the empire, with territories annexed, villages conquered, people resettled, and tribute exacted, whereas others were allowed to remain semiautonomous, so long as they supported the state with economic resources or fulfilled other obligations as needed. Likewise, the Tiwanaku state actively supported the colonization of areas with important economic resources. Unfortunately, climate change—a prolonged dry period—seems to have severely affected their agricultural resources and they, in addition to Wari, started to collapse around 1000.

Chimor, from its capital Chan Chan in the Moche Valley, was an even larger state, extending more than 600 miles along the northern coast of Peru. The city center of Chan Chan alone was over 2 square miles, with skilled weavers, metalworkers, woodcarvers, potters, and other craftsmen living in apartment compounds. At almost thirty-thousand people, the city was the political and economic hub of a vast empire surpassed only by the Inca, who conquered it in 1470. The rural and the urban inhabitants of Chimor were economically specialized: Workshops have been found in both settings, and it is clear that the empire was able to muster resources from the Pacific Coast and the Andes. By comparison, the Inca of 1400 were provincial; they had just renovated their capital of Cuzco, from which they would soon launch a military conquest of the Andean world.

Amazonia and the Caribbean

By 400, one diaspora of Arawak-speaking peoples had occupied a stretch of territory ranging from modern-day Venezuela to the Caribbean islands. These peoples were agriculturalists living in densely populated villages ruled by chiefs; these chiefdoms had existed for quite some time, perhaps as early as 1000 B.C.E. The social and economic networks that these chiefdoms participated in stretched across northern South America and, after 500 B.C.E., into the Greater Antilles. Those who lived on islands in the Caribbean seem to have had some contact with the Maya: Mesoamerican-style ball courts appear in a great range over the Caribbean, with one as far north as Puerto Rico (see Ballgame). Although it is not known what else may have been traded between these areas, there was almost certainly some economic exchange.

As for Amazonia, large, densely populated villages were in the process of being established in 400 C.E.; antecedents to these did exist, most notably in Ecuador and Bolivia, but settlements in vast numbers only began to emerge between 400 and 1000. The founding of these settlements seems to have been accompanied by the growth of long-distance trade networks: There is some evidence for metals, ceramics, precious stones (amethyst), gold, ceremonial axe heads, and other items moving between areas as distant as the Amazon estuary and the Peruvian border during this era. Some of the best evidence supporting regular contact between regions of Amazonia comes from a wide distribution of many ceramic traits: The tradition known as Amazonian Polychrome, for example, stretches over much of this region. Some of the earliest evidence for this style comes from the precocious site of Marajó Island (400–1300).

Unfortunately, it is quite possible that much of what was traded between these regions between 400 and 1400 did not survive. Accounts from the early colonial period, for example, point to economic activity centered on goods
such as tropical feathers, salt, animal pelts, and medicinal plants, all of which would be almost impossible to recover from the archaeological record. Their absence, combined with poor conditions for preservation and lack of archaeological data, makes reconstructing what was traded and how it moved about the landscape difficult. However, growing interest in sites like Marajó Island, where mounds were built and used between 600 and 1300, is starting to change our image of Amazonian prehistory, and with it the political systems present in the region. As these sites gain more attention, the economic picture will slowly come into focus.

Further Reading

4. THE ARTS

The millennium preceding the Spanish Conquest and the first permanent European settlements in the Americas (c. 1492–1600) saw the rise and fall of several major civilizations. Artistic achievements, in the forms of stone sculpture,
painting, and several other media, too reached new heights in this period. The
cultures that existed between 400 and 1400 inherited a rich legacy of earlier
civilizations, such as the Adena-Hopewell of the American Southeast, the Olmec
of southern Mexico (1200–300 B.C.E.), or the Chavín culture of Andean South
America (1200–200 B.C.E.). As societies in the Americas became more complex,
with chiefdoms, city-states, and even empires forming in different regions, the
demand for large public monuments, mural paintings, or other great works of
art grew. Likewise, this complexity allowed for the production of portable
goods, the raw materials of which were often transported over great distances.
These works were often used to convey and to support elite claims to super-
natural authority, royal lineage, and even divinity. Likewise, many of the por-
table objects that one might consider art had sacred or political associations to
the groups who produced them; in many cases, such objects would not have
been separated according to these categories. To understand the arts of this era,
we will look at the works of the dominant civilizations of this period and
at the various media used by the peoples of the Americas before Columbus,
collectively known as the Pre-Columbian era.

**Eastern Woodlands and the Great Plains**

In the years prior to 400 C.E., the Mississippi and Ohio Valleys had been
home to the Adena and Hopewell cultures, societies whose burial mounds,
rich ceremonial life, and production of visually stunning artifacts—typically
crafted of materials from exotic origins—had become a fixture in eastern North
America. The decline of these activities around 400 C.E. was accompanied by
an increase in warfare and the formation of ever-increasingly more complex
political groups, until by 1000 powerful chiefdoms had emerged at places like
Cahokia, Illinois, and Moundville, Alabama. Archaeologists deem the era
between 1000 and the fifteenth century the Mississippian Period an era of
unprecedented urban construction in a region stretching from Oklahoma to
portions of the Atlantic Coast. Towns literally erupted from the landscape,
with massive burial earthworks and a resurgence of aesthetically pleasing por-
table objects—largely produced from nonlocal materials—serving as testament
to the power of the new chiefdoms, collectively called the “Mississippians.”
The largest of the mounds were enormous earthen pyramids, with Monk’s
Mound at Cahokia being the best example: About 100 feet high, it alone cov-
ered 13.8 acres and was one of the largest structures in the Pre-Columbian
world.

The most precious of the portable objects were usually interred with de-
ceased elites, including objects from rare or high-status materials such as sea-
shell and copper. Stylistically, such items were often decorated with a common
set of motifs, termed the **Southern Cult** or Southeastern Ceremonial complex:
Weeping eyes, birds, warriors, crossed objects, and cosmic imagery are the
primary characteristics of this widespread art style. Carved artifacts of stone
or, more commonly, wood have also been found in burial contexts and usually
deal with ancestors and warriors as their primary subject matter. Overall, the
idea seems to have been to reinforce the position of elites within Mississippian
society, and although such items occur throughout the era, they are most com-
mon in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, after which time the region
went into decline. Further resurgences were to occur within the Southeast in the years before European colonization.

As in the Southeast, the years between 400 and 1000 in the Great Plains saw the emergence of villages alongside—and sometimes in combination with—traditional nomadic society. Mounds and other earthworks were also produced in this region; prestigious portable art took the form of carved marine shells, obsidian artifacts, and pottery designs that—like the earthworks—demonstrated an exchange of ideas with the societies of the Southeast. A shift toward larger-scale architecture took place after 1000, when large lodges, walls, and ditches became characteristic of large agricultural settlements, which flourished into the fifteenth century.

American Southwest

The Hohokam (750–1450)

Although the roots of urbanism in the Southwest date back to about 1000 B.C.E. and agriculture far earlier—the Hohokam culture provides one of the most famous, and best-defined examples of Southwest art and architecture for the 1,000-year period between 400 and 1400. From the earliest settlements around 700 to the general abandonment of their sites by 1450, the Hohokam imported a variety of goods from outside the Southwest, including copper bells from Mesoamérica and shell from the Pacific Coast. They were skilled at working this exotic shell, as well as local clay, into a variety of figurines and etched ornaments with human and animal motifs. Unlike the Southeast, however, exotic artifacts do not appear to have been restricted to elites and were generally ceremonially used. The contacts that the Hohokam had with other areas of the Pre-Columbian world resulted in some surprising architecture: In addition to the characteristic settlement pattern of adobe platforms and mounds surrounding central plazas, the Hohokam appear to have imported the ballgame—and, correspondingly, ball courts—from Mesoamérica. Round, semisubterranean ball courts are hallmarks of early Hohokam culture, from about 700 to 1150, with the last falling into disuse about 100 years later. From this point, Hohokam society becomes somewhat more hierarchical, a factor that translates into larger and more centralized architecture until the demise of the Hohokam settlements around 1450.

Ancestral Pueblo (750–1450)

The peoples collectively termed “Ancestral Puebloan” comprise several distinct cultures and eras on the Colorado Plateau, although the majority are linked by, among other characteristics, a distinctive style of art and architecture. By 400 C.E., pottery and small settlements had become widespread in this portion of the Southwest; this led to the development of the first major villages here by 750 and the birth of what is called the “Pueblo I” (750–950) period. One of the hallmarks of this period is the spread of a now-familiar art style on pottery consisting of white- and black-painted geometric designs. Swirls and stepped designs were also common, as were regional variations in style. Pueblo II (950–1150) saw further cultural change in the region, most notably the rise and fall of what is called the “Chaco Phenomenon”: This was the sudden development of masonry architecture and huge settlements in Chaco Canyon, including four-story buildings containing several hundred rooms at sites like
Pueblo Bonito. Portable art in this era took the form of turquoise beads and pendants, ceramic vessels, and wooden objects. By 1150, the production of these objects in Chaco Canyon had all but ceased, and the center of Ancestral Puebloan society had moved northwards; Pueblo III (1150–1300) saw the continuation of Southwest ceramic styles and the development of the cliff-dwelling architecture for which this region is so famous today.

By Pueblo IV (1300–1500), settlements had once again moved to the areas around the Rio Grande and Little Colorado rivers. Architecturally, they were much larger than earlier settlements, with individual pueblos ranging from several hundred to over a thousand rooms. Artistically, the Pueblo IV peoples used more sophisticated pottery techniques than their ancestors, with lead glaze and polychrome vessel technology becoming ever more important. Black-and-white pottery gave way to multicolored geometric designs with religious and agricultural associations, the descendents of which can be seen today in pottery from the Southwest. Although Pueblo IV was a golden era for ceramic art, this period saw a gradual decline in population and the migration of Plains and other groups into the area. Thus this art style, called “Salado polychrome,” may have masked greater social problems for the Ancestral Puebloan peoples that would have clearly been evident in 1400.

Pacific Coast and Arctic

Societies of the Pacific Coast are often associated with a specific art style including painted totem poles and other large, carved wooden objects. However, it is today unclear whether this specific style predates 1700, when metal tools were first introduced into the region. What is clear is that peoples of the Pacific Northwest between 400 and 1400 had a rich tradition of woodcarving and wooden architecture, particularly in the form of plank houses set in rows upon the shorelines. Stone lip and cheek plugs appear to have been common body decorations throughout this period of history, as well as small portable objects of copper, obsidian, jade, shell, and even iron. The discovery of the famous site of Ozette (dating to c. 1400–1500), Washington, with its well-preserved wooden tools, bowls, boxes, and clubs, as well as basketry, indicates the degree to which poor preservation has played a role in history of art in this region.

Much of the art of the Arctic is characteristically functional as well as aesthetically pleasing. Stretching in a band from Alaska to Greenland, the Arctic and sub-Arctic peoples of the Americas are unsurprisingly varied in art styles, and were subject to a variety of influences from their southern neighbors. Two of the dominant cultures of the Arctic between 400 and 1000 were the Dorset and Thule. The Dorset, who were dominant in the Arctic between 500 B.C.E. and 1000 C.E., created beautiful harpoons, needles, and figurines of walrus ivory, antler, and bone; their houses were of snow blocks, stone, or bone depending upon the region. The Thule, who became dominant after 1000, were proficient whale hunters. This had a corresponding effect on their art and architecture, which included whale bone as an artistic medium and a household building block. By way of Greenland, both cultures came into contact with the Norse in their brief foray into the Americas around 1000; art from this period includes carvings of Norse as well as Norse artifacts of wood and iron at Dorset and Thule sites. The Norse had no lasting effect on either of these peoples,
however; life would change dramatically, however, with the advent of Euro-
pean exploration in the sixteenth century.

**Mesoamérica**

The area known as Mesoamérica, as defined in the Historical Overview, 
comprises a cultural and geographic region extending from what is today 
southern Mexico (roughly the state of Jalisco, Mexico) to northwestern Hon-
duras. In addition to several social and political traits common to this region 
in Pre-Columbian times, Mesoamérica was characterized by similarities in ar-
chitecture and art. Nearly all of the most powerful civilizations—including but 
not limited to Teotihuacán, Classic Maya, Toltec, and Aztec—produced stepped 
pyramids decorated in painted plaster (traditionally red or a combination of 
colors), had the corbelled vault or false arch, erected large stone monuments 
bearing the portraits and deeds of rulers. Most created specialized buildings 
such as palaces, sweat baths, and ball courts as well (see “Society” section).

Portable art often took the forms of clay figurines and decorated ceramic 
vessels as well as objects composed of shell, feathers, bone, wood, and stone. 
Perhaps the most valuable portable object in Mesoamérica, one that could be 
found only around the Motagua River Valley in Honduras, was jade. Prized 
greater than any other substance, jade was the material most associated with 
high political or religious office in all Mesoamerican societies; it was so prized 
that similar greenstones, such as serpentine or other imitations, were often used 
as substitutes when jade was unavailable or unattainable. Carved into figurines, 
ear-flares (a type of plug earring), pendants, plaques, beads, flowers, and even 
animals, jade was first among several highly prized portable goods used in 
Mesoamerican art and ritual. Others included feathers from prized birds like 
the quetzal and macaw, Spondylus (spiny oyster) shells from the coast, and 
obsidian (volcanic glass) from the mountainous highlands of Mesoamérica.

**The Teotihuacanos (100 B.C.E. to 600 C.E.)**

Having prized feathers, jade, and obsidian in abundance, it is no wonder 
that the indigenous peoples of Guatemala had drawn the attention of outsid-
ers. The most powerful state at the beginning of the fifth century was, and had 
been since the first century C.E., **Teotihuacán** (the people who settled in this 
city are known to archaeologists as Teotihuacanos). This single megalopolis in 
Central Mexico had a great impact on Mesoamerican civilization as well as art. 
Through a program of invasion and aggressive cultural domination, it had 
spread its influence to the tropical and highland regions of Guatemala (see 
“Society” section) by 400 C.E.; the influence was not only social and political 
but also artistic. A militaristic art style born of this domination, characterized 
by pictorial representations of gods, uniforms, and even weapons, would be 
felt well after its collapse around 600. In fact, we find elements of this Teoti-
huacán style in Mesoamérica stretching all the way to 1400.

What was this art style like? The site of Teotihuacán had a rich artistic tradi-
tion as represented by mural painting and portable stonework, particularly 
with regard to life-sized stone burial masks. Like several Mesoamerican peo-
pies, the Teotihuacanos constructed a city filled not only with low-lying do-
mestic buildings but also magnificent temples, stepped pyramids, and murals 
dedicated to their deities (including an enigmatic "Goddess" figure). Painted in
a variety of colors and adorned with sculptures of deities, these pyramids are some of the most spectacular examples of Pre-Columbian architecture; their form is called the “talud-tablero” style, where a succession of slanting walls are interrupted by flat platforms. The most noteworthy example of this architectural style, the Pyramid of the Sun, was constructed in tiers of adobe, soil, and rubble faced with smooth stone. At 70 meters in height and containing approximately 1,000,000 cubic meters of rubble fill, it was—until late in the Industrial Revolution—the largest structure in the New World. The talud-tablero architectural style was frequently replicated at sites that Teotihuacán conquered or came into contact with; it was also occasionally imitated by peoples who held the Teotihuacános and their civilization in awe.

The Maya (Classic [250–909] and Postclassic [909–1697] Periods)

However, much “Teotihuacán style” art comes to us not from Teotihuacán itself, but from the places and peoples it conquered or came into contact with. As mentioned in the “Historical Overview,” above, in 378 C.E. the Teotihuacános had swept into the tropical lowlands of Guatemala and established new dynasties at sites originally dominated by the Lowland or Classic Maya (250–909), a people with local roots stretching far back into what is today called the “Preclassic Period” (2000 B.C.E. to 250 C.E.). Although ethnically, we know that these Maya quickly absorbed their would-be conquerors through intermarriage, culturally the impact of Teotihuacán remained quite strong. In their art, Classic Maya rulers within their numerous city-states sought to emulate the dress and overwhelmingly militaristic appearance of the Teotihuacános, to the point where “Teotihuacán style” art became synonymous with the art of a strong, powerful, legitimate Maya ruler. As a result, talud-tablero architecture was popular in the fifth century C.E., alongside more traditional stepped forms of construction.

Despite a rich artistic tradition in nearly all media, from carved bone and jade to ceramics bearing historical as well as mythological tales and images, the best-known feature of Maya art is perhaps its monumental sculpture. Usually taking the form of square or circular altars paired with large stone monoliths called “stelae,” the Maya sculptural tradition has been lauded as one of the great cultural achievements of Pre-Columbian Latin America (see Stela). Although not the first civilization to produce similar monuments in Mesoamérica (the earliest stelae date from the Preclassic period), the Classic Maya took depictions of the human form as well as three-dimensional sculpture to their height between 250 and 850.

Apart from visual depictions of rulers, daily life in the royal court, religious ceremonies, and warfare, Classic Maya monuments often bear hieroglyphic inscriptions. Although the Maya probably did not invent written language on their own, borrowing concepts, style, and imagery from earlier peoples such as the Olmecs or geographic neighbors such as the Zapotecs of the Valley of Oaxaca (500 B.C.E. to 700 C.E.), they did create the most elaborate and sophisticated writing system the Pre-Columbian world would ever see. The writing system, designed as means of conveying information as well as an art form, was well-developed by the time the Teotihuacános “arrived” in Mesoamérica. So too was the general format of the stela and the altar, which usually display a central figure—a semidivine ruler or k’uhul ajaw “holy lord”—as well as subordinates or war captives. Any texts would either surround these figures or be placed on stelae sides and backs.
Tikal Stela 31, recording the victory of Teotihuacános over the native Maya king, is an example of the fusion of Teotihuacán and Maya elements. Framing the Maya hieroglyphic inscriptions are warriors dressed in the typical style of Teotihuacán warriors from Central Mexico: They wear scaled, feathered helmets, carry spear-throwers (otherwise known as *atlatl*) and use square shields bearing the image of a god with “goggle-eyes” known to us as *Tlaloc*, a rain-fertility deity worshipped in many parts of Mesoamérica. We find this basic dress, carved into stone monuments or painted on ceramics and other media, persisting on monuments throughout the Maya lowlands well into the eighth century C.E. despite the collapse of Teotihuacán itself in 600.

As mentioned in the Historical Overview, Classic Maya civilization not only survived the Teotihuacán invasion but also thrived for over 600 years. During this time, stelae and other stone monuments were erected to coincide with significant astronomical, calendrical, or historical dates. Due to the efforts of countless scholars, approximately 80 percent of all of the Maya hieroglyphics, or glyphs, can now be read. Accessions, deaths, anniversaries of conquests, and even birthdays were recorded and set within a visual program on Classic Maya monuments. Several different calendars set to the solar year, lunar year, or other astronomical cycles were also kept. Among these was a Long Count or tally of the days elapsed since the creation of the Maya, believed to have occurred in the year 3114 B.C.E. (see *Mesoamerican Calendar*). We now know that these dates framed a text fully capable of recording names, actions, places, and other events. Each glyph was composed of several parts, some more pictorial than others but standing for words and sounds in the Maya language. One has only to look at the Maya inscriptions to see the artistry and technical skill required to produce them in stone. They were meant to be artistically complex, for they were created by and for a small elite population at each site. Rulers wanted their monuments—and the writing on them—to impress potential rivals and neighbors visiting from other sites. At the same, they wanted to restrict the knowledge and information conveyed by their political artwork to a small elite class within their cities. Mass literacy was not a priority, a condition similar to that existing in medieval Europe in the first millennium C.E.

The subject matter found on Maya monuments was not, of course, restricted to stelae or altars. Decorated ceramic vessels, such as drinking bowls (for chocolate) or serving dishes, could—in addition to patterns—bear hieroglyphics or even scenes from Classic Maya mythology and history. The most elaborate of these, termed “codex-style” vessels, bore creatures and figures that would, over the next 1,000 years, continue to be found in Maya creation stories and historical narratives. In addition to ceramics, nearly every possible form of media was used for artistic expression among the Classic Maya. One of the most popular forms, particularly in the final century before the Maya collapse in the ninth and tenth centuries C.E., was that of mural painting: The scenes of battle, torture, and human sacrifice on the murals of Bonampak are among the most famous paintings in the Pre-Columbian world. Thematically, most of the Late Classic (600–909) murals deal with war as a central theme, a condition paralleled by similar grisly scenes on stelae from this time period. In spite of the increased warfare and elite competition characteristic of the Late Classic, however, it is clear that many of the finest examples of Maya art come from this darker era of lowland history.
Not surprisingly, several of these works—including the Bonampak murals—were never finished. As the Classic Maya sites were abandoned and left to the forest, other Postclassic (909–1697) Maya centers grew and changed in what is today highland Guatemala and northern Yucatán, Mexico; they demonstrate increased social, political, religious, and artistic interaction with other parts of Mesoamérica, particularly with Central Mexico. Sites like Chichén Itzá, Yucatán (1000–1200), with its stepped pyramids, ball courts, and chacmools (reclining figures designed for ritual offerings), continued the trajectory of Maya art and civilization, albeit in a more cosmopolitan way. But the focus on the semidivine k’uhul ajaw was broken, and no more stelae were to be erected. Powerful civilizations and correspondingly foreign art styles were to make their way into the Maya area from other locations: The Toltecs, and subsequently the Aztecs, were to leave an indelible mark on Mesoamérica over the next 500 years.

The Toltecs (950–1170) and the Aztecs (1345–1521)

The two major civilizations that followed in the highlands of Central Mexico, the Toltecs (950–1170) and the Aztecs (1345–1521), were among the most powerful and centrally organized states Latin America had ever seen. Both descended from northwest Mexico upon the peoples of southern Mesoamérica and embarked upon waves of conquest, and both blended elements of their own culture with those of subject peoples; in particular, native gods such as Tlaloc and Quetzalcoatl joined a pantheon of “foreign” deities in Toltec and Aztec art. The Toltecs, for their part, appear to have taken the preexisting practice of human sacrifice in Mesoamérica to new extremes as well as played a role in the hybridization of Mexican and Maya culture in northern Yucatán, particularly at the site of Chichén Itzá. Art from this period thus reflects these changes, with low-relief carvings and stylized representations of gods, captives, and warriors—arranged in columns—the dominant attributes at the Toltec capitol of Tula and the Toltec-Maya city of Chichén Itzá. From the founding of Tula in 950 to its destruction by Chichimecs (a Nahuatl word for “barbarians”) in 1170, however, the era of Toltec dominance was relatively short-lived. The “idea” of Toltec art, however, survived until the Conquest.

The major reason why Toltec art was and continues to be well known in Mesoamérica is because the Aztecs, one of several Chichimec populations that moved into Central Mexico around 1345, popularized—and likely overrepresented—their accomplishments. According to the Aztecs, the Toltecs had been proficient feather workers, lapidaries, and metal smiths. They had perfected mining, painting, agriculture, and textile production and had even invented medicine. For the Aztecs, “the true artist works like a true Toltec” and “the good painter is a Toltec, he creates with red and black ink.” Being foreigners surrounded by preexisting, well-established subject peoples, the Aztecs felt the need to identify themselves with the “glorious” Toltec past: They saw themselves as continuing an ancient, well-established (yet ultimately foreign) tradition in southern Mesoamérica. All good art was “Toltec” art.

In reality, the various peoples who made up the Aztec empire, particularly the Mixtecs of Oaxaca, surpassed the artistic accomplishments of the Toltecs, much as the Aztecs themselves exceeded the Toltecs in social, political, and economic complexity.

In terms of monumental art and architecture, Aztec artists excelled in the construction of massive, stepped pyramids and the carving of statues dedicated
to gods such as Huitzilopochtli, Tlaloc, and Quetzalcoatl. Large “public” art designed around a militaristic state ideology, particularly with respect to the taking and sacrifice of captives on a scale unequalled in the Americas, was reflected in stucco, paint, and stone throughout the empire. Its tribute-based economy saw a constant flow of gold, cotton, turquoise, and feathers—as well as finished goods—into its primary cities. Some of the most famous, portable Aztec art was actually designed as tribute: The Mixtecs of Oaxaca, for example, produced polychrome pottery and were experts in the production of textiles, gold jewelry, and objects of jade, onyx, shell, and stone. When the Spanish brought the Aztec empire to an abrupt end in 1521, production of these goods largely ceased, and new art forms—born of a blend of Spanish and Pre-Hispanic cultures—made their way into the Mesoamerican world.

Lower Central America and the Andes

Between 400 and 1400, art in Lower Central America, also called the “Intermediate Area,” took the form of portable objects designed for display, trade, and grave offerings. Although the peoples of this region did not, for the most part, engage in the production of stone sculpture or massive architecture as compared to their northern and southern neighbors, metalworking—a limited practice in Mesoamerica until 900—was a major art form. Elaborate status objects, particularly gold figurines and plaques, were a major component of burials at sites such as Rivas (900–1300), a Chiriquí site on the Pacific Coast of Costa Rica. Unfortunately, the use of gold and other precious metals within Pre-Columbian chiefdoms in Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, and Colombia had a direct impact not only on the excesses of Spanish colonization, but also on the integrity of local archaeological sites as well: Much of the art of this region can now be found only on the black market and in private collections.

The technology used to produce these gold objects was, by 400, quite ancient and of Andean origin. The working of gold, silver, and copper—and the combination of these into dazzling alloys—had begun during a period known as the Early Horizon (400–200 B.C.E.); prefabricated sheets of gold and other alloys were being shaped into three-dimensional art in places such as Chavín de Huantar long before the birth of the first empires of the Americas. From 400 to 1400, the Andes witnessed the rise and/or fall of several major civilizations—including the Moche, Nasca, Tiwanaku, and Chimor—as well as the foundation of the capital of that most famous Andean civilization, the Inca, in 1300. Architecturally, all of these civilizations produced massive temple-pyramids, palaces, or other public works. Artistically, each was influenced by preceding civilizations and took several common forms: polychrome painted ceramics, multicolored textiles, and a dazzling array of metal goods. Smiths mastered the techniques of gilding and making alloys and were even able to cast gold using molds as well as a technique called the “lost-wax” method. Perhaps the most famous alloy in use within the Andes was known as tumbaga and was an alloy of gold and copper.

Moche (200–600 C.E.) and Nazca (200 B.C.E.–650 C.E.)

The Moche culture of northern Peru produced one of the most well known art styles in the Pre-Columbian world. Like the Classic Maya and several other peoples of Mesoamerica, art in the Moche world was in the hands of the elite;
by 400 this style was well developed and had taken form in the painted ceramics and stuccoed temple-pyramids of sites such as Moche and Sipán along the north coast of Peru. Supernatural beings, human-supernatural composites, warriors, rulers, and captives feature prominently on spouted, globular bottles.

Thematically, the scenes on these ceramics deal with the taking of war captives, their nude humiliation, and their ritual sacrifice. Moche ceramics are famous for their graphic depiction of this latter practice, including scenes of throat cutting, blood collecting, and ritualized dismemberment in a motif commonly known as the “Presentation Theme.” This blood sacrifice was, despite its humiliating aspects, considered to be an honorable death and commemo-rated as such in Moche art.

The graphic aspects of this art style played out on Moche temple-pyramids, which were designed as spaces for similar public rituals. Large earthen temples such as the *Huaca del Sol* (Temple of the Sun) and *Huaca de la Luna* (Temple of the Moon) at the site of Moche were, on one level, mortuary complexes where the Moche elites buried their dead; on the other, they were vibrantly stuccoed and painted buildings that were the scenes of elite display as well as human sacrifice. Mural paintings and stucco friezes from the Moche area display spider-like supernatural creatures, parades of war captives, and images of the Moche rulers.

Unlike the realistic portrayals of humans and graphic depictions of violence, the art of the Nazca, a people who existed on the south coast of Peru at approximately the same time as the Moche, is relatively abstract. For the most part, Nazca architecture was modest by comparison, consisting mainly of plazas and low-lying platforms punctuated by small mounds; the one exception occurs at the site of Cuachi, where a temple-pyramid analogous to others found in the Andes has recently come to light. Portable art in the Nazca area takes the form of painted ceramic vessels and rich textiles preserved by the hot, dry climate; images of plants, animals, people, and supernatural creatures are commonplace on these media but are rarely shown in any kind of scene or narrative like those featured in Moche art. Perhaps the most famous Nazca art, however, is not portable: The so-called *Nazca lines* or geoglyphs are lines and figures created in the desert plains by removing darker surface rocks to expose a lighter layer of rock beneath. There are over 600 miles of lines and upwards of three-hundred figures of animals, plants, humans, and geometric designs. Why these were initially created, other than for aesthetic purposes, remains a mystery.

**Tiwanaku (650–1000), Chimor (1000–1476), and the Birth of the Inca (1300–1532)**

Tiwanaku was one of the first great empires of the Andes and based along the Bolivian shores of Lake Titicaca. One of its distinguishing features, particularly with regard to its northern rival, *Wari*, was its lavish use of monumental stone architecture, well-cut masonry, and large stelae and lintels bearing the portraits of rulers or deities. Its capital of the same name bears the largest platform mound in the southern Andes, with a sunken ceremonial court, stone gates, and stelae reminiscent of similar arrangements in Classic (250–850) and Postclassic (850–1500) Mesoamérica. The most lavish gateway at Tiwanaku is known as the Gateway of the Sun and bears a portrait of a ray-headed deity holding two ceremonial scepters. This deity, known as the *Staff God*, appears
at Chavín de Huantar by the third century B.C.E., indicating a very old—if not unchanged—religious tradition in the Andes.

These ties with the past are represented in the art and architecture of the last great civilizations of the Andes, Chimor, and Inca. Arising from the ashes of Moche civilization around 900, Chimor civilization was based at the metropolis of Chan Chan in the Moche Valley, Peru; by 1450 Chimor controlled over 600 miles of the Pacific coast and ranged from southern Ecuador to the middle of Peru. Although known primarily for their political exploits as well as their defeat by and subsequent incorporation into the Inca empire in 1476, the Chimor were also skilled weavers, architects, and metal smiths, creating mud-brick cities with royal palaces, temples, warehouses, and storehouses. Textiles, ceramics, and even wood carvings depict these centers and other aspects of elite life in the years preceding the Incan conquest. Some of the best-preserved art by the Chimor is found in the walls of elite house compounds: One adobe frieze shows fish, aquatic birds, mythical creatures, and other watery elements indicating a local emphasis on the resources of the sea. Such was the prelude to the growth and development of the largest empire of the Americas, the Inca Empire, whose art and architecture would incorporate the themes and motifs of these earlier civilizations. But in 1400, the Inca were simply one of many groups vying for power in what is today Peru, and their art was largely indistinguishable from that of Chimor.

Amazonia and the Caribbean

As related in the Historical Context, Amazonia has long been relegated to the backwaters of archaeology; as a result, its societies and the art they produced are only beginning to be recognized and analyzed in a systematic way. Although it is a vast region, ceramic art from Amazonia is remarkably uniform, with only a few basic ceramic styles dominating the entire region; this is testament to the contacts and ties different groups had with one another. Other art from this vast area is more regionalized and includes objects of shell, semiprecious stones, and metal.

By 400, densely populated settlements had begun to appear along many of the chief rivers in Amazonia. Marajó Island, in the Amazon estuary, is perhaps the best-known of these, with the earliest expression of the Amazonian Polychrome Tradition, a pottery style associated with burial urns and characterized by painted and/or modeled anthropomorphic and geometric designs. Another pottery style, Konduri, was popular between 400 and 1400, and associated with animal forms and modeled designs; it was largely associated with peoples between the Orinoco and Amazon rivers. Architecturally, the Amazonian settlements between 400 and 1400 were associated with earthen mounds (and some stone works), platforms, and plazas; the largest sites, such as Santa-rem, on the Tapajós River, appear to have been organized as urban centers in some ways similar to Cahokia or Chimor.

Likewise, some similarities can be seen between the art and architecture of the Caribbean, with whom peoples of coastal Amazonia share common ancestry, and other societies of the Americas. Between 400 and 1400, the Caribbean was home to—among other groups—various Arawak-speaking peoples. Arawak (Taino) sites such as Caguana and En bas Saline have yielded evidence
of plazas, public architecture, and even ball courts, suggesting that the world before 1400—including the artistic one—was interconnected as part of a greater world system.

Further Reading

5. SOCIETY

One cannot draw a general picture for the different societies of the Americas between 400 and 1400. The sheer variety of societal types is staggering: North America and South America were characterized by hunter-gatherers, societies ruled by chiefs (chiefdoms), city-states, and even empires during this time period. All regions of the Americas had had two or more of these types at once, with the lone exception being societies of the far north such as the Dorset or the Thule. Some parts of the Americas were clearly more urban than others, however, with the densest populations before the period of European contact.
being in Mesoamérica and the Andes. In these regions, hunter-gatherers had all but disappeared by 1400. Both had been dominated by succession of empires and city-states, with those of the Aztecs and the Incas being the last and the most famous.

**Eastern Woodlands and the Great Plains**

Prior to 400, the Eastern Woodlands and Great Plains had been home to an array of groups living in seasonal as well as semipermanent—though isolated and dispersed—camps and settlements. Engaging in mound-building and trading with far-flung peoples in places such as the Gulf Coast or the Great Lakes, groups in this region were relying more and more upon farmed cultigens as their populations increased. The Late Woodland Period (400–1000) saw the growth of permanent villages and, particularly toward its end, the development of chiefdoms and densely populated centers. As related in other sections, however, these transitions were accompanied by the growth of communal tensions that often became violent conflicts. Warfare throughout this region was accompanied, not surprisingly, by a decline in mound-building and long-distance trade by 400 that would last until the end of the first millennium.

Early Late Woodland settlements were characterized by several houses circling centralized open areas; these shared spaces, oftentimes filled with posts or large buildings, are similar to the plaza arrangements common in later societies of the Americas, including the Mississippians and most Mesoamerican civilizations. These were not permanent villages, however: Most farms were occupied for about 8 to 10 years by twenty to thirty individuals. Exceptions to this general rule—as well as the resurgence of mound-building—become more and more common between 800 and 1000, however. The precocious village of Toltec, Arkansas, consisting of over 100 acres of mounds, plazas, and ditches, was a noteworthy example and one of the first chiefdoms in the Eastern Woodlands. Dominant kin groups, clearly defined leaders, and buildings serving community/governmental needs were hallmarks of this (or any) chiefdom.

By the Mississippian Period (1000–1500), the Eastern Woodlands and Great Plains were dominated by such chiefdoms. The dominant ones were at the center of a tiered settlement hierarchy, for example, they were socioeconomically orbited by several subordinate villages and isolated semipermanent settlements (see “Economy” section). Most powerful polities, centered at villages such as Moundville, Alabama, were characterized by (1) scores of earthen mounds topped by wooden buildings; (2) the elite desire for locally and non-locally made precious or manufactured goods, such as marine shell or copper items; (3) evidence of a trade network stretching from the Rocky Mountains and Great Lakes to the Gulf Coast of Mexico; (4) ancestral veneration in the form of elite interments within earthen mounds; (5) evidence of participation in a series of religious practices collectively known as the Southern Cult or Southeastern Ceremonial Complex (see “The Arts” and “Religion” sections); (6) intensive maize cultivation, accompanied by squash, beans, or other crops; and (7) populations numbering from a few to several thousand people. Most commoners lived in plaza-centered building arrangements and were heavily dependent on maize and the other crops listed above; they also relied on domesticated animals such as turkeys as well as wild plant and animal resources.
Common residences were situated on the outskirts of mounds, which supported wooden houses for chiefs and close kin, community buildings, or charnel houses. The prominence and elevation of these mounds, in addition to the labor needed to produce them, was a constant reminder of elite power in these chiefdoms. Some have argued that the largest Mississippian center, at Cahokia, Illinois, was so politically and economically centralized and distinct from its contemporaries as to constitute a state society; others have suggested that Cahokia, like the other Mississippian towns, was an usually powerful chiefdom.

In any event, the Mississippian polities in the Eastern Woodlands and the Great Plains were never politically unified and are, for scholarly purposes, divided into several different cultural spheres of interaction including but not limited to Oneota, Middle Mississippian, Fort Ancient, Caddoan Mississippian, Lower Mississippian, and South Appalachian Mississippian. Between the tenth and fifteenth centuries, dozens of powerful chiefdoms in these regions rose and fell. Political collapse, warfare, environmental degradation (natural and man-made), or a combination of the three are often blamed for the collapse of major centers—Cahokia, for example, was abandoned by 1400—although new ones usually took their place. Unfortunately, these three factors would be exacerbated by the beginning of the Little Ice Age (see “Historical Overview” and “Science and Technology” sections) in 1400, the rise of new forms of social organization (e.g., the rise of the Iroquois Confederacy) and waves of European diseases—followed by Europeans and, consequently, the collapse of Mississippian civilization—in the 1500s.

American Southwest and the Great Basin

Overall, the societal traditions in the Great Basin are those associated with egalitarian hunter-gatherers, although the short florescence of maize-based agricultural villages within the Fremont Culture (400–1300) may have seen greater social stratification. The collapse of Fremont around 1300 saw a return to hunting and gathering and the traditional lifestyle of the Great Basin. In comparison, the Southwest had seen agriculture for quite some time before 400—as early as 1000 B.C.E.—and small villages had been developing there well before 750 C.E. It was only after that time, however, that larger sociopolitical units began to develop in the Southwest, in part due to favorable climatic conditions and the creation of larger and more efficient irrigation networks. Such advances, however, did not lead to states as in some other parts of the Americas and do not appear to have led to marked social stratification.

The Hohokam (750–1450)

Much like their distant contemporaries in the Great Plains, the Preclassic (700–1150) and Classic (1150–1450) Hohokam were characterized by (1) trade in exotic materials, with evidence of a network stretching from the Pacific to Mesoamérica; (2) the creation of public, monumental architecture; (3) houses arranged around plazas and courtyards; (4) intensive cultivation of maize, beans, and squash, in addition to wild and domesticated plant/animal resources such as chenopodium or turkey; and (4) a shared religious tradition. Unlike the Mississippians, however, the Hohokam practiced cremation, created structures that were predominantly of wattle-and-daub or adobe, cultivated
agave cactus, and consumed a significant array of native wild plants such as mesquite or amaranth.

Although irrigation had been practiced for over a millennium in Arizona (see “Science and Technology” section), the Preclassic Period was the first era to see the development of the first permanent villages in the Sonoran Desert. These villages depended upon seasonal flooding and ready access to easily diverted waters such as the Gila River. Houses at settlements like Snaketown, Arizona, surrounded plazas and communal spaces. These thatched, wattle-and-daub buildings in plazas were themselves arranged around even larger courtyards housing oval, semisubterranean structures. These were courts for a sport played—with significant variations—from Arizona to southern Mesoamerica known as the ballgame. As the Mesoamerican ballgame is of great antiquity, it is clear that contact between this region and the American Southwest is at the heart of the Hohokam ballgame; what is not clear is how much similarity there was—in terms of rules or ritual associations, for example—between the two ballgames.

The beginning of the Classic Period was a time of troubles. Major flooding and water-management issues seem to have led to the abandonment of isolated communities and the clustering of populations along the Gila and Salt rivers. This era also saw the decline of the ball courts and the rise of large, adobe platform mound compounds, many of which were associated with specific irrigation systems at Hohokam sites. Likewise, inhumation largely replaced cremation as the predominant form of mortuary behavior. Some scholars have argued that all of these changes represented the growth of chiefdoms among the Hohokam, in some ways similar to the burgeoning chiefdoms in the Southeast in the tenth and eleventh centuries. The evidence is far from clear, however. Certainly, some increased level of sociopolitical organization was necessary to deal with the environmental pressures of this era. Such organization was successful in allowing the Hohokam to thrive in this hostile environment until 1450, when agricultural problems, changes in climate, and/or human factors led to the widespread abandonment of the Hohokam settlements.

**Ancestral Pueblo (750–1450)**

Between 400 and 750 C.E., the Colorado Plateau saw an intensification of agriculture and the growth of small, dispersed farming settlements. The following era, termed “Pueblo I” (750–900), was characterized by the growth of permanent villages housing approximately one hundred to two hundred people apiece. Buildings in these villages were of wattle-and-daub manufacture and were occasionally plastered. They were often accompanied by pit houses and arranged around what is called a “great kiva,” a communal circular structure that could be used for religious, political, or other aspects of public life. Life in these villages appears to have been relatively egalitarian, with little-to-no evidence of status differences in the archaeological record. From Pueblo I to Pueblo III, the primary means of subsistence for these groups was maize agriculture, supplemented by traditional domesticated staples such beans, squash, turkey, as well as a variety of wild resources.

The growth and collapse of villages was a relatively commonplace phenomenon during Pueblo I, possibly owing to fluctuations in climate as well as human factors. Such behavior continued during Pueblo II (900–1150), although the
hallmark of this era was a bit of a departure: Populations moved from small settlements around Chaco Canyon to larger villages centered about “Great Houses,” communal masonry buildings characterized by hundreds of rooms and multiple stories. Buildings up to four stories in height were supported by thousands of beams; the wood for Pueblo Bonito, the largest great house at over six hundred rooms, was imported from over 50 miles away in a colossal cooperative endeavor. This not only suggests a high degree of social organization but also begs an explanation, given the apparently sudden shift in the Puebloan way of life. Although the reasons for why the “Chaco phenomenon” occurred are in some dispute, most scholars believe that Chaco was the product of a religious movement. This view holds that Chaco became a pilgrimage center on the Colorado Plateau, with ritual activity focused in the kivas of the Great Houses. The movement of populations to Chaco may also have had a practical component: What once may have been a natural lake as well as arable land may have contributed to the clustering of people within the canyon.

Ancestral Puebloan society went through yet another dramatic shift during Pueblo III (1150–1300). For reasons that remain unclear, by the mid-twelfth century Chaco had largely been abandoned. New strategies for survival on the plateau were on the rise, as skirmishes between rival villages and population movements caused the settlement of new communities with different traditions. People not only moved to new Great Houses and Chaco-like settlements in New Mexico and Colorado but also to defensible areas guarding water sources, with agricultural settlements centered in the unlikeliest of areas: Several major defensive settlements were astride cliffs and noticeably lacked large kivas (these were replaced by small, household ones) or other public buildings characteristic of the “Chaco phenomenon.” The most famous of the cliff dwellings, Mesa Verde, was a village consisting of over two-hundred rooms with multistoried buildings. Like others of its kind, it appears to have been created with conflict in mind: The small-scale skirmishes of the eleventh century had given way to endemic warfare by the twelfth century, necessitating the construction of villages that could withstand the attacks of their rivals.

A severe drought in the last decades of the thirteenth century, combined with the movement of foreign hunter-gatherers into the Colorado Plateau, seems to have led to the complete abandonment of the plateau village sites by 1300. Some of the people from these sites seem to have moved further south to preexisting communities along the Rio Grande and Little Colorado rivers, resulting not only in a population influx but major socioeconomic change. The villages that emerged from this troubled period were even larger than had previously existed, with the largest pueblos bearing between eight-hundred and eleven-hundred rooms. Chaco-like kivas and major public architecture reemerged during this era, known as Pueblo IV (1300–1542); another characteristic perhaps similar to Chaco was the presence of a unifying religious ideology, termed the “Southwest Cult” (see “Religion” section). Farming by means of dams, reservoirs and terraces—as opposed to irrigation—became the primary activity associated with agriculture, a situation that continued until the colonial period. Some have suggested that the labor needed to create such earthworks required, in turn, a chiefdom or similar institution, although the evidence for such social organization is far from clear.
In spite of the above considerations, Pueblo IV was not an idyllic time for the Ancestral Puebloans. Although the villages themselves were increasing in size and becoming ever more complex, the overall population in the Southwest was on the decline. Malnutrition and disease were on the rise, as were incursions by hunter-gatherers into agricultural lands. Initially, native hunter-gatherers had moved to occupy the areas vacated by the Ancestral Puebloans on the Colorado Plateau. By 1400, these groups were pressuring the margins of the Pueblo IV settlements; they were subsequently joined by immigrant hunter-gatherers from coastal Canada, the Great Basin, and the Great Plains. This human mosaic of agriculturalists and hunter-gatherers was to be a feature of life in the Southwest from the beginning of Pueblo IV to the colonial period.

**Pacific Coast**

Permanent villages and ranked societies all along the Pacific Coast of North America are of great antiquity; clear evidence of social inequality in coastal British Columbia, for example, dates to approximately 1800 B.C.E. Two regions were home to chiefdoms at the time of European contact: southern California and the Pacific Northwest. Unlike the maize agriculturalists of much of North America, the peoples of the Pacific Coast relied primarily on hunting, gathering, and fishing for subsistence; they are good examples of how complex societies can arise without intensive agriculture. Both employed seaworthy canoes and other fishing technologies to gain access to a wide variety of marine resources between 400 and 1400. In southern California, chiefdoms appear to have emerged by 1200 and seem to have followed on the heels of widespread intercommunity violence as well as food shortages. In the Pacific Northwest, by comparison, chiefdoms originated around 500 and were accompanied by endemic warfare. In fact, many of the cultural institutions encountered by Europeans in the eighteenth century were in place by this time, including plank houses on posts, long-distance exchange and consumption networks, cranial deformation, lip/cheek jewelry, and slavery. As in the American Southwest, population levels on the Pacific Coast were on the decline by 1400, although European contact and colonization was largely responsible for the demographic collapse of coastal societies between 1500 and 1900.

**Artic and Subarctic**

As noted in the “Science and Technology” section, below, Arctic peoples such as the Dorset and the Thule were largely reliant on hunting and fishing, with a heavy reliance on sea mammals such as seal, walruses and—in the case of the Thule—whales. The Dorset, who were predominant in the Arctic until 1100 or 1200, lived in small clusters of seasonal, snow-block houses. The Thule, who migrated eastwards from Alaska across much of Arctic Canada, had pushed the Dorset societies to extinction by 1200 largely because of technological advantages like the bow and arrow (see “Science and Technology” section); they created a variety of house types depending upon the construction materials available, with whale bones and sod among the most common building materials. The Thule were largely dependent upon whale hunting and the
exploitation of other sea mammals but were so well-adapted to life in a variety of Arctic conditions that they witnessed the growth as well as subsequent collapse of European (Norse) settlements in Greenland between 1000 and 1400. Their descendents encountered the second wave of European exploration in the Arctic world around 1700.

**Mesoamérica**

As a culture area rather than a geographic region, the term *Mesoamérica* encompasses a set of beliefs, institutions, and practices common to most—if not all—Mesoamerican societies of the Pre-Columbian era. These include shamanism, awareness/use of writing, the use of a 260- and/or 365-day calendar, human sacrifice, esteem for jade and other green stones, monumental stone architecture, the Mesoamerican ballgame, and cranial deformation or other bodily modification. Other shared religious beliefs included the idea that the world had been created several times, the use of five cardinal directions associated with particular colors, beliefs in multiple or divisible souls, ideas about oppositional/complementary duality in the supernatural world, and reverence for a multiplicity of deities in particular associated with maize, death, and the sun.

Likewise, Mesoamerican societies were characterized by populous urban centers; in fact, almost no hunter-gatherers were present in Mesoamérica at the time of European contact. The origins of settled village life in Mesoamérica date back to approximately 1600 B.C.E., with the first major chiefdoms developing around 1200 B.C.E. with the rise of Olmec civilization. Between 400 and 1400 A.D., the four major areas of Mesoamérica (Central Mexico, Valley of Oaxaca, Gulf Coast, Maya Region) were occupied by several major civilizations, including Teotihuacanos, Maya, Toltecs, and Aztecs. These were by no means the only complex societies in Mesoamérica: Rivals to the Aztecs, for example, included the Tarascan Empire of western Mexico and the long-lived Zapotec/Mixtec city-states of the Valley of Oaxaca, Mexico. Nevertheless, the impact of the societies mentioned below—in terms of their overall influence and the geographic extent of their political control—cannot be understated.

**The Teotihuacanos (100 B.C.E. to 600 C.E.)**

Although its origins stretched back to approximately 100 B.C.E., by the year 400 C.E. the city-state of Teotihuacán had become the major player in the geopolitics of Mesoamérica. At its height, between 400 and 600 C.E., it was the sixth largest city in the world, with approximately one-hundred twenty-five thousand people. In size this city dwarfed anything that had previously existed in the hemisphere, with an urban population stretching over 8.5 square miles in dense, apartment-like compounds; much of the city was laid out according to a grid plan enviable even today. Prior to the fourth century, the Teotihuacan city-state had control over what is today the Basin of Mexico; shortly thereafter, its power expanded outwards to include over 9,500 square miles of territory in Central Mexico. In 378 C.E., moreover, Teotihuacán had invaded portions of the Maya lowlands, asserting its influence—either indirectly through client-kings or directly through conquest—in major Maya cities such as Tikal, Guatemala, and Copan, Honduras. By 400 C.E., Teotihuacán enclaves and satellite communities could be found at sites throughout central
and southern Mesoamérica, from Kaminaljuyú (highland Guatemala) and Matacapan (Gulf Coast) to Monte Albán (Valley of Oaxaca), and Chunchucmil (northern Yucatán). Teotihuacán’s cultural influence, from architecture and ideology to material goods, spread further still. In fact, few places in all of Mesoamérica would have not had some contact—however indirect—with the Central Mexican metropolis.

Teotihuacán society was industrious, mercantile, and above all else, cosmopolitan. In addition to the numerous apartment compounds housing peoples native to the Valley of Mexico, the city was characterized by several foreign enclaves: Different ethnic groups from the Valley of Oaxaca, the Gulf Coast, West Mexico, and even the Maya area appear to have been living in this precocious metropolis. Workshops of almost every kind were centered within these apartment compounds, where people manufactured tools, jewelry, ritual goods, and other items from ceramic, stone, obsidian, shell, wood, feathers, and other materials for local consumption as well as export.

Although a royal palace at Teotihuacán has yet to be clearly identified, it is clear that its governance was strongly centralized; like other Mesoamerican polities, Teotihuacán was likely graced by a set of administrative buildings as well as palatial accommodations for its rulership. Such considerations will likely become clearer with further excavations as well as developments in the interpretation of the Teotihuacán writing system. Although this society was once believed to lack the written word, recent discoveries of painted murals and floors point to a system similar to that of later civilizations in the area, such as the Mixtecs or the Aztecs.

Nevertheless, archaeologists do have some information about the Teotihuacán rulers and their behavior: A successful invasion by Teotihuacán forces into the southern Maya lowlands was recorded by the Classic Maya at several locations, including the major sites of Tikal and El Peru. A lord from Teotihuacán named Siyaj K’ahk’ ("Fire is Born") appears to have captured the largest Maya site, Tikal, in 378 C.E. and installed his son Yax Nuun Ayiin I as king; further puppet or sympathetic rulers appear to have been installed at several other Maya sites. Additional rulers claiming to have been involved with or related to the Teotihuacán invaders subsequently made their appearance throughout the Maya lowlands, from Piedras Negras, Guatemala, in the west to Copan, Honduras, in the east. Some of these relationships were clearly fictive, but from the fifth century onwards—even past the fall of Teotihuacán in the seventh century—claims of special relationships with the Central Mexican metropolis were commonplace, attesting to the cultural influence of Teotihuacán on Maya society. In spite of this influence, however, Teotihuacán does not seem to have created a land empire in the traditional sense. Rather, it would seem as if the Teotihuacános engaged in colonialism, setting up colonies and client kingdoms in far-flung areas to create favorable economic relationships. How many of these relationships were directly controlled by the state of Teotihuacán itself is another matter; opportunistic or—equally likely—disenfranchised nobles and their followers cannot be ruled out from most situations in which “Teotihuacán” makes an appearance, including the aforementioned events at Tikal and El Peru.

The Maya (Classic [250–909] and Postclassic [909–1697] Periods)

In 400, the Maya area was culturally divided into three major regions: the Highlands, the Southern Lowlands, and the Northern Lowlands. None of these
areas ever experienced political unification: City-states, chiefdoms, and loose confederations of cities were the rule in all three areas until the colonial period. The highland peoples, having experienced their major florescence from the first to the third centuries, had had a system of centralized, dynastic kingship that made use of the Long Count calendar (see “Science and Technology,” section), carved hieroglyphic inscriptions, and historical portraits of rulers in urban, mountainous settings. By the third century, however, this centralized system had declined; the lords of the highland towns in 400 were but political shadows of their ancestors. Likewise, the “kings” of the Northern Maya Lowlands—and to a lesser extent, parts of modern-day Belize—do not appear to have been strong, centralizing figures in 400; the history of this region prior to the fifth century was dominated by chiefdoms and loosely organized kingdoms.

By comparison, the Southern Lowlands were characterized by numerous centralized dynasties during the Classic Period (250–909). Although the origins of these Maya kingdoms stretch back to the first century C.E., with urbanism beginning in the Maya area as early as 500 B.C.E., the third century C.E. is considered the starting point for “Classic Maya civilization.” It was during the Classic Period that local Pre-Columbian populations reached their height, with extensive architectural projects and a widespread elaboration of a series of traits that were uniquely Maya and associated with Maya elites. These traits included sophisticated calendrical, mathematical, and astronomical systems, a hieroglyphic writing system, and a series of architectural innovations including the corbeled vault or “false arch.” Networks of roads, temple complexes, hierarchical settlement patterns, sweat baths, and other innovations are also hallmarks of the period. Although Maya sites in the Highlands and northern Lowlands shared many of features discussed below with their neighbors, the Southern Lowlands saw the greatest elaboration of these traits and combined them with a hierarchical, clearly defined social system within city-states governed by kings who gradually assumed divine powers.

By 400, the Southern Lowlands had weathered the arrival of interlopers from the central Mexican metropolis of Teotihuacán, and although the effects of this “arrival” were to have repercussions for centuries, the basic model of society in the Southern Lowlands remained relatively unchanged. From approximately 250 to 600, Maya sociopolitical organization was dominated by an ajaw (“lord”) whose duties ranged from the practicalities of governing a city-state to religious rites ensuring agricultural fertility as well as divine favor. The ajaw was likewise the ultimate authority in economic and diplomatic affairs, oftentimes forging (and breaking) alliances with other city-states in an ever-changing political landscape. Over time, kings seem to have gained even greater authority, relegating the mere title of ajaw to subordinate members of the royal family and taking on further names, such as k’uhul ajaw (“holy lord”) or k’inich (“sun-faced”) (an allusion to the Maya sun god). By the seventh century, a multiplicity of titles were firmly entrenched in the royal court, with the ruler clearly having become a divinity in his (or occasionally, her) own right, responsible for the maintaining the unique relationship between the city and its patron gods; it is about this time that we also see the greatest elaboration of ancestor “cults” within the royal line (see Ancestor Veneration). Together with the king and the royal family, other elites—including artisans and probably merchants—formed a complex web of social and political relationships that extended inside and between different Maya polities.
Such relationships were expressed in the production and distribution of several items restricted to elites, including worked objects of jade, feathers, ceramic, bone, shell, and paper. Literacy, which was restricted to Classic Maya nobles, was expressed through the production of large stone portraits and accompanying texts on monoliths, or stelae, as well as altars or other forms (see Stela). Other aspects of Maya society that were restricted to nobles included a host of royal dances, public rituals, and other pageantry. Two facets of life that spanned the royal and common spheres were sweat baths and the ritual ballgame. Sweat baths were stone buildings or, in the case of commoners, more modest structures similar to saunas; their use was probably tied to medicinal purposes (sweating out infirmities, for example), although in the royal context they also involved various drugs (hallucinogenic or otherwise) as well as sexual activity.

As for the ballgame, this was a sport played by two teams with a large rubber ball on a court (ball court); the rules and play of this game seem to have varied in time and space—indeed, most Mesoamerican cultures had versions of this game—but the Maya ballgame was much like a cross between modern-day basketball and volleyball, with body armor and padding reminiscent of American football. Attached to this game were cosmological themes, ritual conflicts, and perhaps economic activity in the form of betting. Royal ball courts were usually of stone, with clearly defined alleyways, while commoner ball courts were minimal affairs.

Commoners, not surprisingly, were in the majority in Maya polities and formed the backbone of an agricultural system supporting the ways of life listed above. Taxes in the form of tribute, labor, or military service appear to have been levied on this population. As a result, we might view many of the aspects of Classic Maya society we are familiar with—including soaring temples and vast public works—as a product of commoner labor. Common society was organized around spatially defined lineages: Platforms fronting a central plaza area formed a basic social unit that was replicated hundredfold in the hinterlands surrounding urban centers.

Although the number of subjects governed within a given Maya city-state could be quite large, between fifty thousand and one hundred thousand people, most Maya centers and their associated territories had populations of approximately ten thousand to twenty thousand people. During the Late Classic Period (600–909), following the fall of Teotihuacán, Maya society experienced its greatest political, artistic, and social florescence: Some of the largest Maya centers, such as Tikal or Calakmul, headed networks of loosely confederated cities in feudal arrangements. Nevertheless, even Late Classic Maya societies were never strictly politically unified and relationships could—and did—change within the feudal structure.

As a result of this instability, warfare within Maya society was almost constant and involved war not only for territory but also for tribute, glory, and revenge. As a result, conflicts could be large and protracted, as in the well-documented wars between Calakmul, Tikal, and their associated allies, or more limited engagements; such skirmishes occasionally involved the targeted capture of prominent nobles. One of the ubiquitous aspects of Maya warfare involved the taking and humiliation of captives, oftentimes destined for sacrifice to one of the many gods in the Classic Maya pantheon. Elites—even the king—was not exempt from this fate, as attested in Classic Maya sources.
Maya society in the Southern Lowlands was beset by a number of stresses that seem to have increased over time. Endemic warfare, peasant revolts, environmental degradation, droughts, or other natural disasters, population increase, and growing numbers of petty elites within cities each strained the abilities of city-states to maintain the status quo. By the late eighth century, the institution of divine kingship started to fail. Several key sites, such as Palenque, Yaxchilan, and Piedras Negras, collapsed early and were largely abandoned between 800 and 850. Others, like Copan and Tikal, began a long process of decline. By the tenth century, the institution of divine kingship in the lowlands was no more, with the last carved hieroglyphic monument erected at the site of Tonina in 909. Elites and commoners, however, continued to thrive in places for a few hundred years more, although they too gradually dwindled in population until the majority of the Southern Lowlands was reclaimed by the forest. Although some shadows of Classic civilization survived here up to the Conquest, particularly around Lake Peten, Guatemala, the momentum of Maya society would shift decisively to the northern Lowlands and subsequently, after 1400, to the Maya Highlands, where a series of expansionist, highly organized states like the K’iche and K’ak’chiquel would make a final stand against the Spanish in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Although the Classic Maya collapse in did involve population movements to the northern and southern regions, the dramatic social upheaval of the eighth to the tenth centuries—and all of the ills associated with it—did result in massive destruction and death for the once-urban civilization occupying the Southern Lowlands.

This political transition, having started in the eighth century, was firmly in place by the mid-late ninth century at places such as Uxmal, Kabah, Labna, and Sayil in the Puuc region of northwest Yucatán. Many of these polities seem to have actually benefited from the Classic Maya collapse. These polities and their successors in Yucatán retained many of the institutions and innovations of Classic society—including writing, monumental stone architecture, sweat baths, and ballgames—although in most cases the government seems to have revolved around weaker kings and elite councils rather than strong authoritarian rule. These small states seem to have briefly coalesced around Uxmal around 900, although by 1000 the Puuc centers met the same general fate as their Classic Period counterparts to the south. These Puuc collapses, in turn, benefited centers even further to the north: The years between 1000 and 1400 were dominated, in succession, by the city-states of Chichén Itzá and Mayapán.

Chichén Itzá, one of the largest cities in the Americas, dominated northern Yucatán between 900 and 1200; it was one of the primary economic centers in Mesoamérica at this time and may have been influenced by—if not politically dominated—the Toltecs, a rival civilization based in Central Mexico. In any event, it was also a major center for religious pilgrimage during and after its collapse in 1200: The name Chichén Itzá refers to the “well of the Itzá (a Maya group),” a huge water-filled sinkhole into which precious goods—and even human sacrifices—were ritually and habitually thrown. Mayapán, prominent from 1200 to 1440, likewise engaged many of the trappings of Classic Maya society without the institution of divine kingship, although in many ways it was a diminutive, lesser copy of Chichén Itzá. The ends at Chichén Itzá and Mayapán appear to have been violent, although a multiplicity of explanations
abounds for precisely why and how their collapses occurred. Ultimately, Maya political organization and society would regroup into a series of competing, petty kingdoms—a situation that was still in place at the time of Spanish colonization.

The Toltecs (950–1170) and the Aztecs (1345–1521)

Much of what we know about Toltec society comes from later sources, particularly from the Aztecs: They believed that the Toltecs were a powerful expansionist empire whose people were not only skilled craftsmen but also the inventors of most of the technologies and practices of Mesoamérica. Quasi-historical figures, deities in the Aztec traditions, were said to have lived during the time of the Toltecs, including Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca (gods associated, among other things, with human creation and magic, respectively). The truth is somewhat more modest: Although the Toltecs did not invent Mesoamérica, they certainly had a small empire with far-flung trade relationships extending to northern Mexico and as far south as Central America. Based at Tula in Central Mexico, they dominated much of the Basin of Mexico and, much like the earlier Teotihuacános, were characterized by a cosmopolitan society that fused Central Mexican architectural characteristics with those from the Maya area and the Gulf Coast of Mexico. Tula alone may have housed a population of about sixty-thousand people, most of whom resided in adobe apartment compounds. Also like Teotihuacá, Tula employed a network of artisans and craftsmen manufacturing goods for local as well as foreign consumption; like most Mesoamerican cities, it was surrounded by an agrarian commoner class supporting the urban center.

Suffering a violent collapse at about the same time as Chichén Itzá, the Toltecs were supplanted by a network of competing city-states in Central Mexico. Many of the city-states that formed were actually founded by Nahuatl-speaking invaders from northwest Mexico. One of these invading groups, the Tepanecs of Atzcapotzalco, had just begun to forge an empire here in the 1300s when another set of Nahuatl speakers arrived in the Basin of Mexico: the Mexica. In 1325, the Tepanecs allowed the Mexica, a wandering, hunter-gatherer group, to settle on a swampy island in their territory. The city founded there, Tenochtitlán, was to become the basis for a Mexica-led empire—otherwise known as the Aztec empire—that overthrew the Tepanecs and eventually subjugated most of northern Mesoamérica. This rebellion was to begin in 1428, such that by the time of the Spanish arrival in Mesoamérica c. 1519, the Aztec empire would be the largest empire Mesoamérica had ever seen. But in the 1300s, Mexica society was undergoing an agrarian transformation, its people serving primarily as mercenaries for other, more powerful city-states. Much of what Aztec society would become famous for—large urban centers, mass human sacrifices, emperors, courts, laws, and philosophy—was only in its infancy at this time.

Lower Central America and the Andes

Moche (200–600 C.E.) and Nazca (200 B.C.E.–650 C.E.)

The Moche are credited with having produced the first state society in South America. Although the Moche were culturally unified behind a shared religious, artistic and sociopolitical system, they were territorially organized as
city-states and thus somewhat comparable to the Maya. Sites such as Pampa Grande, Sipán, and Moche were ruled by sovereigns living on high atop palatial mud-brick pyramids. Other elites, as well as servants, often lived in lower tiers of these structures, although the bulk of the commoner Moche population lived in adobe compounds outside the city centers, oftentimes arranged to accommodate different family groups.

Although the majority of the population was agrarian, artisans and craft specialists played a major role in the supply of elite ceramics, fine arts, and utilitarian goods to various segments of the population. Extensive pottery workshops, as well as metalworking centers (copper, gold, silver) and textile “factories” found at Moche sites are testament not only to the specialization but also to the class differences in Moche society. The largest sites, moreover, seem to have made use of secondary administrative or ceremonial centers, indicating a rather large bureaucracy headed by individual Moche rulers.

Lacking a written language, the Moche nevertheless produced elite ceramics with elaborate pictographic designs that shed light on everyday life. Some of the most common themes are martial and/or religious in nature; surprisingly, several events and even characters demonstrably tied to real occasions have been identified by archaeologists. For example, blood sacrifice, particularly those involving foreign prisoners of war or even dishonored Moche, is a common theme in Moche art that has been corroborated archaeologically: Archaeologists have found the remains of people dressed as sacrificial priests, victims bearing telltale wounds, and even objects traditionally associated with sacrifice in Moche burials. From the analysis of many painted Moche ceramics, it seems that blood sacrifice—particularly for the benefit of the gods and Moche society—was a necessary facet of life on the north coast of Peru.

Unlike the Moche, the Nazca of the south coast of Peru were not organized along state lines. The decentralized farming communities dotting this region were, however, situated around a pivotal ceremonial center, Cahuachi, which may have served as a place of pilgrimage for these agriculturalists. Declining in the seventh century, in part due to disastrous floods, droughts, and other consequences of El Niño weather patterns, the Moche and the Nazca orders would be replaced by other city-states until the empire building activities of Chimor and, subsequently, the Inca.

**Tiwanaku (650–1000), Chimor (1000–1476), and the Birth of the Inca (1300–1532)**

**Tiwanaku** and **Chimor**, Andean and coastal civilizations respectively, can be seen as antecedents of the Inca, who ultimately united the various peoples in parts of Ecuador, Peru, Chile, Bolivia, and Argentina under one political banner. Although environmentally and temporally separated, the two empires were remarkably similar in overall sociopolitical organization. Both societies employed tribute labor to produce vast cities and associated monuments; the capitals of both empires may have held between thirty thousand to forty thousand people each. Tiwanaku, ruling from its high-altitude (over 10,000 feet above sea level) capital of the same name near Lake Titicaca, was characterized by an elite dedicated to the construction of religious monuments and austere stone temple mounds and courts. The Tiwanaku elites were supported by a large outlying agrarian and pastoral population as well as far-flung colonies.
and client polities, which provided much-desired crops and goods unobtainable in the capital region. Chimor, a Pacific coastal empire, was characterized by similarly grandiose—but adobe—compounds, pyramids, and walls in its capital, Chan Chan: Buildings were typically arranged according to a grid plan, with the urban majority consisting of craft specialists as well as the ruling elite. The agrarian commoner communities, as in other parts of the Americas, lived well outside the city center. Tiwanaku and Chimor controlled some territory outside their capitals, although towns and villages in such territories were not nearly as hierarchically or architecturally complex.

Although the Inca can be said to have originated about 1000 as a distinct ethnic group within the Andes, their emergence as an expansionist state—as well as their conquest of much of Pacific coastal South America—took place in the 100 years before the Conquest. In 1400, the Inca were one of several groups of petty kingdoms competing for dominance in southern Peru; based at the city-state of Cuzco, they would begin the process of expansion in 1438—a process largely cut short by the arrival of the Spanish and European-derived diseases.

Amazonia and the Caribbean

In the year 400, the Caribbean was occupied by different Arawak, Tupiguarani, and Carib-speaking peoples. Ultimately these populations derived from coastal and interior Amazonia and had taken with them social systems and practices similar to those on the mainland. This diaspora, particularly in the case of the Arawak (Taino), had resulted in the transplantation of chiefdoms onto many of the Caribbean islands; these chiefdoms were characterized by large villages, roads, plazas, and ceremonial buildings such as ball courts (the latter ultimately derived through contact with Mesoamérica).

Amazonia proper was characterized by different types of societies between 400 and 1400. Small hereditary chiefdoms had probably emerged well before this time, during what is called the “Amazonian Formative Period” (1000 B.C.E.–500 C.E.), but it was after 500 that large, densely populated regional centers began to dot the Amazonian landscape. The island of Marajó in the Amazon estuary is a case in point. From 400 to 1400 the Marajóara people created large earthen mounds here; some were used for burial and ceremonial purposes, whereas others appear to have been the bases for impermanent buildings. People at Marajó and other large villages in the Amazon appear to have been trading for gold, ceramics, feathers, precious stones, and other goods at vast distances; socially, these settlements seem to have had clear divisions between classes, with elites receiving special funerary treatments as well as greater numbers of precious goods. Hunter-gatherers, agricultural chiefdoms, and perhaps even more complex societies made up a complex web of interactions in the Amazon; likewise, many of these groups would not have been completely economically or culturally isolated from their Andean neighbors. Although none of the Amazonian societies left behind written records, archaeology points to an image vastly different from that usually provided for Amazonia: As more research is undertaken in this understudied area, Amazonian societies of the Pre-Columbian world are becoming more and more urban as well as complex.
Further Reading

6. SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

In the Americas, drastic cultural and social changes were not necessarily the product of technological change, an assumption that runs counter to many of the experiences of civilizations in the Old World. In fact, much of the basic technology employed by Pre-Columbian civilizations in 1400 had been around—nevertheless, with some significant changes—well before 400. Science and technology common to all of the regions described below before 400 included advancements in pottery, stone tool manufacture (including weapons like the bow and arrow, spears, and the atlatl or spear-thrower—see individual entries),
domesticated plants and/or animals (see "Society" section), masonry and construction (in stone, earthworks or both), and irrigation; most native groups employed medicinal plants and kept track of astronomical events, particularly the equinoxes and groups of stars such as the Pleiades. Nearly all public works and trade, save in Andean South America, were based upon human labor and the capacity to mobilize large groups of people for construction. The major difference between 400 and 1400, in terms of science and technology, was the scale to which labor and technological advances were employed: Huge cities and even empires were developing out of smaller-scale chiefdoms.

Having already witnessed the birth of urbanism and several technologies key to the development of chiefdoms, states, and empires, the Americas in 400 saw the apex of several major civilizations, particularly within highland Mesoamérica and Andean South America. Yet the spread of scientific advancements and technological change throughout the Americas was oftentimes limited and sporadic in the best of circumstances. Advancements such as metallurgy, the sail, and writing are good examples of this. Complex metallurgy, for example, was largely confined to Lower Central America and Andean South America from 800 B.C.E to 800 C.E. until its spread to western Mesoamérica. By comparison, the sail as a technology seems not have been used by Mesoamericans, although it is likely that sailing vessels from places such as Ecuador and Colombia brought metallurgy to Mesoamérica around 800. Writing—a key feature of most states and empires—was invented in the Americas about 900 B.C.E. but was largely confined to central and eastern Mesoamérica; the literate civilizations in these areas traded (and even fought) with their contemporaries in a variety of settings, yet the written word seems never to have become a predominant feature in North or South America prior to the 1500s. Other developments, such as mathematics and the calendar, were perhaps independently invented at several times and places, although the complexity of these systems varied.

Oft-cited, interrelated explanations for such limited technological transfers are (1) the near complete absence of large, domesticated animals such as horses or oxen (the one exception is the llama of Andean South America); (2) the lack of several key supporting technologies that would have facilitated transport or movement of goods, ideas, and people, including wheeled vehicles, pulleys, or other complex machines; and (3) the almost universal persistence of stone and wood tools, even among expansion-oriented states and empires with access to copper and bronze technology. Although the basic facts behind these explanations are correct (civilizations like the Maya or Inca, who created vast cities within jungle or mountainous landscapes, indeed lacked wheeled vehicles), we must be careful in assuming that people will always adopt "better" technology—or adopt the most utilitarian stance toward it—whenever new technology is available. If anything, history has shown that people do not always behave in this way: For example, objects of copper, silver, gold, and bronze were typically appreciated for their rarity, color, and musical properties in ancient Mesoamérica and were rarely fashioned into weapons or large tools. Stone tools were the medium of choice for all of the civilizations discussed below, with the emphasis being on choice: As with any society past or present, culture—not necessarily utility—determined how science was used in Pre-Columbian America.
Eastern Woodlands and the Great Plains

The Eastern Woodlands and the Great Plains saw varying degrees of architectural change between 400 and 1400, with the greatest extent of sophistication in architectural engineering coinciding with the growth of widespread urbanism around 1000. Although the construction of mounds, walls, canals, ditches and other earthworks had been commonplace in the Mississippi and Ohio River Valleys prior to 400, the years between 1000 and 1400 saw the unprecedented growth of villages and towns here and in the Great Plains. The greatest of these was the Mississippian town of Cahokia, which—as mentioned elsewhere—contained mounds of a scale to rival those in Mesoamerica and South America. Towns like these continued earlier traditions of metalworking, in the form of copper artifacts, as well as pottery, shell- and woodworking, and stone tool manufacture, but most of these areas—like engineering—were augmented during the Mississippian Period (1000–1500). Of particular note were changes in ceramic manufacture, where the introduction of shell temper allowed not only new forms but also thin-walled pottery in some ways comparable to porcelain.

Technologically, the greatest change affecting the Eastern Woodlands and Great Plains between 400 and 1400 was the introduction of intensive maize agriculture. Cultivation of native plants such as chenopodium, sunflower, and marsh elder had already been grown en masse in the eras known as the Early and Middle Woodland Period (800 B.C.E.–400 C.E.), in many ways contributing to the transition from hunting and gathering to sedentary life. The growth of villages, chiefdoms and—unfortunately—warfare in the Late Woodland (400–1000) was coupled with the mass adoption of a new crop, maize, in different parts of the Eastern Woodlands between 800 and 1100. Having originally been domesticated in Central Mexico around 4300 B.C.E. and spread to the Eastern Woodlands by 1 C.E., maize does not originally appear to have had much of an impact on the peoples of this region. Archaeologists believe that the social changes of the Late Woodland period, coupled with a population boom, suddenly made the adoption of this productive crop desirable. Such adoption made further chiefdoms and social complexity possible over a vast area and led to the large towns of the Mississippian Period; other Mexican crops such as beans and squash were to follow, creating a complex of crops that continues to be associated with native agriculture in this region to the present day. Improvements to existing technology were the general rule during the Mississippian Period, and the several thousand people living in major centers such as Cahokia, Illinois, and Moundville, Arkansas, used technology that would have largely been familiar to their ancestors, but for its scale: Villages in 400 would have been occupied by only a few dozen people. Ultimately sociopolitical and natural events, including a period of low temperatures termed the “Little Ice Age” (1300–1850), contributed to the decline of the Mississippian chiefdoms, to the extent that new societies were on the ascent at the time of European contact.

American Southwest and the Great Basin

In some ways, the American Southwest and the Great Basin could not be more different in terms of overall technological trajectories between 400 and 1400.
In others, they follow a similar pattern. In the Great Basin, the long-term tradition of hunting and gathering was just beginning to be complemented by maize-based agriculture as well as pottery among groups of desert peoples known as the **Fremont Culture**. By comparison, pottery and limited agriculture in the Southwest were of great antiquity: As with the Eastern Woodlands and the Great Plains, maize, beans and squash from Central Mexico had been introduced into the Southwest far before the growth of major towns there, with maize agriculture dating as early as 1000 B.C.E.

Yet both regions shared similar problems in terms of agriculture after 1300. The collapse of Fremont Culture in the Great Basin around that time led not only to large-scale abandonment of the region but also the return—for stragglers—of hunting and gathering as the primary means of subsistence. In the American Southwest, maize-based agriculture was not abandoned per se between 1300 and 1500, but the overall number of people engaged in farming certainly decreased precipitously. Hunting and gathering, correspondingly, became more important in the Southwest as well. Most likely, these two areas suffered from related problems, with some blaming an influx of hunter-gatherers from the Great Basin itself (and other areas) as the reason for why the Southwest declined in this way.

**The Hohokam (750–1450)**

As mentioned above, maize agriculture and small villages are of great antiquity in the Southwest and had been complemented—as early as the first millennium B.C.E.—by limited irrigations systems allowing water from distant areas to serve these as well as native crops such as mesquite and prickly pear cactus. Around 700, perennial floods and a narrow channel made the Gila River an ideal place for the growth of even larger irrigation systems; settlement here during the Preclassic Hohokam (700–1150) was paired with a series of engineering projects at sites such as **Snaketown** and Casa Grande. These and other water-management projects in the American Southwest—though, in principle, not new technology—were of a scale so vast and so well built that the first European settlers were using them up to 1,000 years later.

The Classic Hohokam Period (1150–1450) saw the growth of major villages and a shift from wattle-and-daub, thatched roof architecture to adobe, a technological change that continues to resonate today. Likewise, increased populations and changes to sociopolitical systems may have seen the growth of chiefdoms as well as a near-total dependence on irrigation agriculture. Such technological dependence had its drawbacks: Climate change is one of the leading reasons for why Hohokam civilization declined, its settlements abandoned by 1450.

**Ancestral Pueblo (750–1450)**

Technological innovations on the Colorado Plateau for the Ancestral Puebloans largely mirrored that of the Hohokam, with many of the primary developments involving vast engineering projects, terracing, and other techniques designed to maximize the use of water for agriculture in a relatively dry, hostile environment. Other than the aforementioned canals, the most significant technological advancements stemming from this era involve pottery. As mentioned in the “Arts” essay, above, lead and other glazes were invented around the thirteenth century, allowing for what is now a familiar sight in
contemporary pottery of the Southwest: geometric, polychrome designs in red, black, and white.

**Pacific Coast and Arctic**

As noted in the introduction, the Pacific Coast and Arctic are home to an array of maritime societies that historically have relied on hunting, gathering, and fishing for subsistence. Seaworthy canoes allowing deepwater fishing as well as nets, harpoons, and fish weirs were the primary food-gathering implements between 400 and 1400. Houses on the Pacific Coast during this time were, as in the contact era, constructed primarily of wooden planks; sites such as Ozette have revealed archaeological remains from this era, including evidence of long-distance trade in objects of copper, obsidian, and shell. In the Arctic, technologies were adapted to tundra life and the hunting of land as well as sea mammals including whales, walruses, and seals; specialized harpoons and skin-covered boats for whale hunting were developed after 1000 by the Thule culture of Arctic Canada. The Thule spread eastwards across Canada, to the lasting detriment of the native Dorset peoples, largely as a result of this technology. It should be noted that sporadic encounters between native peoples of the Arctic and European explorers (Vikings) in Greenland, confined to the years 1000 to 1500, had no lasting technological effect on either group; ultimately, the Thule proved technologically better adapted to life in the Arctic, and by the fifteenth century no Europeans remained in Greenland.

**Mesoamérica**

Between 400 and 1400, Mesoamérica was one of the major centers of scientific and technological achievement in the Americas. Although the cultures themselves were ethnically and linguistically diverse, in terms of science and technology they were remarkably uniform. Unlike the regions of North America or South America, there were almost no hunter-gatherer societies in Mesoamérica between 400 and 1400; Mesoamérican society during this millennium was primarily agricultural and urban in nature, with trading ties as far north as the American Southwest and as far south as the Pacific Coast of Columbia and Panama. Many Mesoamérican societies were literate and versed in astronomy and mathematics, and—given the limitations outlined earlier—were accomplished masters of architectural and agricultural engineering. All had a complex calendar, predating the Classic Maya but ultimately perfected by them. Most were builders of pyramids, royal palaces, and other large structures in addition to residential structures; the stepped buildings for which Mesoamérican civilizations are famous would have required the capacity—as outlined above—to use large numbers of people to build retaining walls as well as transport, cut, and/or carve stone blocks of sizes ranging from minuscule to enormous! Most of the towns and cities of Mesoamérica in this era were well planned and often aligned to accommodate astronomical phenomena and/or natural features in the landscape. The Central Mexican metropolises of *Teotihuacá* (100 B.C.E.–600 C.E.) and *Tenochtitlán* (1325–1521) were easily two of the most impressive planned cities in the hemisphere, with populations exceeding well over one hundred thousand people apiece; both were
The Teotihuacános (100 B.C.E. to 600 C.E.)

Until recently, it was believed that the Teotihuacános, the sixth largest city in the world at its peak (about one-hundred twenty-five thousand people), lacked a writing system; discoveries in the last several years have not only proved this false but also suggested that its writing system—consisting of painted hieroglyphs with pictographic characteristics—was ancestral to the Aztec and other Central Mexican writing systems. Although most glyphs cannot currently be read, archaeologists have begun to decipher names of people, places and other signs suggesting that the Teotihuacános had a calendar (and possibly a mathematical system) similar to their contemporaries the Classic Maya.

In addition to building a massive network of roads, the Teotihuacános were architecturally famous for creating stepped pyramids built in a style known as talud-tablero: Rectangular and sloping elements were set atop one another in regular fashion, providing for an aesthetically pleasing and stable pyramid structure. Teotihuacán is also noteworthy for its apartment compounds, where different ethnic enclaves as well as native Teotihuacános manufactured obsidian tools, ceramic vessels, jewelry, and other goods for local consumption as well as foreign export. That so many people moved to and lived in Teotihuacán at this early time was testament to the technological sophistication of this city: Feeding this many people at once would have required highly productive agricultural system and a network of institutions to bring this food to the masses.

The Maya (Classic [250–909] and Postclassic [909–1697] Periods)

Compared to other Mesoamerican civilizations, the Classic Maya are perhaps the best known for their achievements in science and technology. Their cities in the jungle continue to fascinate scholars and laymen alike. Like Teotihuacán, most Maya city centers were built primarily of stone, requiring a heavy investment in labor and architectural planning; Maya cities were plastered, lavishly painted, and well drained to accommodate the rainy, tropical climate.

One technological innovation used in Maya buildings as well as tombs was the corbelled vault or false arch. Also used in Mycenaean Greece, this technique involved stacking courses of stone at the springline of each wall successively, such that they projected toward the center; the top of the arch was then capped by flat stones, creating a stand-alone doorway much like an arch. Much like the Teotihuacán talud-tablero, the corbelled vault was a readily identifiable characteristic of Classic Maya architecture.

The Classic Maya were particularly accomplished in the interrelated fields of mathematics, calendrics, and astronomy. Mathematically, they had the concepts of zero and place, which allowed them to algebraically employ large numbers and afforded complex calculations. Although the use of an actual sign for zero (or the concept of zero, for that matter) is today regarded as commonsense, it was not a feature of mathematics worldwide until the first century B.C.E. In the Americas, the first documented use of a sign for zero occurs with the Classic Maya, as part of what is called the “Long Count” of the Mesoamerican calendar. The Long Count is much older than the Classic Maya,
however, and would have required the use of a zero or a placeholder: It dates to at least 36 B.C. and is associated with Epi-Olmec civilization at the site of Chiapa de Corzo, Chiapas, Mexico. Other Mesoamerican calendars which served as antecedents to the Long Count date back as early as the sixth century B.C.E. As a result, Mesoamerican civilizations may have invented a sign for zero around the same time—or even before—their contemporaries in the Old World! In any event, the Classic Maya certainly perfected the use of zero and place in Mesoamerica, taking computations to a level never seen before (and perhaps after).

These computations were largely calendrical in nature; they were designed to (1) track the movement of celestial bodies such as the sun, moon, and other planets; (2) predict astronomical events such as solar eclipses; and (3) keep track of historical or other events of celebratory and divinatory importance. Unlike many of the other mathematical systems in use between 400 and 1400, Mesoamerican math was based upon a vigesimal (base-20) instead of decimal (base-10) system, with dots and bars signifying increments of ones and fives, respectively (there were also more pictographic glyphs that could be used to signify numbers as well, particularly in the Maya system). For example, the number 14 would have been represented by four dots and two bars.

There were three basic calendars employed in Mesoamerica. Although the Classic Maya were not the first to use all three of these together, by 400 they were the only civilization to do so. The first of these was the 260-day calendar, or Sacred Almanac, where each day was given a number ranging from 1 to 13 as well as one of twenty names (hence, $13 \times 20 = 260$). The second was a rough 365-day calendar designed to approximate the solar year. It consisted of a number ranging from 1 to 20 as well as one of eighteen-month names plus five extra days (hence, $20 \times 18 + 5 = 365$). Although there were exceptions, the 260- and 365-day calendars were often combined to produce what is called the “Calendar Round,” which provided each day with a set of four signs (2 numbers and 2 names). The Classic Maya did this, with an example being the day 4 Ajaw 8 Kumk’u (day number + day name + month number + month name). The same combination of numbers and days would occur only once every 52 years.

In the short term, this was not a problem. In fact, many civilizations that postdated the Classic Maya used only the first two. But for long-term dates, a third calendar was required: the aforementioned Long Count. This calendar was, like Western calendars, fixed and began on a specific date. Scholars have reconstructed this day as August 11, 3114 B.C.E., allowing us to know precisely when any Long Count date—recorded in Classic Maya—was written. The Long Count itself was divided into units called k’in (day), winal (20 days), tuun (360 days), k’atun (7,200 days), and b’aktun (144,000); although several larger units were habitually used, these five units were the most common. As the beginning date of the calendar was fixed to a Calendar Round (4 Ajaw 8 Kumk’u), the entire Long Count could be attached to the other two calendars. The result is that the beginning date in our own script would be written (Long Count + Calendar Round) as: 0.0.0.0.0 4 Ajaw 8 Kumk’u, or August 11, 3114 B.C.E. A sample date within the actual florescence of Classic Maya civilization would be 9.15.0.0.0 4 Ajaw 13 Yax, or August 20, 731 C.E. Needless to say, the calculations required to keep track of all three calendars are complex by any standard and are testament to the mathematical prowess of the Classic Maya. Today, archaeologists make such calculations via computer programs.
Astronomically, the Classic Maya kept track of lunar and planetary movements, creating further calendars by which to know precisely where and when each body would appear in the sky; some buildings were even designed to accommodate such phenomena. The sun, moon, and Venus were of particular interest, although some constellations as well as Mercury, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn were appreciated by the Maya. The Classic Maya were primarily concerned with solstices, equinoxes, and other dramatic celestial events. Given these concerns, it is probable that the Classic Maya were aware of inaccuracies in their solar calendar of 365 days. Nevertheless, no corrections (such as leap years) appear to have been made.

The other major technological achievement of the Classic Maya was their writing system, elements of which were in place among the Postclassic Maya until the Spanish Conquest of the sixteenth century. Although the earliest writing in Mesoamerica dates to approximately 900 B.C.E., the Classic Maya are credited with creating the most complex and complete writing system ever created in Mesoamerica. Like all other writing systems of this region, the Maya system was hieroglyphic in nature. Unlike others, however, the Maya system excelled in the ability to express person, tense, and other elements of complex grammar and syntax, to the extent that one could write poetry, prose, and even humorous phrases; the majority of inscriptions, however, are formulaic but riveting records of dynastic succession, divine kingship, warfare, sacrifice, ancestral/deity veneration, marriages, and political/trade relationships. The inscriptions consisted of two basic types of glyphs: logographs (signs equivalent to words) and syllables (signs equivalent to sounds). These were usually arranged top-to-bottom and left-to-right in columns. Dates were usually followed by a verb-object-subject (VOS) order, such that a sample phrase in Classic Maya might translate as: “(on) 4 Ajaw 13 Yax, (he) arrived at 7-Bone-Place, K’inich Yax K’uk’ Mo’.” Maya hieroglyphs were written on almost every medium available, although the materials remaining to archaeologists are primarily of stone and ceramic; large monoliths or stelae, for example, were quarried and moved for great distances before being carved with images of kings and stories of their deeds. Weighing several tons, they would have required considerable effort in their movement (without the wheel) through hills and jungle terrain. Unfortunately, no Classic Maya books, or codices, have survived to the present day; decayed fragments of Classic Maya codices and a few Postclassic books that survived the Conquest are all that remain. The scientific and technological innovations mentioned in this section persisted long after the collapse of Classic Maya civilization in the tenth century. The Postclassic Maya, from the tenth to the fifteenth centuries, employed tools and techniques that would have been recognizable to the Classic Maya people, although the days of the divine kings were long gone by the time of the Spanish Conquest.

The Toltecs (950–1170) and the Aztecs (1345–1521)

The abandonment of the southern Classic Maya cities in the tenth century (and new beginnings for the Postclassic Maya at northern Yucatecan sites such as Chichén Itzá and Mayapán) was accompanied by the political resurgence of expansionist states and empires in Central Mexico. As outlined in the introduction to this section, Postclassic Mesoamerica was characterized by increasing trade relationships with distant areas. One major technological consequence
of long-distance trade was the influx of metallurgical techniques into Mesoamérica from places such as Ecuador, Colombia, and Lower Central America. Although the first gold in Mesoamérica dates to around 600, it appears to have been a foreign import, with the first clear case of local metallurgy occurring in West Mexico around 800. Initially, metallurgy in West Mexico concentrated on working copper, although gold and silver were also employed; between 1200 and 1300 West Mexican metallurgists—perhaps through further long-distance contacts with Lower Central America and coastal South America—started creating alloys and using a wider variety of metals, including a type of bronze. As mentioned earlier, the materials produced from metals were often ritual objects or small utilitarian goods such as tweezers, needles, and axes; they were almost never fashioned into weapons or functional protective gear. Metal was primarily appreciated for its color, rarity, and ability to be fashioned into beautiful (even musical) objects, much like gold or silver is today. As a result, large civilizations to the east like the Toltecs or the later Aztecs, to whom this technology eventually spread, continued to use stone as the primary medium for weapons of war, farming implements, and the like.

As mentioned in the introduction to this section, many aspects of science and technology present in the 1400s would have been familiar to an individual from 400. What oftentimes changed was the ability of this technology to be altered and adapted for increasingly larger and more complex societies and political institutions. The Aztecs, in particular, are a good example of this. Population estimates for the entire Aztec empire, as mentioned in the Society section, range from 3.5 to 6.5 million people. Such a populous empire had never before been seen in Mesoamérica and would have required an enormous amount of resources. Although technologies such as terracing, irrigation, and swamp reclamation had all been known well before 400, the Aztecs of 1345 adapted the basics of these techniques to great advantage. Terrace walls built by the Aztecs, for example, have proved durable enough to the point where they continue to be used in farming within Mexico. Nearly all sources of fresh water throughout the Valley of Mexico were employed for irrigation—and frequently transported through aqueducts, an Aztec innovation—at the time of the Conquest.

However, the most readily identifiable agricultural technology associated with the Aztec empire were chinampas, or raised fields. These were a series of large, straightened ditches used to drain away the excess water from swamps. Between the ditches were artificial islands, which were augmented by soil from the swamp bottom. The islands were stabilized by trees and wooden stakes; they become home to a variety of cultivated plants originally germinated on floating reed rafts in the ditches. What made this technology so astonishing is that three to four crops could be grown each year in the chinampas, making them the most productive farming areas of the Aztec empire. Although the initial creation of chinampas is labor intensive, such production levels are, even with modern agribusiness, unprecedented.

Like the Maya, the Aztecs also employed a writing system, although it was far more pictorial in character. A given text could have not only logographs and syllables but also pictographs (narrative images “read” as text), and the subject matter was far more limited than the Classic Maya script. Most of the texts remaining to archaeologists are from codices of deerskin, cloth, or bark paper; they primarily deal with divination, agricultural cycles, and trade/tribute
from different provinces of the Aztec empire. The calendar employed by the Aztecs was the Calendar Round, although the names for days and months were different and largely associated with animals, plants, and other natural phenomena. As mentioned earlier, the sole use of the Calendar Round meant that the same combination of numbers, days, and months would occur every 52 years. This “reset” in the Aztec calendar was considered to be a dangerous time and required a number of appropriate sacrifices and rituals, collectively called the “New Fire Ceremony” (see “Religion” section).

Also like other Mesoamerican civilizations, the Aztecs were avid astronomers. They kept track of solar, lunar, and other planetary movements, seeking to predict their movements throughout the year. They also associated specific gods and traits to planets and constellations. For example, the planet Venus (when it was seen in the morning) was known as Tlahuizpantecuhtli and thought to be an enemy of the sun, throwing darts at it to prevent its rise. Moreover, although what is known about Aztec constellations is severely limited, the Aztecs seem to have paid attention to stars in the constellations Orion, Gemini, the Big Dipper, and Scorpio. Particular attention was also paid to comets and other transitory celestial phenomena: Several accounts of the Conquest cite the appearance of an unpredicted comet as an omen (possibly apocryphal) foretelling the coming of the Spanish in 1519.

Lower Central America and the Andes

Although large, literate urban societies were not characteristic of the societies stretching from Lower Central America to Colombia between 400 and 1400, the peoples of this region did engage with many of the practices and technologies associated with their immediate neighbors to the north and south, including monumental architecture in the form of earthworks and limited stone constructions as well as metallurgy. In fact, this region was home to an advanced, ancient metallurgical tradition centering on gold and dating to approximately 500 B.C.E. By 400, peoples of this region had long been using gold or gold and copper alloys for objects such as masks, figurines, and personal adornments; they were familiar with several casting methods, including the “lost-wax” technique (see “The Arts” section). In fact, it seems likely that the oldest gold in Mesoamerica, dated to 600, originally came from this region of the Americas.

The Andean region, consisting of mountainous terrain as well as coastal deserts, was one of the cradles of empire in the Americas and the source of many scientific and technological achievements. Between 400 and 1400, it was home to a series of states and empires that competed with one another for political and economic domination; by 400 most Andean civilizations had had a long history of urbanism and the technologies associated with it; for example, public monumental architecture, in the form of pyramidal buildings, may date back early as 3000 B.C.E. Masonry walls, terraces, and buildings, as well as decorative lapidary work had also begun by this period. Furthermore, technologies such as mining and metallurgy were well-established before 400, with early metallurgy in the Andes dating to 800 B.C.E.; techniques such as soldering, welding, casting, and alloying were about 1,000 years old by 400 C.E. Unlike some other parts of the Americas, however, none of the Andean civilizations to be
discussed employed a writing system in the traditional sense; the one exception may be the Inca.

**Moche (200–600 C.E.) and Nazca (200 B.C.E.–650 C.E.)**

In 400, the Andean region was dominated by two cultures based in desert coastal Peru: Moche and Nazca. In terms of science and technology, the Moche were accomplished architectural engineers on the north coast, creating some of the largest pyramids ever erected in South America; millions of adobe bricks and painted friezes were employed in the creation of pyramids housing sacrificial victims and richly attired rulers of the Moche state. Architecturally, Nazca pyramids on the south coast of Peru were somewhat more modest, although the famous “Nazca lines” are perhaps the most enduring images associated with this civilization. They consisted of hundreds of enormous images of animals, plants, and geometric figures and would have been relatively easy to create in terms of labor: Dark stones were removed from the desert to expose lighter ones beneath. However, the size and form of these images (some are up to 12 miles in length) would have required considerable planning and coordination, particularly in cases where they appear on flat, featureless terrain. Exactly how some of these were made—and why—remains open to speculation, ever-fueling proposals of varying credulity. Although neither the Moche nor the Nazca had a writing system, elite forms of communication similar to writing may have existed, particularly with regard to the Moche (see “The Arts” section).

**Tiwanaku (650–1000), Chimor (1000–1476), and the Birth of the Inca (1300–1532)**

Among the several states antecedent to the Inca, Tiwanaku and Chimor are perhaps the most famous. In terms of science and technology, Tiwanaku is perhaps most noteworthy for its architectural style, set dramatically among the mountains and plains of Peru, Bolivia, and northern Chile; although this style has antecedents, it was perfected by the Tiwanaku and adopted by later civilizations. The largest cut stones at the capital (also known as Tiwanaku, on the coast of Lake Titicaca), weighing between 100 and 200 tons apiece, are remarkable not only for having been moved up to 40 kilometers without wheels but also for having been set within buildings so tightly fit together that mortar was not required; each stone was cut to match its neighbor (and thus not of a standard size). Like later Inca buildings, Tiwanaku structures were fairly resistant to earthquakes or other disturbances and were complemented by drains and tunnels for water.

Chimor civilization was also noteworthy for its architecture. Inheriting the north coast of Peru from the Moche and eventually controlling approximately 620 miles of Pacific coast, Chimor in many ways anticipated what the Inca Empire was to become. Architectural engineering within this desert coast civilization was truly remarkable, with multistoried adobe compounds and a civic center at the capital, Chan Chan, stretching 2.3 square miles. Gridded cities with geometrically designed complexes of settlement were the result of meticulous urban planning, a characteristic that would be equaled—if not surpassed—by the Inca during their rise to power.

Although the origins of the Inca stretch back to 1000, the Incas were but one of many ethnic groups until 1438, when Sapa Inca Pachacuti began his conquest
of the Andes and coastal South America. In fact, readily definable “Inca” art, style, or other traits only emerge around 1375. As a result, it is difficult to isolate specific hallmarks of Inca science or technology for the period between 400 and 1400. Nevertheless, one might say that the Inca technologically approximated Tiwanaku civilization in architectural style, but on a much grander level: Using millions of workers at its height in the late fifteenth century, the Inca Empire was able to create vast cities such as Cuzco and Machu Picchu and over twenty thousand miles of roads stretching from Ecuador to Southern Chile. By 1400, the Inca had started along this path architecturally and employed the mortarless style pioneered by Tiwanaku. Inca architecture ranks as a marvel of engineering in the preindustrial world.

The Inca were likewise noteworthy, in terms of science and technology, for their achievements in medicine and astronomy. The Inca were known to have practiced trephination (cutting holes in the skull to relieve swelling from head injuries) as well as herbal medicine; coca leaves were used, as today, to lessen hunger, relieve pain, and provide energy. Astronomically, the Inca are known to have kept a calendar as well as records of stars, constellations, solstices, and equinoxes much like their counterparts in Mesoamérica; they set up stone towers around the capital, Cuzco, to mark the passage of celestial phenomena. Records of astronomical events, as well as mathematics and trade/tribute lists, were kept on quipu. These devices of knotted strings were once thought to have been mnemonic devices for the Inca, used to recall specific events. Recent discoveries, however, suggest that the quipu may have recorded more complex information, much like a writing system. As the quipu are deciphered it is likely that more on the science and technology of the Inca will come to light.
Amazonia and the Caribbean

The years prior to 400 had, in Amazonia and the Caribbean, seen large-scale population movements in which nearly every corner of this vast area had been colonized, with agricultural chiefdoms living in large, settled villages dominating the landscape. By 400 this process had largely wound down, and the incipient chiefdoms in Amazonia embarked upon a process of mound-building and huge earthworks. The Caribbean societies, spreading outwards from Amazonia in seaworthy canoes, had likewise settled down and begun to create large plaza-centered settlements. In terms of science and technology, one major development between 400 and 1400 was the creation, in Amazonia, of so-called black earth (terra preta) sites: sedentary villages in the Lower Amazon that bear evidence of managed forest gardens and manufactured agricultural landscapes. Contrary to the popular model of the Amazon as relatively infertile and inhospitable to large-scale agriculture, it would seem as if populations living at sites such as Santarem purposefully created agricultural land through a long-term process of fertilizing the earth—literally creating “black earth” for agriculture that continues to be fertile today. The discovery of such sites is a relatively recent development archaeologically; future studies may reveal further evidence of social complexity and the mechanisms behind this distinctively Amazonian technology of the Pre-Columbian Americas.

Further Reading


7. GLOBAL TIES

As noted in the Economy section, peoples of the Americas were often able to procure goods originating from distant places. Visitors from the Europe of the fifth century would likely be surprised, as many of the things that they would have taken for granted did not exist. Moreover, some objects and materials that were readily recognizable were not used in the same way. In terms of tools, the Americas were largely dominated by works of stone; although metals such as gold, copper, silver, and platinum were readily available in some places, they were usually employed for ornamentation and not typically used to fashion utilitarian implements or weapons. As noted in the “Science and Technology” essay, above, all potential beasts of burden in the Americas, save the camelids (e.g., llamas, alpacas, etc.) of the Andes, had been extinct since around 11,000 to 10,000 B.C.E. As a potential consequence of this major absence, the wheel was not adopted. Although the wheel was, in fact, known to some peoples of the Americas, it was (as far as we know) never employed for labor and, consequently, complex machines were unknown. Moreover, the sail was only in use in a few areas and absent among some key urban peoples, most notably those of Mesoamérica. All these factors limited the global ties of the peoples of the Americas. Yet there are many cases—in the prehistory of all regions—where long-distance trade not only occurred but also flourished. Such is a testament to the ingenuity of the peoples of the Americas.

Eastern Woodlands and the Great Plains

As mentioned in the “Economy” section, the year 400 C.E. was a poor time for ties between societies of the Eastern Woodlands and the Great Plains. Prior to this point, much of the eastern half of North America was linked through a series of trade networks; although the most distant networks were, presumably, never characterized by direct exchange (e.g., Wyoming was not directly engaged in trade with Florida), there had been a flow—if intermittent—of goods and ideas between the Rockies and the Atlantic. By the beginning of the Late Woodland Period (400–1000), this gradual exchange of cultural and material traditions had ended in the Eastern Woodlands. It had been replaced with a far more provincial system. War, social instability, and economic insularity were the rules of the day, and towns and villages withdrew into local networks.

Although the Great Plains did see a reduction in ties with the Eastern Woodlands during this era, it nevertheless seems to have had sporadic exchanges with places as distant as the Pacific Coast and the American Southwest, as evidenced by pottery styles and even exotic imports such as shell; such exchanges would continue well after the period of European contact.

The recovery of a wider system of exchange in the eastern half of North America came in the eleventh century with the birth of the Mississippian tradition.
Although certainly distinct in terms of levels of urbanization and degree of intensive agriculture, the Eastern Woodlands and the Great Plains saw connections once more. Artifacts—notably pottery—diagnostic of the Mississippian centers have been found at a wide variety of archaeological sites in the Great Plains, particularly during the height of such centers as Cahokia and Moundville. In fact, the period of greatest social and economic exchange between the two areas seems to have occurred between 1000 and 1200. By 1300, however, any major global ties had faded, and the Eastern Woodlands was becoming even more defined regionally than it had been. The decline of the Mississippian tradition between 1400 and 1500 would see new beginnings in other areas, notably in the northeast with such peoples as the Iroquois, but overall eastern North America became less global in its cultural and economic ties.

**American Southwest and the Great Basin**

Like the Great Plains, the Great Basin was a crossroads of cultures and ideas between 400 and 1400. As noted in other sections, the Fremont Culture (400–1300) of the Great Basin appears to have been a collection of regional societies bound together by a new, increasingly widespread agricultural tradition; these societies appear to have been in direct contact with and influenced by their surrounding neighbors, such that one can see traditions imported from the Great Plains or the American Southwest in Fremont artifacts.

The American Southwest, for its part, appears to have had closest economic and cultural ties—not surprisingly—with the peoples of the Great Basin, the Pacific Coast and Mesoamérica. Trade goods from these regions appear at archaeological sites in the Southwest (and vice versa). Between 1300 and 1500, however, the American Southwest appears to have been integrated into larger events taking place in North America: The region seems to have been invaded by waves of immigration from the Pacific Northwest, the Great Basin, and the Great Plains. New farmers as well as hunter-gatherers made the Southwest their homes, forever altering the local population ethnically and culturally. Explanations for this demographic upheaval have largely centered on climatic shifts associated with a cold period (the Little Ice Age) around 1400.

**The Hohokam (750–1450)**

The period of greatest global interaction for these peoples was perhaps the Preclassic Hohokam (700–1150). During this era, the Mesoamerican ballgame appears to have made its way into the American Southwest, perhaps via sites such as Casas Grandes, in northern Mexico, or similar sites in the Mexican state of Chihuahua to the west. Likewise, Mesoamerican imports such as parrots and copper bells also made their way to Hohokam sites. The latter were likely brought to the region, if directly, from the workshops of West Mexico, where Mesoamerican metallurgy was at its most advanced. From the Preclassic to the Classic (1150–1450), the Hohokam also appear to have maintained ties with the Pacific Coast: Shells from California were imported into the Gila River area and etched with the images of local animals. Agricultural collapse and climate change were the likely culprits of the end of the Hohokam tradition around 1450, when the population collapsed. Few remained in the area at the time of European contact.
Ancestral Pueblo (750–1450)

Sporadic movements into and out of the Colorado Plateau region during the Pueblo I and Pueblo II Periods (750–1150) was probably a major factor in the exchange of culture into and out of this area of the American Southwest. Connections between the Colorado Plateau and the Great Basin likely intensified during the Pueblo III period (1150–1300), when peoples from the latter region seem to have been making territorial incursions into the former. What followed was wholesale societal disruption, as the Colorado Plateau was abandoned and populations moved into the Rio Grande Valley. Despite these problems, however, the thirteenth century did see the invention of a pottery tradition that was to become widespread over the American Southwest: Salado Polychrome, often cited as a direct marker for a phenomenon known as the Southwest Cult. Somewhat analogous to the Southeast Cult or Southeastern Ceremonial Complex of the Eastern Woodlands, the Southwest Cult was a set of shared symbols on pottery indicating a general religious tradition involving agricultural fertility and water management (see Southern Cult). Thus one might say that the time between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, when portions of the Southwest experienced a demographic collapse, was a period when the area was unified by a (more or less) single religious tradition.

Pacific Coast, Arctic, and Subarctic

Between 400 and 1400, the peoples of the Pacific Coast were in intermittent contact with those of the Great Basin and the American Southwest, trading in shell and other local goods. These and other exchange networks were also responsible for exotic items found in coastal contexts, particularly within the Pacific Northwest, where obsidian, copper, shell, and even iron (likely traded from Asia into the Bering area) appear at coastal archaeological sites.

In terms of sheer geographic area, the Arctic and Subarctic worlds were among the largest areas in which long-distance trade occurred in the Americas. The Dorset and the Thule were present to encounter the Norse in their brief foray into the Americas around 1000; the Norse called the peoples they met “skraelings” in their saga of the discovery of Vinland, which, until the site of L’anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland was found, was thought to have been embellished at best. In terms of global ties, the Thule were probably the only peoples of the Americas to remain in long-term contact with the Old World: In addition to obtaining, through trade, items of copper from the interior of North America, they seem to have been trading limited quantities of iron from Asia as well as—in the brief case of the Norse—Europe. As a result the Thule were, for a brief period, the only tenuous link between the Pacific and Atlantic worlds.

Mesoamérica

The Mesoamérican world was, at times, what Robert Carmack and others have called a “world system,” for example, a region that was—to a certain extent—economically, culturally, and politically linked, where the fortunes of one affected those of the others. The Aztec world at the time of European contact in 1519, for example, fits this description. In addition to being the masters
of a multiethnic state encompassing a vast portion of Mesoamérica, the Aztecs were engaged with most of the peoples of Mesoamérica directly or indirectly through fighting, trading, or both. They fought regularly, for example, with the only other multiethnic empire in Mesoamérica, the Tarascans of West Mexico, and at times could count portions of the Valley of Oaxaca, another great culture area of Mesoamérica to the south, among their economic and political vassals. The Aztecs were likewise engaged with the Maya area, trading with the coastal centers of Yucatán (and thereby indirectly with the remaining Maya kingdoms of the interior) and fighting with the K’ichee Maya of the highlands for supremacy on the Pacific coasts of Chiapas, Mexico, and Suchitepequez, Guatemala; in the sixteenth century they managed to carve out a province there and had made the K’ichee their vassals. They had even subjugated parts of the Gulf Coast of Mexico and established enclaves in the trading centers of the Caribbean as well as in more distant locations, with the furthest of these possibly in Panama. As a result, the global impact of Late Postclassic peoples like the Aztecs was considerable: By this time, a significant portion of the Americas was cosmopolitan and interdependent. The roots of this interdependency, however, stretch back several hundred years.

The Teotihuacános (100 B.C.E. to 600 C.E.)

Other than the Olmecs of the Middle Preclassic (1200–400 B.C.E.), no civilization before the year 400 had so much impact in Mesoamérica as Teotihuacán. As mentioned in other essays, Teotihuacán was the dominant political, economic, and cultural force in Mesoamérica from approximately 100 B.C.E. to 600 C.E. Teotihuacáanos, either at the behest of their rulers or as independent fortune seekers, had set up puppet dynasties in the Maya lowlands by 400 C.E. and were in the process of increasing their influence among the highland Maya, the Zapotecs of the Valley of Oaxaca, the Gulf Coast of Mexico, and even far into northwest Mexico. Many of the places they came into contact with had, in short order, Teotihuacán-style art and architecture as well as an assemblage of Central Mexican artifacts (including ceramics and obsidian from near the great metropolis).

Furthermore, even following the demise of Teotihuacán around 600 C.E., many places in Mesoamérica were employing Teotihuacán-style imagery and symbolism for status reasons: Materials derived—or thought to derive—from Teotihuacán were viewed as prestigious well into the ninth and tenth centuries.

The Maya (Classic [250–909] and Postclassic [909–1697] Periods)

The Classic Maya kingdoms, by virtue of their individual independence, were relatively insular in terms of broader impact within Mesoamérica. However, the collective actions of the Maya kingdoms, often uncoordinated, had far-reaching implications for many Mesoamerican societies. This can be seen in the trade of jade within and outside the Maya area: As the only source for this most valuable of substances, the Motagua River Valley (on the present Guatemala–Honduras border) was mined for jade that was exported as far as Lower Central America (Intermediate Area). Salt, feathers, cacao, obsidian, and other local materials also made their way into northern Mesoamérica during the Classic Maya era, albeit in much smaller quantities than during the Postclassic.

It was, in fact, during the period following the collapse in the lowlands that the Maya area became a hub of economic activity and a major player in long-distance
exchange. Instead of many different centers in the southern area of the Yucatán, there were now a few major centers near reliable water sources in the north, many of which had concentrated populations; such centers required robust markets and more complicated networks of exchange. The result of this was the birth of a more global, market economy focused on external trade in goods such as honey, cotton, and chert in addition to more traditional exports. Although the individual kingdoms on the coast were, in terms of royal authority, relatively weak by Classic Maya standards, the economies were more robust and engaged with the wider world.

**The Toltecs (950–1170) and the Aztecs (1345–1521)**

The time between the rise of the Toltecs and the fall of the Aztec Empire was the most cosmopolitan era in Mesoamerican prehistory. The exchange of ideas and overall culture between the Maya area and Central Mexico had reached a new level following the collapse of Classic (250–909) civilization in the Maya lowlands, for example, with clear evidence for increased ties between the two regions occurring at Maya sites such as Seibal, Guatemala, and Chichén Itzá, Mexico. This cultural exchange was not one way, however, and there is good evidence to suggest that the Toltecs were influenced by the Maya as much as, if not more than, the reverse. Moreover, regions that had always been in major contact but still culturally and politically independent were being drawn together: The Gulf Coast of Mexico, the Valley of Oaxaca, and even parts of West Mexico were all being bound—as a result of increased trade, conquest, or both—more closely. This was particularly the case during the florescence of Aztec civilization.

Connections between Mesoamerica and other parts of the Americas, moreover, were becoming stronger by the last centuries of the first millennium C.E. To the north, the Mesoamerican ballgame appears to have spread up into the American Southwest as far as the Hohokam cultural sphere; resources from Mesoamerica, such as parrots and copper bells, likewise were moving northwards to places such as Casas Grandes. To the immediate south, ties were being forged between Mesoamerica and Lower Central America (the Intermediate Area). Although ceramics and ceramic styles, for example, had always moved between eastern Mesoamerica and Lower Central America, now such items were moving to great distances beyond their places of origin: Ceramics from Lower Central America began to make appearances in Central Mexico, indicating a greater level of contact between these regions. Such extra-Mesoamerican contacts mostly intensified during the Aztec hegemony in Central Mexico, largely due to the size and organization of the Aztec Empire but also a consequence of Aztec origins: The Aztecs themselves, who appear to have invaded Central Mexico in waves of migrations between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, appear to have originally come from the northern fringes of Mesoamerica and certainly brought with them ideas and practices not native to the region.

Perhaps the most noteworthy global ties between Mesoamerica and the outside world at this time, however, were the connections forged between West Mexico and Andean South America: Sometime around the late ninth or early tenth century, metallurgical technology spread from places such as Peru, Ecuador, and Colombia to the region of West Mexico. From there, it then spread to most of Mesoamerica. By the time of the Aztecs, the most accomplished
metalworking cultures were located in West Mexico (the Tarascans) and the Valley of Oaxaca (the Mixtecs). Although objects of metal had been traded northwards from Lower Central America and the Andes prior to the ninth century, it was only in the Toltec era that the technology to produce them was transmitted to Mesoamérica. This indicates a more sustained contact between parts of the Americas than had ever existed before.

**Lower Central America and the Andes**

Most global ties within Lower Central America (the Intermediate Area) were, not surprisingly, between Mesoamérica, Amazonia, and the Andean world between 400 and 1400. Jade and other Mesoamérican objects have been found deep into Central America, whereas long-term cultural exchange is indicated by ceramics mutually traded between the two areas throughout this period. Lower Central America was traditionally, however, more integrated with the areas to the south than it was to Mesoamérica. Indeed, until the tenth century, one could draw a border between Mesoamérica and the Intermediate Area in terms of metallurgical technology. After the tenth century, exchange between all of these regions seems to have intensified, with enclaves of foreign peoples established along the Atlantic and Pacific Coasts. The most noteworthy of these were the Aztec merchant enclaves, which ranged as far south as Panama. The Andes and Amazonia, however, present a very different picture in terms of global ties.

**Moche (200–600 C.E.) and Nazca (200 B.C.E.–650 C.E.)**

Much like the Classic Maya (250–909 C.E.) of Mesoamérica, the Moche and the Nazca peoples were far more insular politically and culturally than their successors on the coast of Peru. These cultures were certainly influenced by prior developments on the desert coast as well as the Andes during the Andean Preceramic (3000–1800 B.C.E.), Initial Period (1800–400 B.C.E.), and the Early Horizon (400–200 B.C.E.), particularly in terms of architecture. In terms of global ties, however, contacts between Moche or Nazca and other regions of the Americas were likely sporadic.

**Tiwanaku (650–1000), Chimor (1000–1476), and the Birth of the Inca (1300–1532)**

During the period of the first empires in South America, comprising Tiwanaku and Wari (650–1000), ties with other regions do appear to have become more pronounced. Prior long-term contact between the Andes and Amazonia seems resulted in the development of some hierarchically organized societies on the Amazonian side of the Andes, and presumably such interactions continued on—at the very least—a limited scale. Perhaps more importantly in terms of global ties, metallurgy from the Andes was introduced into Mesoamérica around the time of the first expansionist empires (this was probably not a coincidence) in South America.

By the time of Chimor and the Inca, empire-building in South America had reached its largest expression. The major empires had long since come into direct contact and conflict with individuals from Lower Central America and, at the time of European contact, the Inca were engaged in a seemingly inexorable push northwards. Ties with the western Amazon were also pronounced.
That being said, cultural exchange outside this immediate zone was, even at the height of the Inca Empire, sporadic at best.

Perhaps the most surprising contacts that the desert coast and the Andes had with the outside world were not with the North or East, but with the West: There are signs of ephemeral, but surprisingly influential, contact with eastern Polynesia after 700 and certainly by 1000. Certain agricultural crops native to the Andes—that is, sweet potatoes and bottle gourds—were clearly brought to eastern Polynesia, as they can be found in the archaeological record there (the sweet potato was a food staple in Polynesia from then on). Moreover, it is possible that the first sailing rafts in South America were brought to coastal Ecuador during this period; they, in turn, became a staple of the coastal peoples of South America. Despite these potential exchanges, however, there is no evidence for settlement of peoples in either direction, nor are there any other long-term shared cultural or technological traits in these regions. As this would be expected from consistent contact, it seems likely that any ties between the two were rare and very short lived.

Amazonia and the Caribbean

Prior to 500 C.E., Amazonia had seen massive diasporas of Arawak- and Tupiguarani-speaking groups. These had spread outwards from the western and southern Amazon, respectively, to colonize not only the rest of Amazonia but also the entire Caribbean world. Cultural groups like the Arawak-speaking Taino of Los Buchillones, Cuba, were thus the result of far-reaching population movements and cultural spread. Given that ball courts can be found at archaeological sites in the Caribbean, it seems clear that at points between 500 and 1400, Caribbean peoples had established ties with Mesoamérica and their exploits probably allowed for some limited cultural exchange with many of the peoples of the Gulf Coast of Mexico. Amazonian peoples were likewise in contact with peoples of the Intermediate Area. As a result, the cultural impact of Arawak- and Tupiguarani-speaking societies was geographically very significant indeed.

Some scholars believe, moreover, that there was limited, long-term contact between some of the earliest Andean societies or small Andean states and the peoples of Amazonia. There is some evidence, for example, of hierarchically organized societies on the Amazonian side of the Andes that bear similarities to civilizations further to the west. Further research in the Amazon will be needed to further tease out the relationship between this vast geographical zone and other societies of the Americas.

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Acutuba

The Amazonian site of Acutuba, located near present-day Manaus, Brazil, is one of the longest-occupied villages in South America. With people living here almost continuously from 500 B.C.E. to the colonial period, Acutuba provides us with a barometer for the major social and technological changes in the Central Amazon. Possibly first inhabited by Arawak speakers, the culture that first dominated Acutuba and the surrounding region is known as Barranoid. It was they who first determined the overall plan of Acutuba, which was a classic architectural arrangement for the central Amazon: Houses were arranged around a large, centralized plaza of approximately 10 acres. The Barranoid people who lived here used a diagnostic, modeled-incised type of pottery (named after this culture), one that was common in the region, between 500 B.C.E. and 900 C.E. Later phases of occupation at Acutuba show a blending of the Barranoid style with a more widespread ceramic tradition known as Amazonian Polychrome; the result was a regional variant called “Guarita,” which lasted until the colonial period.

Acutuba, like some other sites in the Amazon, is also noteworthy for having constructed earthen mounds and employing terra preta “black earth,” a fertile soil—created and managed by Amazonian peoples over time—used for agricultural purposes which stands in marked contrast to the relatively poor natural soils of Amazonia. For these reasons, some scholars have suggested that Acutuba was a populous urban center by 1000. There are even some archaeological indications that Acutuba was a major center for Amazonian trade. At the moment, however, the nature of Amazonian urbanism is ill defined, so it is difficult to say how sociopolitically complex Acutuba was. What is certain is that Acutuba, in addition to the site of Santarem in the Lower Amazon, is one of the best candidates for a densely populated, complex settlement in this region of the Pre-Columbian Americas.

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Ancestor Veneration

Ancestor veneration played a major role in most culture areas of the Pre-Columbian Americas. In general, it took the form of a belief system whereby deceased kin were interested in—and, more important, could play a role in—the affairs of the living. In most instances, ancestors needed to be fed, clothed, prayed to, or otherwise satisfied so as to ensure their continued assistance and to prevent them from becoming so angry that they took out their displeasure on the living. Sometimes, as was common in the early historic period in the American Southwest, the venerated dead were considered more as a group, for example, as a pool of ancestors largely undifferentiated in terms of identity. In other cases, specific individuals from a society might be singled out for veneration by a state; in these examples, not everyone would be considered an “ancestor” for the purposes of state ritual or prayer. However, the boundaries between these two types of ancestors were, even in societies that were more focused on one or the other, somewhat vague. In trying to understand how ancestor veneration works in the Pre-Columbian context, one of the key points involves remembrance: As memories fade, only undifferentiated dead or particularly well-known ancestors remain, such that who or what is venerated can change over time.

In most societies where it occurred, ancestor veneration was an important part of reinforcing and maintaining social, political, and ritual well-being. In the case of elites, ancestors were often used to justify the wealth and power of their descendents. This was particularly the case in the chiefdoms and kingdoms of the Americas, most notably those of Mesoamérica. There the community of the dead quite literally organized the community of the living: In the Maya lowlands of the Classic Period (250–909), for example, kings based their right to rule on lineage ties to deified ancestors. Sacred shrines were often at the heart of Maya sites, and attention to them by the king was a matter of correct ritual behavior and of political necessity.

Some of the most venerated of Classic Maya ancestors, for example, were K’inich Yax K’uk’ Mo’ of Copan and K’inich Janaab’ Pakal of Palenque. For the former, much of the city of Copan seems to have been built around his tomb, with shrines and images of him built by subsequent kings and persisting for the entire history of the site. His most famous shrine, a building dubbed Rosalila by archaeologists, was so venerated that it was carefully buried with earth before a new temple was erected on top of it. Typically, the Maya would damage and at least partially destroy temples before they built new ones in their place; such reverence is unheard of not only at Copan but also at most sites in the Maya lowlands. In the case of K’inich Janaab’ Pakal, almost all of the subsequent rulers of Palenque continued to dedicate monuments bearing his portrait or name for the next 100 years. Mortuary shrines for both of these kings were visited for several generations after their deaths, with even their tombs visited and offerings placed by the Classic Maya nobility. Such behavior continues, albeit in modified form, to the present era in the Maya area and in other parts of the Americas.
Atlatl

Invented over 30,000 years ago, the atlatl or spear thrower is a notched, wooden hunting device used to extend the normal range and overall throwing power of a dart or spear. Essentially, the atlatl consists of a wooden shaft with a handle on one side and a cupped or notched protrusion on the other end, into which the base of the spear is fitted. In an action similar to that of a baseball pitch, the spear is thrown from the atlatl in an overhand motion and—if done correctly—can fly over 100 meters. Accuracy is affected not only by this motion but also by such factors as spear length, wind, projectile point size, and atlatl design. What makes the atlatl so interesting is that it has been used by peoples throughout the world at different points in history (indeed, there are places where it continues to be employed) and was used in some parts of the Americas regularly until the sixteenth century. As such, the atlatl is one of the most widely utilized and long-lived hunting devices in human history.

By 400, the atlatl had largely been abandoned as a hunting tool by most peoples of the Americas in favor of the bow and arrow, a process that had begun by the beginning of the millennium and one that was almost certainly finished by 500. However, the atlatl did remain in common use in a few regions, most notably as a hunting/fishing device in the Arctic. Perhaps the most noteworthy wielders of the atlatl between 400 and 1400, however, were the peoples of Mesoamérica. In this portion of the Americas, the atlatl was most closely associated with the inhabitants of Central Mexico and was employed not only as a hunting/fishing device but also as a weapon of war. The Teotihuacános and the later Aztecs used atlatls to extend the range of their war darts. In the places that they conquered or influenced, the atlatl took on a symbolic quality: The Classic Maya (250–850), for example, always associated the atlatl with the great metropolis of Teotihuacá and used images of atlatl-wielding warriors in their sculpture when they wanted to illustrate powerful conquerors. Among the Maya, in fact, the atlatl as a symbol of power far outlived the actual metropolis of Teotihuacá, which collapsed by the early seventh century. Classic Maya kings of the eighth century were still showing themselves with atlatls in their sculpture, portraying themselves as descendents of a powerful warrior tradition. When the Aztecs met the Spaniards on the fields of battle in the sixteenth century, they were using atlatls along with bows and arrows to hurl projectiles at their enemies. The Spanish borrowed the Aztec term for this fishing tool and weapon of war: atlatl.

Further Reading
Avonlea

Like its more famous “contemporary” from Alberta, Canada, Head-Smashed-In (5400 B.C.E. to 1600 C.E.), Avonlea was a place used specifically for killing—and then processing—bison. Located in southern Saskatchewan, Avonlea was one of a host of such places on the Great Plains, including sites such as Glenrock, Muddy Creek, Ruby, Wardell, and Vore. Instead of being a bison jump, as at Head-Smashed-In (here, bison were herded over a cliff), it was simply a “corral.” From 500 all the way to the sixteenth century, bison would be driven to this place by large, cooperative hunting parties, who would perform shamanic rituals before trying to move the bison in the direction they wanted. It was a testament to the hunters’ skill that they could track and (sometimes) actually get the bison to move in the direction that they wanted: Lacking horses until the sixteenth century, all of this was done on foot and thereby depended upon local knowledge of where the bison would be and what they would do.

Avonlea is also important because it is one of the earliest sites in which the bow and arrow makes an appearance on the Great Plains, having been introduced there around 500. In fact, Avonlea is the type name for one of the earliest side-notched projectile points yet found on the Great Plains. In addition to allowing for smaller (and more easily made) projectile points than those needed for an atlatl (a spear thrower), the bow and arrow revolutionized bison hunting on the Plains. It enabled hunters to kill more prey and even gain a surplus of meat or hides, with which Plains peoples could trade. In particular, they could exchange such valuables for items not normally found on the Great Plains, such as pottery from the Southwest or the Great Basin. This, in turn, facilitated contact between areas that would not usually interact. Hence, places like Avonlea were representative of new changes sweeping across the Great Plains, including the greater facilitation of cultural and technological exchange.

Further Reading

Ayllu

In some ways comparable to the Aztec calpolli system, an ayllu was the basic unit of religious and sociopolitical life within Andean societies by the Late Horizon (1476–1533), with antecedents dating back at least several hundred years. Typically ruled by two (or more) curaca nobles, one for each moiety or descent group, ayllus were familial groups of real and fictive kin organized so as to be economically self-sustaining. An ayllu would usually have its own huaca or sacred location, which would be ritually fed with offerings. Likewise, ayllus would educate their members in agricultural and domestic skills, with descent groups sharing the burden of work for the ayllu.
and regularly supplying labor—as tax—for public works projects of the Inca Empire. In return, an ayllu could be assured of protection from military and socioeconomic disaster, such as famines or flooding, by gaining access to imperial storehouses in times of need. They are perhaps best understood as a mutual, extended familial support network with ritual undertones: Nearly all aspects of land tenure, from inheritance to pastoral management, were governed by the ayllu. Far from being communal in all aspects, however, the ayllu was characterized by a civil and a religious hierarchy, in which some members—ultimately the nobles—claimed closer descent to the founding ancestors of individual ayllus.

As noted earlier, this form of social organization certainly predates the Late Horizon and the Inca Empire, with clear archaeological evidence of similar social groupings in the Late Intermediate Period (1000–1476); they probably functioned similarly for the prior states of the Andes like Tiwanaku or Wari. However, in the absence of written records it is difficult to determine their precise nature. Most of what we know about ayllus comes from Spanish ethnohistorical accounts of Inca organization as well as anthropological research within ayllu communities of the Andes today.

Further Reading

Aztlan

The word *Aztlan*, or “Place of the White Heron,” refers to the legendary homeland of the Chichimecs, a series of Nahua-speaking desert peoples who migrated into the Valley of Mexico from the northern frontiers of Mesoamerica sometime between 1150 and 1250. According to later Nahua legends, the Chichimecs emerged from a series of seven caves beneath a sacred mountain within the homeland of Aztlan. Collectively known as Chicomoztoc, the “Seven Caves” corresponded to the birthplaces of seven different Nahua-speaking groups: the Acolhua, Chalca, Mexica, Tepaneca, Tlahuica, Tlaxcalan, and Xochimilca. Divinely inspired to leave Aztlan for places further south, the Chichimecs abandoned their homeland for Central Mexico and, under the tutelage of deities such as Mixcoatl and Huitzilopochtli, conquered the preexisting inhabitants of the region.

Archaeologically, there is plenty of evidence for population upheavals and migrations during this era. Although the location of Aztlan is currently unknown, these Nahua-speaking peoples who moved into Central Mexico did come to dominate the previous inhabitants, although it is clear that they borrowed many of their cultural traditions. The resultant blend of Chichimec and local traditions resulted in a common, widespread culture that we know today as “Aztec.” One of the Chichimec groups from Aztlan, the Mexica, would come to dominate the others between 1428 and 1519, with the resultant state known as the Aztec Empire. Thus Aztlan can be counted as the mythical homeland of the Aztecs. In point of fact, the word *Aztec* was never used by these peoples: It is a word derived from Aztlan and was created as well as popularized by Europeans in the nineteenth century. Since that time many theories, some purely
speculative or even fantastical, have been suggested for the actual location of Aztlan, ranging from Utah to Wisconsin to northern Mexico.

Further Reading

Ballgame

The ballgame, sometimes called the “Mesoamerican ballgame,” was an athletic sport as well as a ritual invented sometime around 1400 B.C.E. by the Olmecs on the Gulf Coast of Mexico. That being said, it was widely adopted by all major Mesoamerican societies such that it could be found from northern Mexico all the way to western Honduras in a near continuum by the time of European contact. It was played sporadically, if not continuously, throughout the colonial period and into the modern era, and is currently enjoying a revival in some parts of Mesoamerica.

The play, rules, and even equipment of the Mesoamerican ballgame varied with time and space, but the basic idea of this team exercise seems to have been to strike a rubber ball such that it went into the opponents “end zone” or even a stone ring, usually set up on the side walls of the court. The playing alley was usually shaped like an “I” or similar, sunken somewhat below the normal ground surface with walls of earth or masonry (other courts, most notably in northwest Mexico, were round). Players would wear body armor to protect themselves from the ball, which, as it was of solid rubber and sometimes of great size, was capable of seriously injuring them; likewise, they would wear gear in places where the ball was allowed to strike them.

Symbolically, the game was set in a space that connected the living surface world with the Mesoamerican realm of death, the Underworld. The dead—and even the sun, on a daily basis—were believed to journey here and, as a result, the game could take on supernatural as well as cosmological significance. Human sacrifice, moreover, was sometimes part of the ritual associated with the ballgame. There is much popular literature on the association between human sacrifice and the ballgame, but the specifics of who actually died and when they were killed are not uniform for Mesoamerica. Suffice to say, the individuals killed before, during, or after ballgames are almost always depicted as war captives.

In places where we have visual depictions or descriptions of the ballgame, such as in the Maya lowlands or West Mexico, ballgames seem to have been played for a variety of reasons under different circumstances.
Sometimes they appear to have taken place just for fun: Some ball courts were simple affairs, the playing alleys built well outside city centers and clearly not designed for mass elite spectacle. In other cases, most notably among the Classic Maya (250–850) and the Aztecs (1325–1521), ballgames were occasionally mechanisms for diplomacy, with rulers—or surrogates for them—playing one another. Likewise, ballgames were, as with some sports today, occasions for serious gambling: The Aztecs, for example, are known to have bet themselves into (temporary) slavery over the outcomes of such contests.

The ballgame as a concept seems to have been exported out of Mesoamérica to the American Southwest for time. Between 700 and 1250, ball courts were built and used by the Hohokam of Arizona. Their courts were round rather than rectangular and appear to have the most similarities with those employed by peoples on the fringes of northern Mesoamérica, who themselves had adopted and adapted the Mesoamérican ballgame from places further south. The Hohokam abandoned the ballgame in the thirteenth century, and it is not known whether they, like the Mesoaméricans, attached supernatural or cosmological significance to it. Most archaeologists, however, believe that the Hohokam Ballgame, like its ancestor, did combine ritual with sport.

**Further Reading**


**Batán Grande**

This archaeological site in the Lambayeque region of the north coast of Peru was the largest and most powerful city in the area between 800 and 1100. Following a series of massive natural disasters that weakened and ultimately precipitated the decline of Moche civilization between 700 and 800, the political scene on the north coast came to be dominated by two powers: the empire of Chimor and the Lambayeque city-states (also known as Sican Culture), a loose confederation of polities dominated by Batán Grande. According to native accounts, Batán Grande was founded by a grandson of the quasi-historical culture hero Naymlap; it was, according to the story, one of twelve such federated and related settlements in the Lambayeque region.

Archaeologically, we know that between 800 and 1000, Batán Grande grew into a major city with an urban core of approximately 1.5 square miles. It appears to have become a favored locale for burial as well, with thousands of elite interments having been discovered thus far. Unfortunately, the majority of the known interments at Batán Grande have been looted for their gold. From the looted objects, however, it is clear that Lambayeque continues some of the traditions found in Moche civilization; moreover, there is a clear continuum from Lambayeque to succeeding cultural traditions in the area.

Like Moche, moreover, Batán Grande was hit hard by natural disasters: An especially strong El Niño event in 1100 appears to have flooded the site and
precipitated its abandonment. Interestingly enough, the native accounts also mention such a disaster in connection with Lambayeque: A later descendent of Naymlap angers the gods and precipitates its collapse. Although the Lambayeque region did recover, it was eventually conquered by the empire of Chimor in the fourteenth century.

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Cacao

Although the wild variety of the cacao tree—whose fruits hang from its trunk rather than its branches—appears to be native to the Amazon and Orinoco river basins of South America, cacao does not appear to have been of great importance to this region. Rather, it was the peoples of Mesoamérica who held cacao in great regard, using its beans to make the first chocolate in the world. Like all peoples who encountered chocolate before 1591, from the Americas to Europe, Mesoamerican civilizations drank their chocolate: There was no such thing as solid chocolate until that time. In the Pre-Columbian world, chocolate was a drink reserved for elites and was a mark of high status. It was the only major stimulant drink in the Americas until tea and coffee were imported by the Europeans. In Europe, it was to become the most popular stimulant drink until the mid-seventeenth century. And although solid chocolate appears to have been invented early in the colonial period—in present-day Guatemala—the chocolate bar, as we know it, was not invented until the early nineteenth century.

We do not know how cacao was imported to Mesoamérica. Some scholars have even suggested that the original range of the cacao tree extended as far north as Chiapas, Mexico, so it may not have been imported at all. What is clear is that Mesoamerican peoples domesticated this plant and that the most likely individuals (but not the only candidates) to have done so were the Maya, sometime during the Preclassic Period (1200 B.C.E.–250 C.E.). It is actually from the ancient Maya word kakaw, that we get the word for these beans: Most of the peoples of Mesoamerica borrowed this word and modified it in their languages, including the Aztecs, who used the word cacaoatl (“chocolate water”) to refer to the final product. Cacaoatl may be the original source of the English word for chocolate, although there are other possibilities.

Chocolate as a drink was made by gathering and fermenting the fruits of the cacao tree. Their seeds were then taken out, dried, and peeled before they were finely ground. The grounds were then mixed with water as well as a host of ingredients that varied according to region, time period, and taste: Ground chili peppers, maize dough, fruits, vanilla, and possibly honey were the main additives. One of the reasons why this drink was so prestigious in Mesoamérica was because cacao could only be grown within portions of that region: The Maya area was ideal for growing this tropical fruit, whereas Central Mexico
was not. As a result, peoples such as the Aztecs had to import chocolate—either peaceably or as tribute—to enjoy it. The ultimate consequence of the value of chocolate was that it came to be used as money, with the cacao beans being the smallest, lowest form of currency in some parts of Mesoamérica.

Further Reading

Cahokia

As the most famous of all of the mound-building settlements of the Mississippian era (1000–1500), Cahokia was the most populous center in the present-day United States between 1050 and 1250. With population estimates widely varying from as little as four thousand to as much as forty thousand, it is difficult to say how densely settled this site was, but it was certainly built on a grand scale: For example, the largest mound, popularly known as Monk’s Mound, is over 100 feet tall and covers 16 acres alone. Close to modern St. Louis, Missouri, the site is characterized by over one hundred earthen mounds of various shapes and sizes, erected in stages so as to give the appearance of several steps or courses. It is also noteworthy for its large, open plaza, as well as a wooden palisade protecting the center of the site. In its heydey, Cahokia was at the top of a local hierarchy of over fifty sites and appears to have been an important locus of sociopolitical and religious activity, particularly with regard to the Southern Cult or Southeastern Ceremonial Complex. It declined by the fourteenth century and was long abandoned by the time of European contact.

One of the reasons why Cahokia is so important to the prehistory of the Americas is that it, together with Moundville, Alabama, provides us with the best case for an indigenous state north of Mexico. Some archaeologists have characterized Cahokia as a huge, populous urban center, with public works, craft specialization, and a politically centralized elite dominating the Midwest in the eleventh and twelfth centuries; in this model the dominant groups were vastly different, in terms of personal wealth and power, from the average inhabitant of the site. Others see Cahokia as an unusually complex chieftain, where the chief did not live a vastly different life from the rest of the population and craft specialization extended only to a select few elite objects. In that model, a modest population built up the site as well as its mounds over generations, participating in a cultural exchange of ideas with other Mississippian centers. Clearly there is much disagreement on the size and nature of Cahokia: There is no consensus as to whether Cahokia (or Moundville) represented a sharp break with local social and political traditions. Certainly, settlements such as Cahokia were more complex than had previously existed, but whether or not they represented something new—versus an elaboration of the old—is not something that is going to be resolved soon. One argument that is somewhat in favor of the “state” hypothesis is that like peoples from other archaic state-level societies, the inhabitants of Cahokia practiced human sacrifice in elite
mortuary ritual. The interment within Mound 72 at Cahokia, perhaps the most famous burial in the Southeast, included an elite man who was accompanied by twenty-thousand shell beads, eight-hundred arrowheads, sheets of copper and mica, and a host of other objects. Also included as part of his burial were three high-status men and women as well as four decapitated men missing their hands. In a nearby (and related) pit, archaeologists found the remains of over fifty young women, at least some of whom appear to have been strangled.

Further Reading

Calakmul

This archaeological site in Yucatán, Mexico, was one of the preeminent cities of the Lowland Maya. Certainly settled by the Late Preclassic (300 B.C.E.–250 C.E.), Calakmul steadily grew in population and political influence for hundreds of years thereafter. It eventually became the largest of the Classic Maya (250–850) cities and a bitter rival of Tikal. Although the majority of its hieroglyphic monuments have not weathered the centuries well, archaeologists are continuing to learn more about the past at this major Maya center. Known to the ancient Maya as *Kaan* (kingdom of *Kaanal*), Calakmul embarked upon a series of political and military maneuvers in the sixth century to threaten and isolate its rival: It conquered, subjugated, or allied itself with many of the major players of the Classic era, including Caracol, Dos Pilas, El Peru, Naranjo, and Piedras Negras. These maneuvers ultimately resulted in the utter defeat of Tikal, to the extent that no new monuments were erected there for most of the sixth and seventh centuries. The capture of the ruler of Tikal, Wak Chan K’awiil, in 562 by the king of Calakmul—as well as a series of victories over Palenque shortly thereafter—marked a turning point in the political fortunes of the *Kaan* kingdom.

Calakmul was at the apex of its power in the seventh century, and its epicenter may have been home to over fifty-thousand people. Under kings such as Yuknoom Ch’een II (r. 636–686) or his son, Yuknoom Yich’aak K’ahk’ (r. 686–695), Calakmul built some of the largest temple-pyramids in the Maya Lowlands (Structure 2, for example, was the largest temple-pyramid of the Classic era) and extended its influence over much of the Central Petén. Its vassals were many and geographically widespread, and although they often squabbled among themselves their individual allegiance to Calakmul generally held. Some of the most successful attacks on Tikal, for example, were made by allies such as Dos Pilas or Caracol seemingly at the behest of Calakmul. For whatever reason, however, the kings of Calakmul were unable to fully subjugate or destroy Tikal and its allies. Their gradual resurgence under seminal leaders such as K’inich Janaab’ Pakal (r. 615–683) of Palenque and Jasaw Chan K’awiil I (r. 682–734) of Tikal eroded the power base of the loose Calakmul confederation. For whatever reason, the great center was largely unable to protect its vassals...
during this time. Disaster for Calakmul finally came in 732 with the capture and public killing of its king, Yuknoom Took’ K’awiil, by Jasaw Chan K’awiil I in the central plaza at Tikal. Although future kings of Calakmul were to follow, the site experienced a precipitous decline in the latter half of the eighth century from which it was unable to recover. By the tenth century Calakmul, like most of its contemporaries, had been abandoned to the ravages of the jungle, its royal dynasty long since destroyed.

**Further Reading**


**Calmecac**

Between 1325 and 1519, the Aztec Empire was the most powerful military and political force in Mesoamerica. Although it is most commonly associated with warfare and militaristic expansionism, the Aztec Empire was remarkable for its time and place in its social institutions. One of the most basic characteristics of the empire was its emphasis on education: All boys and girls were required to attend a school at some point between 10 and 20 years of age, with separate schools for males and females. Aztec schools were divided into two types, known as the telpochcalli and the calmecac. The telpochcalli was a school largely for commoners and could be found in nearly every Aztec town. Males there were primarily trained in the basics of agriculture as well as warfare, whereas females learned domestic skills as well as the basics of textile production. The latter was a skill essential to the functioning of the empire, as textiles were often provided as tribute to the Aztec capital at Tenochtitlán. A calmecac was a school for nobles and select individuals being trained for governmental and administrative positions, the priesthood, or leadership in battle. Literacy and “correct speech” were of paramount importance to elite education. Men and women were trained in all manner of courtly skills and behavior and, in a sense, taught how to perform as a member of the nobility or upper class. It should be mentioned, however, that in the calmecac and the telpochcalli, all students learned how to sing, dance, and play musical instruments. Although the primary function of school was to prepare for the daily activities—and hazards—of Aztec life, particularly with respect to warfare, the arts were considered an essential part of Aztec education.

**Further Reading**


**Calpolli**

In the towns and cities of the Aztecs (1325–1521), a calpolli was a residential ward or block of land serving as a basic unit of settlement within the empire,
oftentimes factoring into administrative needs and decisions, such as the calculation of annual tribute payments. Given the size of the Aztec Empire and the many peoples within it, the relative importance of the calpolli varied from region to region. In some places, people from the same calpolli shared a common occupation, with the land maintained and managed by a calpolli council; land here was communal in that it could not be bought, sold, or otherwise dispatched but as a group. These calpollis, in turn, were under the jurisdiction of a noble, with the nobles themselves living there but having their own lands apart from the calpolli where peasants were not allowed. The well-excavated towns of Cuexcomate and Capilco, for example, may have been examples of this system. With over one hundred houses, the calpolli town of Cuexcomate had its own palace for a noble and his family as well as a temple and perhaps a telpochcalli school; there, peasant children aged 10 to 20 would be expected to learn the arts as well as martial, agricultural, and domestic skills (see Calmecac).

In other portions of the Aztec Empire, calpollis were of minimal importance or even absent. Nobles might, for example, directly own lands upon which peasants were attached by daily service and annual tribute. Ever-increasing tribute payments as well as worsening environmental conditions in the late years of the Aztec Empire increased the gap between nobles and commoners drastically, such that for many the calpolli—with its council—was probably a welcome buffer institution.

Further Reading

Casas Grandes

Located in the northwest part of Chihuahua, Mexico, near the Mexico-U.S. border, the Pre-Columbian settlement of Casas Grandes (1130–1500) was an important stop on the Postclassic (909–1519) trade route between Mesoamérica and the American Southwest. Like peoples from the Southwest, the inhabitants of Casas Grandes—and surrounding settlements—created residential, storied apartment compounds of adobe and had elaborate water-management systems. Similarities to Mesoamerican culture included the presence of an I-shaped ball court (see Ballgame), stone-faced architecture, and craft centers producing copper bells similar to those being manufactured in West Mexican, Mesoamerican communities of that time. Effigy mounds, a local innovation, as well as craft production involving marine shell, were also hallmarks of this site, which at its height housed perhaps twenty-five hundred people. Moreover, these inhabitants appear to have been importing and raising scarlet macaws, native to Mesoamerica. Casas Grandes, also known as Paquimé, began to decline in the final decades of the fifteenth century, when public architecture fell into ruin. Residential abandonment followed soon after, and by 1500 the site was deserted.

Casas Grandes and related local communities are also known archaeologically for their pottery, which is usually white or red and decorated in brilliant colors or earth tones. Ceramics in the overall forms of animals or humans are also common, and so distinctive is the Casas Grandes ceramic type that it has
been identified in archaeological contexts all over the American Southwest. Given that regions to the north and west show clear evidence of Mesoamericán influence during this time, it is likely that this area of Chihuahua played a role in the spread of cultural ideas—and goods—between the Southwest, northern Mexico, and Mesoamérica. The period of greatest exchange seems to have been in the early Postclassic, when Central Mexican powers such as the Toltecs (700–1200) and Southwest societies such as the Preclassic Hohokam (700–1150) were at their height. The Toltecs actually appear to have been trading with Casas Grandes, although the extent of this trade is not fully understood. Casas Grandes, then, is an important site for its apparent connections to two major worlds as well as the indigenous developments in northern Mexico. However intermittent, it stands as a testament to contact between cultural areas in the Americas.

Further Reading

Chaco Canyon

Although signs of sporadic occupation in Chaco Canyon, New Mexico, located in the Four Corners region of the American Southwest, date back thousands of years, it was not until the founding of Shabik'eschee in the late fifth century that the area saw permanent settlement. Small farming settlements spread here and into the San Juan basin of the Colorado Plateau thereafter, but population levels remained low for the next 300 to 400 years. Between 800 and 900, these farming communities began to get larger, with subterranean kivas (communal sociopolitical and religious spaces) and the beginnings of masonry architecture for either residential or ritual functions. Between 950 and 1050, however, this trend intensified greatly. Communal masonry buildings with hundreds of rooms—called “great houses”—exploded over the landscape of the San Juan basin. This building activity intensified over the next 100 years and was particularly concentrated within Chaco Canyon. Dubbed the “Chaco phenomenon,” these events abruptly took a turn for the worse by the mid-twelfth century. By 1200, most of Chaco Canyon was abandoned, and new population centers had sprung up to the north.

Archaeologists have fiercely debated the events surrounding the Chaco phenomenon: Why it was settled so rapidly has been a topic laden with environmental and religious explanations. Most environmental explanations center on the idea that Chaco became an agriculturally desirable place to live in the early eleventh century (or even earlier); conflicting environmental data has portrayed Chaco Canyon as a forested oasis, a lacustrine paradise, or an inhospitable desert. Religious explanations usually portray Chaco Canyon as a pilgrimage center, with turquoise and other precious objects ritually deposited by pilgrims—themselves from disparate geographic origins—at this sacred center in the Southwest. At the moment, there is enough archaeological evidence to support both of these explanations, with ideology and favorable climate not being
mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, archaeological consensus does not look to be in the immediate future, and explanations for the abandonment of Chaco Canyon—almost as rapid as its settlement—are equally elusive.

**Further Reading**


**Chichén Itzá**

The ancient Maya site of Chichén Itzá was one of the most powerful cities of the early part of the Postclassic (909–1519) and, for part of that time, was the largest settlement in the northern lowlands. Up until recently, Chichén Itzá was believed to have been a city-state dominated by the Toltecs, a major civilization of Central Mexico. According to native accounts from the early colonial period as well as prior archaeological research, the site had risen to local prominence in the Yucatán by the Late Classic (600–909). Native accounts held that around 987, a Toltec lord from the site of Tula named Ce Acatl Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl and his followers migrated to Chichén Itzá and came to power, displacing the local Itzá Maya elite. Founding a dynasty that was to last until the site’s violent destruction between 1200 and 1250, this figure brought Toltec influence to the Maya area and transformed Chichén Itzá into the principal economic and political force in southern Mesoamérica.
Recent scholarship, however, has demonstrated that at least part of this story is wrong. It is now known that Chichén Itzá, as a major power, predated the rise of the Toltecs in Central Mexico: Its period of greatest florescence and power was between 750 and 1050. To be sure, the art and architecture of Chichén Itzá (and those cities in the Maya area with which it had prolonged contact) show styles long associated with the Toltecs. As the Toltecs of Tula did not become a major power in Central Mexico until 900, however, there is a distinct possibility that Chichén Itzá influenced Tula—and not the other way around.

The revised dates also set Chichén Itzá as a direct beneficiary of the Maya collapse: All of the sites of the southern lowlands, from Tikal and Palenque to Calakmul and Copan, were being abandoned as Chichén Itzá grew in strength. Other sites in the northern lowlands seem to have benefited from the collapse as well, including the major centers of Uxmal and Coba, and now appear to have been in direct competition with the northern metropolis. Chichén Itzá seems to have won this protracted engagement, however, conquering parts of the Coba kingdom and gaining control over lucrative maritime and inland trade routes, where salt, textiles, and cacao (chocolate) were imported and exported to many parts of Mesoamérica on a massive scale.

Such trade enabled Chichén Itzá to become a new version of the Classic Maya kingdoms of Tikal or Calakmul for a time. Chichén Itzá became a major center for pilgrimage, in part due to its newfound power and as a result of its proximity to a gigantic cenote, or water-filled sinkhole, into which precious items—including sacrificed individuals—would be thrown (the name Chichén Itzá means “Well of the Itzá”). Building a massive ball court (see Ballgame), the Monjas Palace, and the iconic Castillo Pyramid, the rulers of Chichén Itzá could boast of being the natural successors to the splendor of the Classic Period (250–909).

Yet Chichén Itzá was different from these earlier centers in many respects. Divisions between different types of elites, notably merchants, priests, and warriors, were more pronounced than they ever had been. Elite factions, often-times centered on competing lineages, were now more the rule than the exception; the kings of Chichén Itzá did not hold absolute power and had entered into power-sharing arrangements with groups of nobles in councils. Economically, people at Chichén Itzá concentrated more on producing goods for trade than their ancestors had ever been, and Mesoamérica was seeing the birth of a market economy. As a result, Chichén Itzá can be thought of as a transition between the sociopolitical and economic organization of the Classic Period (250–909) and the new order of the Postclassic (909–1519). It does seem to have suffered a violent destruction around 1050, perhaps—as in native accounts—by an internal, factional conflict. Some of its peoples are believed to have migrated further south, to Lake Petén Itzá in present-day Guatemala (see Tayasal).

Further Reading
Chimor

The empire of Chimor, founded by its quasi-mythical ancestor Taycanamu at Chan Chan, on the north coast of Peru, was the second-largest empire ever to reign in South America. Together with the Lambayeque city-states (see Batán Grande), Chimor was one of the two states, which followed after the disintegration of Moche civilization. Chimor, by far, was the dominant player and had come to dominate the Moche Valley around 900. Shortly thereafter, it sought to expand its sociopolitical domains and had begun a campaign of conquest along the coast that was, by 1450, to stretch over 600 miles. From southern Ecuador to southern Peru, Chimor could boast that it had conquered all of the land held by the previous, powerful coastal states of South America. In the late fourteenth century, however, Chimor would see its holdings and empire challenged—and destroyed—by an upstart Andean culture: the Inca.

The Chimor capital of Chan Chan was the largest city of its day on the north coast, housing approximately twenty-nine thousand people. Like other settlements in this area, the capital was built of mud-bricks and adobe and consisted of a political center bearing vast residential and royal compounds known as ciudadelas. Occasionally the ciudadelas also housed mortuary mounds, where the mummies of the Chimor nobility would be kept for the purposes of ancestor veneration. The ciudadelas themselves were sometimes surrounded by towering, thick walls and were exclusive to the nobility: The entire effect would have been a vast political center in which a disproportionate few actually lived. By comparison, the vast majority of people at Chan Chan lived outside the ciudadelas in meager households of wattle-and-daub, working as farmers, laborers, and skilled craftsmen. These individuals produced some of the finest goods in the hemisphere, particularly with regard to metallurgy. Although pottery and textile manufacture were highly developed in Chimor, it was in the realm of metalworking that the craftsmen of the north coast were particularly skilled, especially with regard to gold. The empire of Chimor was thus an economic as well as a political prize to the Inca when they started to expand in the late fourteenth century.

Further Reading

Chinampas

Swamp reclamation and the use of canals for agricultural purposes are of great antiquity in Mesoamérica, dating back to the Preclassic (2500 B.C.E.–250 C.E.). The fabled chinampas of Central Mexico were the latest of these agricultural methods and were common in the Basin of Mexico prior to the arrival of the Aztecs there in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. These newcomers employed chinampas to great effect, particularly during the creation and expansion of the Aztec Empire between 1325 and 1521. As a series of artificial islands
and fields built within swamps and lakes, chinampas were one of the keys to the success of the Aztec Empire. Aztec engineers in their capital of Tenochtitlán, for example, created thousands of hectares (one hectare equals 10,000 square meters) of chinampas in and around their city. Such well-watered—and drained—agricultural fields produced an enormous amount of food, which could be transported through canals easily and efficiently throughout the city via boat. The population boom that ensued was one of the major factors in the Aztec rise. Chinampas transformed Tenochtitlán from a minor village in a swamp to the capital of Mesoamérica’s largest empire within a little over 100 years! In fact, as the Aztec Empire expanded, its rulers paid particular attention to the conquest of areas of Central Mexico already using chinampas. These areas became breadbaskets for the state, most notably in and around the cities of Xochimilco and Chalco, in the southern Basin.

Also known as “floating gardens,” chinampas were built by taking sediment from the lake or swamp bottom and building it up in fenced-off or similarly secured areas. Arranged in long rows facing the water, these fields had the advantage of being raised high enough to prevent watery inundation but low enough to ensure that all crops had a continual supply of water as needed. Canals built between these artificial islands ensured rapid transportation of goods and workers throughout the chinampas. Houses for caretakers were sometimes built on the chinampas as well, which grew the majority of the food consumed by the Aztec Empire. Those around Tenochtitlán were used to grow food for its two-hundred-thousand inhabitants (chinampas alone accounted for over half of food consumption in the city) as well as specialty items like flowers for sale and export. Chinampas largely fell out of use after the Spanish conquest of the Aztecs in 1521, primarily because much of Lake Texcoco was filled in, although there are pockets of Mexico today where they continue to function.

Further Reading

Codex

Pre-Columbian codices (sing. codex) were books painted by different civilizations of Mesoamérica to record mythology, history, astronomical observations, and agricultural information. Although produced by all literate civilizations of Mesoamérica, the most prolific producers of codices were the Classic (250–909) and Postclassic (909–1519) kingdoms of the Maya and the Mixtec, as well as the scribes of the Aztec Empire in the late Postclassic. Although the writing systems of these three distinct linguistic and ethnic groups were vastly different, the basic construction and purpose of a codex remained the same.

Codices were usually constructed of paper made from bark or other plant fibers, although occasionally deerskin would be used. The bark or plant fiber was boiled and then pounded with stone to produce a rough, long stretch of thin paper. A layer of white plaster was then applied to create a smooth surface for painting. The paper was then folded, screenlike, so as to produce a
book. The pages would be painted on both sides by professional scribes, who existed as a class of artisans in Mesoamérica from the birth of writing in the Preclassic (c. 900 B.C.E.) to the early colonial period.

At the very least, thousands of codices were likely produced by Mesoamérican civilizations, from the Olmec in the first millennium B.C.E. to the Aztecs of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Almost none survive today. Archaeologists have certainly found the remains of Pre-Columbian codices at archaeological sites such as Uaxactun, Guatemala, or Copan, Honduras, but they are illegible and largely destroyed. The only known codices that have survived to the present were produced just before, or shortly after, the Spanish Conquests of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Unfortunately, the vast majority of the extant codices were destroyed by the Spanish as heretical works. At present there are four existing Maya codices (Madrid, Dresden, Paris, and Grolier), approximately five-hundred Aztec codices, and eight Mixtec codices (the most famous of these is the Codex Nuttall). Of the numerous Aztec codices, the vast majority were created in a hybrid Aztec-Spanish style after the Conquest, so the actual number of purely indigenous codices is quite small, perhaps numbering around 20.

Further Reading

Copan

The ancient Maya site of Copan, located in present-day western Honduras, is one of the most well known and excavated of all Classic Maya (250–850) cities. During its heyday it was the capital of a kingdom (*Xukpi*), which held sway over the sites of the Motagua River valley, a border region between present-day Guatemala and Honduras. This region was important because it was the only source of one of the most precious items in Classic Maya trade: jade. Copan today is justifiably famous for the unique, 3-dimensional sculptural style of its royal monuments and for the Hieroglyphic Stairway, the longest written Pre-Columbian text in the Americas. Settled in the Late Preclassic (300 B.C.E.–250 C.E.), Copan rose to political importance in 426, when an individual named K’inich Yax K’uk’ Mo’ is said to have “arrived” there and founded a new royal dynasty. What makes this arrival interesting is that he is clearly described on hieroglyphic monuments as having associations with the Central Mexican metropolis of Teotihuacá. Although K’inich Yax K’uk’ Mo’ was probably not from Central Mexico, the manner of his ascension is similar to that of other central Mexican-related dynasties in the Maya area (see Tikal). Some have suggested that Copan, like its contemporaries to the northwest, was strongly influenced—if not directly, then certainly indirectly—by Teotihuacá during the fourth to sixth centuries.

Perhaps the most famous ruler of Copan, however, lived well past the era of Teotihuacá influence: Waxaklajuun Ub’aah K’awiil, popularly known as “18
Rabbit.” Following his accession in 695, this king transformed the site with three-dimensional self-portraits, an early version of the Hieroglyphic Stairway, a new ball court, and other monumental works. Art during his reign flourished, with scribes and sculptors breaking many Classic Maya conventions. As an example, Stela J—his first commission—was sculpted such that its text was visually “woven” (and read) like a mat; unlike any other Maya stela, moreover, it was provided with a roof and thus transformed into a symbolic house. Many consider his reign to have been the apex of a “golden age” at Copan.

Unfortunately, this time came to an abrupt end in 738. After some initial military successes early in his reign, Waxaklajuun Ub’aaj K’awiil was killed by an unlikely foe: His vassal, the king of Quirigua. Quirigua had been a subject state to Copan since the time of K’inich Yax K’uk’ Mo’, but in the early eighth century its new king, K’ak’ Tiliw Chan Yoaat, seems to have had his eyes on independence. In 738, he took Waxaklajuun Ub’aah K’awiil hostage and had him beheaded, taking control of at least part of the lucrative Motagua trade in jade. Copan never fully recovered from the ascendance of its new competitor, although it did experience a major period of revitalization in the mid- to late-eighth century, when the Hieroglyphic Stairway was finally finished. Unfortunately for eighth-century Copan, archaeologists have found signs that the state was coming under increasing stress from two sources: the nobility and the larger population. Nobles appear to have gained in power, at the expense of kings, steadily during the late eighth century, while the population continued to grow at environmentally unsustainable rates. By 822, the royal dynasty at Copan was collapsing, with the site abandoned and reoccupied sporadically—and sparsely—over the next 200 years.
Corvée Labor

This system of labor tax or tribute is one where people in authority have the right to compel subjects to perform menial labor for a specified, usually cyclical period. Although it is usually associated with such ancient civilizations as Egypt or Rome, or the feudal conditions of medieval and early modern European nations, corvée labor was practiced throughout the Americas. The most noteworthy culture to employ corvée in the building of public works and monuments was the Inca.

Sometime around 1375, the Inca city-state of Cuzco began to transform from a provincial center—virtually indistinguishable from other city-states of the time—to a growing metropolis on the verge of conquering its neighbors. Architecture became grandiose in style and massive in size, with enormous stone blocks cut to fit one another in walls devoid of mortar. Corvée labor was almost certainly a factor in this construction and appears to have been borrowed as a concept from earlier civilizations in the Andes, most likely the Wari or Tiwanaku (1000–1476). Called mit’a in Quechua, it was the dominant form of tribute—as public service—required by the Inca of their subjects, who became more and more numerous as the Inca expanded out from their homeland. This process accelerated during the reign of Pachacuti (1438–1471), who conquered other nations to become the first Inca emperor and founder of the Inca Empire. In the process of empire-building, the mit’a labor draft became a dominant force in the lives of commoners, with a significant percentage of a given year devoted to corvée projects.

Further Reading

Cotzumalhuapa

The Cotzumalhuapa archaeological zone, stretching over 75 miles along the Pacific Coast of present-day Guatemala, is home to a series of ancient—but problematic—archaeological sites, including El Baúl, Bilbao, and El Castillo. The Cotzumalhuapan sites bear some of the earliest inscriptions in this portion of the Mesoamérica area, including the earliest legible Long Count date in Guatemala: 37 C.E., at the site of El Baúl. The area is problematic, however, because it may not have been settled by Maya at all: at the time of the Conquest, in the sixteenth century, the area was occupied by the Pipil, a Nahuatl-speaking people with ethnic and linguistic ties to Central Mexico. Closer attention to
Cotzumalhuapan art and architecture, much of it dating to the Late Preclassic (400 B.C.E.–250 C.E.) and the Classic Periods (250–909) reveals influences from the lowland Maya, the Gulf Coast, and even the Central Mexican metropolis of Teotihuacá. As a result, it is difficult to say which ethnic group was responsible for the florescence of this zone early on in its history.

The Cotzumalhuapa sites are characterized by a distinctive style, often involving ballplayers (see Ballgame); realistically rendered images of men, women, and animals; scenes of sacrifice, and vegetative imagery. Cotzumalhuapan artifacts bearing this style have been found along the coast from Chiapas to Nicaragua; they have likewise been recovered deep into highland Guatemala, as far as the present-day city of Antigua. As a result, these sites would appear to have been important to the trade between Mesoamérica and Lower Central America. Cosmopolitan and culturally heterogenous, the Cotzumalhuapan sites are a testament to the far-reaching economic activities of early Mesoamérica societies.

Further Reading


Crow Creek

This archaeological site on the Missouri River, South Dakota, was one of the largest agricultural settlements on the Great Plains. Populated by one of a host of peoples collectively called “Plains Village,” Crow Creek dates to approximately 1350 and appears to have been a seasonally occupied and farmed settlement. Despite its seasonal nature, approximately five-hundred people may have lived there. Like some other large settlements of its time, it consisted of tightly packed houses surrounded by a moat and a wooden palisade. The latter of these defenses was eventually removed as the settlement grew larger. Unfortunately, such defenses appear to have been sorely needed in the fourteenth century: Endemic, small-scale conflicts were common on the Great Plains at this time, and at Crow Creek resulted in the decimation of its inhabitants.

Crow Creek is perhaps most famous as an archaeological site for this bloody occasion. At least 486 people, of all ages and sexes, appear to have died in a surprisingly deadly—but common, in the prehistory of the Great Plains—raid on the site. Of the 486 people, most appear to have been killed with arrows or clubs. Decapitated, scalped, and dismembered, their bodies were left in the open for scavengers to devour. At a later date, some bones were eventually gathered up and placed in the defensive ditch, but numerous others remained elsewhere at the site or scattered about. Crow Creek and its buildings were burned shortly after the mass grave was produced, ending a devastating chapter in the prehistory of this region.

Further Reading


Curaca

The curaca were Andean and Pacific Coastal elites whose authority was based upon prestigious ancestors. The word *curaca* (sometimes spelled “kuraka”) was actually coined by the Spanish, who used it as a blanket term to refer to South American elite classes. In the Pre-Columbian world, many different societies had versions of curaca nobles, who served as intermediaries between the living and the ancestors. They maintained social and political distance from commoners through the commission and production of specialty items, ranging from distinct pottery and textiles to metalwork, and through differential mortuary treatment. Oftentimes, such individuals would be buried with vast quantities of gold and other finery or were mumified and housed in sacred locations; occasionally, the mummies would be brought from these locations to attend public ceremonies as ancestral authorities.

The curaca as a class were firmly established by the Early Intermediate Period (200 B.C.E.–650 C.E.) of Andean prehistory and appear as portrait vessels or characters on ceramics of the Moche and Nazca civilizations. The most noteworthy examples of curaca are on Moche vessels with narrative scenes. On these, curaca nobles are shown fighting with one another and even as victims of human sacrifice: Prestigious Moche nobles engaged in warfare with enemy sites would depict nobles ritually killing prestigious captives and drinking their blood, as in the Presentation Theme (see Sipán). On these vessels and in Moche and Nazca contexts, curaca nobles are given supernatural qualities, occasionally hybridized with jaguars or other feline creatures.

Over time, particularly as empires in the Andes became more authoritarian, different gradations of curacas appeared, such that by the time of the Inca ascendency in the late fifteenth century, there was a hierarchy of curacas ranging from local leaders, leaders of several communities, rulers of territories, and the ultimate curaca himself, the Tupa Inca, or emperor. Most curaca nobles were male, although there were female curacas, and on the local level there were usually two in charge of a given settlement or extended family grouping (see Ayllu). Beyond this, to carry the status of Inca within the Inca Empire carried with it its own set of privileges. Members of the royal lineage, in turn, were superior to the traditional curaca nobles, who came from annexed and conquered provinces. In 1400, however, much of the Andes and Pacific Coast was divided into territories ruled by curaca nobles.

Further Reading

Cuzco

The city of Cuzco, in modern-day Lima, Peru, is best known as the capital of the Inca Empire, or Tawantinsuyu. However, settlement here seems to predate
the Inca: Recent excavations here have proven that an earlier culture, known as Killke, lived here between 900 and 1200. They appear to have built a temple, roads, and irrigation systems here in the 1100s. Their most famous contribution was the fortress of Sacsayhuamán, which was occupied and elaborated upon by the Inca, who seem to have supplanted Killke by 1200 and founded their own capital here.

In the thirteenth century, Cusco was one of many towns struggling for dominance in the region: Encircled in a radius of approximately 60 miles by different groups, it was not at all clear that Cusco would become the capital of a vast empire until the fifteenth century. The nobles of Cusco spent most of their energy in these early years making allies and fighting their neighbors. Their most dangerous enemies at this time were the Mohina, a people who had inherited part of the Wari Empire, which had disintegrated around 1050. Founding their capital, Chokepukio, at the old, abandoned Wari center of Pikillacta, the Mohina came close to preventing the formation of the largest land empire in the Americas. Unfortunately for them, Cusco and its allies prevailed in subjugating the Mohina and others by 1400 and began a campaign of conquest outside the region shortly thereafter.

The years surrounding 1400 saw the architectural transformation of Cuzco from a minor center to a regional capital, at which time it began to take on the form in which the Inca capital stands today. Nevertheless, it would not be until the reign of Pachacuti Inca (1438–1471) that the city was formally divided into four parts to accommodate the four quarters of the burgeoning Inca Empire (Tawantinsuyu or “Land of the Four Quarters”). Cuzco ultimately fell to the Spanish in 1534, although the ruling Inca lineages continued to wield some measure of power for the next few decades.

Further Reading

Cyclical Time

The concept of cyclical time is one that was common in Mesoamérica civilizations throughout the Pre-Columbian era. It refers to the general belief that life has no end but rather constantly changes forms. This applies to all living beings and even abstract concepts such as time and space, which die or are destroyed periodically only to be reborn into new and ephemeral forms. Most Mesoamerican civilizations believed, for example, that the world they knew had been destroyed several times. When they died, people would be reborn into new roles, which, theoretically, would also be temporary.

Aztec mythology provides a very literal example of cyclical time. According to the Aztecs, the people of the known world were living in what was known as Nahui Ollin, “the Fifth Sun,” or fifth epoch of creation. It was also known as Four Earthquake, so titled because it was believed to have begun on the day in the Aztec calendar bearing that name; Four Earthquake was dominated by a solar deity named Tonatiuh. The previous worlds had similar names based on the
calendar: Four Ocelot, Four Wind, Four Rain, and Four Water. They were each
dominated and eventually destroyed by the gods who represented them, with
people killed by a variety of natural and supernatural disasters including people
being devoured by jaguars, killed by hurricanes, annihilated by a rain of fire, and
drowned in a massive flood. After each destruction, people were re-created by
the gods, with the fifth creation believed to have occurred at the Central Mexican
metropolis of Teotihuacan. According to Aztec mythology, the present world
would be destroyed by earthquakes. See also Mesoamerica Calendar.

Further Reading
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Divine Kingship

The two areas of the Americas for which the institution of divine kingship
can be securely attested are Mesoamerica and the Andes. In each region, there
were a number of states where rulers were believed to wield divine powers
and who—as clearly attested for societies such as the Inca—were explicitly
descended from major gods of their respective religious pantheons. The super-
natural powers of a divine king might include such abilities as the capacity to
perform rituals ensuring good harvests, rain, or similar essentials as well as
the sole ability to communicate with and receive favors from royal ancestors
or gods. Most such kings had, by virtue of their divinity, the authority to wage
war and the control of vital, strategic natural resources. In some but not all
cases, such rulers had some measure of control over foreign trade.

Two examples of divine kingship in the Americas come from the Classic
Maya (250–850) and the Inca Empire (1438–1533). A Maya king was known as
a k’uhul ajaw (divine/holy lord) and was believed to have all of the supernat-
ural and most of the secular abilities listed above; the one sole exception may
have involved royal economic control, which is hotly debated among scholars.
During the Late Classic Period (600–750), each divine king was the supreme
member of a royal lineage claiming descent from a founding, deified ancestor;
in the city of Palenque, moreover, kings explicitly claimed lineal descent from
creator deities and traced their heritage well back into mythical time. The final
collapse of Classic civilization in the tenth century saw the end of this tradi-
tion, and although there would be kings elsewhere in the Maya highlands and
lowlands, none would be strong enough to claim divine status.

In comparison, a divine king in the Inca Empire was known simply as a
Sapa Inca, or “the Only Inca,” or Apu, “Divinity.” The term Inca, in fact, only
applied to members of the ruling ethnic group or individuals who were pro-
vided with that status and made “Inca by privilege.” The Sapa Inca was the
supreme one among them and was believed to be descended from Inti, the
god of the sun. Inti was responsible for the protection and growth of all agri-
cultural crops; by extension, the Sapa Inca could—by virtue of his descent—
claim a special relationship with the sun and agricultural fertility. As a god,
the Sapa Inca theoretically owned all lands, people, and property of the empire.
When he died, he was mummified and his mummy continued to participate in
the affairs of state, albeit in the hands of priests and his successor. More important, each Sapa Inca retained the right to his lands and property after death, such that a new emperor theoretically needed to conquer more land and obtain more property for personal use. This pattern continued until the dissolution of the Inca Empire in 1533.

Further Reading

**Dorset**

In the year 400, the Dorset were the dominant peoples of the eastern Arctic. Living in small groups of thirty to forty, they occupied seasonal settlements and were beginning to recolonize the northern extremes of the Arctic after a prolonged period of abandonment. Taking advantage of warmer temperatures, which began after 500, they steadily occupied islands and stretches of coastline into the far north. By 1000, they had occupied nearly all of the eastern Arctic and reached the apex of their population. Lacking dogsleds or the ability to extensively hunt at sea, they were unable to hunt whales effectively or travel long distances after game.

Yet the Dorset were able to forage for plants, fish, hunt seals, and even manage to kill an occasional whale or other large mammal. Likewise, their art was second-to-none in the Arctic world: Dorset peoples produced some of the most finely carved objects in the Americas of bone and ivory, many of which seem to have been created for religious (shamanic) purposes. They were likely the first native peoples to encounter the Norse, who had recently “discovered” the Americas and begun to hunt (and eventually settle) in Greenland. Yet by 1200 the Dorset had all but disappeared from the Arctic, replaced by the Thule.

Superior hunting technologies and techniques, coupled with possible diseases inadvertently introduced by the Thule, seem to have hastened the Dorset demise. Some archaeologists believe, however, that some Dorset groups were able to survive past 1400 in isolated pockets of the Arctic. The ultimate fate of the Dorset is currently unknown.

Further Reading

**Eight Deer Jaguar Claw (1063–1115)**

Eight Deer Jaguar Claw was the most famous and powerful king of the Mixtecs, a major Mesoamérica civilization, which was based in the present-day
Mexican state of Oaxaca as well as portions of the states of Puebla and Guerrero. He was the only ruler to unite most of the independent kingdoms of the Mixtec under one banner—his—and was an ally of the nearby city-state of Cholula, an ancient political and religious center that was one of the dominant forces in Central Mexico at that time.

Most of what we know about this figure comes from Mixtec codices (see Codex), painted books with texts describing the history and mythology of their civilization. According to native accounts, Eight Deer Jaguar Claw was the son of the high priest at the city of Tilatango, which at that time was ruled from afar by the lords of an as yet undiscovered site named Red-and-White-Bundle. One of the chief nobles of Tilatango, he was nevertheless not in line for the throne there and spent the majority of his life making and breaking marriages to different Mixtec royal lines in an attempt to gain political power. One of his other great political victories was gaining the support of the ruler of Cholula, who was of Toltec (and therefore prestigious) ancestry: That king provided him with symbols of Toltec royal authority, which he displayed on his monuments.

Eight Deer Jaguar Claw’s other pursuits were military. A consummate general, he is listed as having conquered ninety-four Mixtec cities during his life. He finally conquered Red-and-White-Bundle between 1099 and 1101, taking the throne of Tilatango and making it the capital of a large state based in Oaxaca. Having killed many of his in-laws to do so, Eight Deer Jaguar Claw was not without enemies, and ultimately this was to prove his undoing: One of his
nephews, 4 Wind, was able to convince some of the Mixtec kingdoms to ally against the conqueror in 1115. Eight Deer Jaguar Claw was captured by his nephew and eventually sacrificed. With his death, the Mixtec kingdoms once again devolved into competing factions. Although the Aztecs gained a loose hegemony over this region in the fifteenth century, the Mixtec area—despite its factionalization—was never fully subdued until the Spanish conquest.

**Further Reading**


**“Flowery Wars”**

Perhaps the most widely cited battles in Aztec warfare, “flowery wars” were engagements that the Aztecs described as being primarily for prestigious captives. Highly stylized, they were almost like training battles and—from the Aztec point of view—mutually agreed upon as such. The Aztec enemy states most often cited as participating in such wars were Tlaxcala, Huexotzinco, and Cholula. Although the latter two were eventually conquered formally, Tlaxcala—a mountainous city-state close to the Aztec capital—was never subjugated and seems to have participated in “flowery wars” on a regular basis.

Some scholars believe that the concept of these engagements, as related by the Aztec nobility in their accounts, was a pleasant fiction designed to mask the fact that the Aztecs were either unable or unwilling to subjugate certain enemy states. For Tlaxcala, “flowery wars” may have been a combination of both: Set in mountainous terrain, of lesser agricultural or economic value than other regions of Mexico, the cost of conquering this state may have been deemed too high. Another, alternate interpretation of “flowery war,” sees these exercises as minor acts of aggression by the Aztecs, designed to wear the enemy down for eventual conquest.

The weapons used in such battles were the same that the Aztecs used to conquer other nations and consisted of warriors wielding bows and arrows, atlatls, slings, lances, war clubs, and a wooden club or “sword” studded with volcanic glass (obsidian). Known as the macuahuitl or “hand stick,” it had been used by many peoples of the Americas prior to the Aztecs. Warriors of higher rank wielded better weapons and wore quilted cotton armor as well as wooden or cane shields. Those of the highest rank belonged to warrior societies, like the Cuachicqueh “shorn ones” or the Eagle Warriors, and had specific costumes they wore into battle. In “flowery wars,” such specialized warriors might challenge one another on the battlefield, each attempting to subdue the other to bring them back to their city for eventual sacrifice.
Fremont

Between 400 and 900, the Great Basin area of the present-day United States saw changes in subsistence and settlement patterns consistent with the emergence of a new culture. The peoples of this culture were semisedentary horticulturalists collectively known to archaeologists as “Fremont Culture.” Although there are demonstrably strong cultural continuities between Fremont and earlier peoples in the area, who were hunter-gatherers, Fremont represented a marked change in local lifestyle. People began to grow maize, live in pit houses, employ stone in their architecture, and use pottery. All of these provide indications that the peoples of this area were in contact with the American Southwest, if not facing migration from the Southwest itself. Given the wide range of dates with which these changes are associated, some archaeologists have suggested that Fremont actually represents different ethnic groups receiving these traits at different times. In any event, Fremont was a sea change with respect to local subsistence.

Fremont art and artifacts show, as would be expected, strong ties to the Southwest and the Great Plains. Likewise, there are regional variations over much of present-day Utah, eastern Nevada, western Colorado, and southern Idaho, with some communities far more sedentary than others. Yet many seem to have suffered the same fate: By 1400, all but the most northern Fremont sites appear to have been abandoned. This was due, in part to the Little Ice Age and concomitant droughts that began at about that time. Some of the peoples that survived in these newer, drier conditions gave up maize horticulture and became full-time hunter-gatherers once more, whereas others grew maize—but in much more limited contexts.

Further Reading


Huaca

A huaca represents, in ancient as well as contemporary Andean ritual, a sacred object or location. Often associated with natural features or imitations of them—such as temple-pyramids or similar monuments—huacas were of paramount importance to Andean and Pacific coastal societies at the time of European contact in the sixteenth century. In Andean religions, much of the natural world is animate, with prominent locations and features being of sacred significance. Such natural features might be located on the tops of mountains, the depths of watery
springs, or even be noteworthy rock formations. Features of the built environment might be burial places (particularly those associated with mummies) as well as temples or other structures belonging to early civilizations.

The idea of a huaca is probably of great antiquity, dating at least to the time of the first settlements in the Andes and on the Pacific Coast (c. 3000–1800 B.C.E.). As with all major religious phenomena, however, what constituted a huaca likely changed over time and space.

As there are no written records for the Andes, much of what we know about ancient huacas comes from fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Spanish or indigenous accounts of the Inca Empire. At that time, many of the centers of civilizations that the Inca had conquered or come into contact with were considered to have huacas, in the forms of temples, palaces, and significant natural features. The Inca consciously cultivated the images and functions of certain huacas, which served as focal points or pilgrimage centers for many of the disparate ethnic groups living within the empire. Today, the ruins of such civilizations as Moche, Nazca, Wari, Tiwanaku, and Chimor—in addition to those of the Inca—are considered to have huacas. Some of these were huacas during the Pre-Columbian period, whereas others became huacas after the coming of the Spanish.

Further Reading

Iroquois

Although the League of the Iroquois, perhaps the most famous indigenous alliance in North America, was formed around the era of European contact (c. 1500–1600), the ancestors of the tribes collectively known as Iroquois are believed to have settled in what is today the northeast United States by the beginning of the second millennium C.E. Preceded by Algonquin-speaking peoples and then sharing an uneasy coexistence, the ancestors of the Iroquois seem to have established themselves in the northeast—particularly within New York—through a series of migrations from the Midwest. Between 800 and 1000, different elements of these migrants’ cultures combined to create a distinct, Iroquois archaeological assemblage.

Living in seasonal camps and combining hunting and gathering with maize horticulture, the early Iroquois groups lived much like their Algonquin contemporaries in small villages of between one-hundred and four-hundred people. Between 1000 and 1300, these villages not only grew in size but also became fortified centers, with wooden palisades protecting a population that was becoming ever more dependent upon maize as its dietary staple. By 1300, the Iroquois were clearly relying on maize as a major food crop: The largest Iroquois villages may have held up to fifteen-hundred people. Such population densities had implications for political life in the Northeast, with chiefs becoming paramount authorities in war, ritual, and diplomacy. By the year
1400, worsening climactic conditions—a result of a period of low temperatures in North America called the “Little Ice Age”—as well as competition for resources among the largest villages had precipitated two major events: (1) greater numbers of conflicts in the Northeast, as represented by an increased emphasis on defense in Iroquois villages and signs of major violence in Iroquois burials and (2) the birth of distinct tribes, which likely coalesced as a result of said violence. The League of the Iroquois, which was to follow soon after, was a successful attempt by some groups to deal with this troubled time. Likewise, the League was able to make collective decisions about non-Iroquois rivals, whether diplomatic or martial. It persisted well into the contact era.

**Further Reading**


**Itzcoatl (d. 1440)**

Born at the beginning of the fifteenth century, Itzcoatl was one of the most significant figures in Mesoamérica prehistory and was an Aztec emperor second only to Motecuhzoma II (Montezuma) in contemporary fame. He was the first ruler of the Mexica city of Tenochtitlán to rebel against the Tepanec Empire, which had employed the Mexica as warriors, vassals, and aides to their expansionist designs in the Basin of Mexico since 1325. Deteriorating relations with the Tepanecs began during the reign of his father, who was assassinated by the Tepanec emperor Maxtla in 1426. Apparently, Maxtla believed that the Mexica were becoming a threat and as such wanted to formally conquer them. He laid siege to Tenochtitlán, under its new king Itzcoatl, in 1428.

Knowing that others in the Basin of Mexico were disaffected with Maxtla, he called for assistance to repel the siege. In 1428, he was joined by the Acolhua ruler of Texcoco and the rebellious Tepanec king at Tacuba, close to Atzcapotzalco, and successfully defeated the empire. The result was the beginning of the Triple Alliance. This fourth tlatoani, or king, of the Mexica had become the first emperor of the conquest state we know as the Aztec Empire.

Itzcoatl as well as his immediate successors proceeded to transform the new empire politically and ideologically, inventing many of the
traditions, which were to be fundamental parts of Aztec life. These included systems of taxation and tribute for provinces as they were conquered. Perhaps their most significant invention, however, was their “official” history of the Mexico: Trying to erase years of vassalage as well as the image of the people of Tenochtitlán as Chichimecs, or “barbarians” (see Aztlan), Itzcoatl had all available historical books, or codices (see Codex), burned. A new history was written, one that saw the Mexica and their paramount deity, Huitzilopochtli, as natural descendents of the Toltecs—the most powerful civilization in the Central Mexico of recent memory—and their traditions. Huitzilopochtli, the Mexica god of war and of the sun, was elevated to become the chief deity of the empire. In time, this new history became fact. Nevertheless, alternate versions of the Aztec past did survive and provide a counterpoint to the new order in the Basin of Mexico. Itzcoatl died in 1440, starting a political and military juggernaut that was to endure until the reign of Moteuczoma II (1466–1520), whose failure to effectively deal with Hernan Cortés as well as his Spanish and native allies would spell disaster for the Triple Alliance.

Further Reading

Ixiptla

The concept of an ixiptla, or “god impersonator,” was central to the practice of human sacrifice among the Aztecs (1325–1521) and was usually associated with the very public ritual of heart sacrifice. Heart sacrifice would typically involve a war captive who, held over an altar atop a temple, would be cut open with a knife by a priest. Extracting the heart, the priest and others would then throw the body off the steps of the temple; at some point they would remove the head of the captive for display on a rack, composed of rotting skulls, near the pyramid.

An individual sacrificed in this way, however, was experiencing the end point of a process that could, at times, take up to a year of preparation. For an ixiptla was considered a living incarnation of a very particular god, usually one that was considered a good “match” for the god’s attributes. Children, warriors, women, and even individuals with specific qualities were all selected to fit a given god. For example, the Central Mexican storm god Tlaloc required children, whereas Tezcatlipoca—a god associated with a host of concepts including the night, sorcery, and warfare—needed a male ixiptla who was cultured and exceedingly handsome.

These individuals, prior to the day of their sacrifice, literally became avatars of their chosen gods and were worshipped as such. An ixiptla would be bathed, treated to rich feasts, and clothed in finery; such individuals might even expect to be provided with wives and sexual favors. Likewise, they were expected to sing, dance, parade around the city, and otherwise perform in ceremonies dedicated to their specific god. Finally, they would be taken to the place of sacrifice, stripped of their finery, and be killed.
The death of an ixiptla was considered a “good death,” honorable and certainly preferable to dying of old age or illness: Believing in multiple realms of the afterlife, the Aztecs felt that what we consider to be a natural death resulted in a miserable eternity filled with work and even torture. Death by sacrifice, however, resulted in the ixiptla going to the paradise of his or her chosen god. As a result, captives who became ixiptla—however miserable—knew that they would die with honor.

Further Reading

**Jasaw Chan K’awiil I (d. 734)**

Jasaw Chan K’awiil I (r. 682–734), the *k’uhul ajaw* (holy lord) of the ancient Maya site of Tikal, was largely responsible for the resurgence of his kingdom in the late seventh century after a long period of decline. A distant descendent of Yax Nuun Ayiin I, Jasaw Chan K’awiil I grew up during one of the darkest
periods in Tikal’s history. A series of wars between Tikal and Calakmul (and its many allies) in the sixth and seventh centuries had resulted in severe dynastic turmoil and even exile for at least some members of the royal family. Jasaw Chan K’awiil came to power at the end of this 130-year period, known to archaeologists as the Hiatus. Memories of the last major defeat of Tikal in 679 were certainly fresh when he came to power in 682.

By some means, however, Jasaw Chan K’awiil I was able to reverse the fortunes of his embattled kingdom, defeating the king of Calakmul, Yuknoom Yich’aak K’ahk’, in 695. Further victories against Calakmul and its allies were to follow, with one king of that site, Yuknoom Took’ K’awiil, captured and killed in the central plaza at Tikal in 732. Calakmul was never to fully recover from this event: Its vassals were to either assert their own independence, go into precipitous decline, or themselves become vassal states to Tikal as a result. The resurgence was coupled with a flurry of building activity over the succeeding decades, with many of the major buildings visible at Tikal today having been augmented or built during this time. As a result, Jasaw Chan K’awiil I can be counted among the greatest of the kings of the ancient Maya during the Late Classic (600–850). At his death, he was placed within the now-famous Temple I at Tikal, which was started by Jasaw but completed by his son and successor, Yik’in Chan K’awiil. It continues to be the most iconic of the Classic Maya temple-pyramids.

Further Reading

**K’inish Janaab’ Pakal (d. 683)**

This long-lived king (r. 615–683), or k’uhul ajaw (holy lord), of the ancient Maya site of Palenque is perhaps the most famous of the Classic Maya (250–850) rulers. Like his far younger contemporary Jasaw Chan K’awiil I of Tikal, K’inish Janaab’ Pakal grew up during the hegemony of Calakmul and its allies in the Maya area. Palenque had been sacked twice in recent memory by Calakmul, first in 599 and again in 611. Abnormal dynastic successes, most notably the reign of his mother Lady Sak K’uk’ amidst a generally patriarchal society, were likewise hallmarks of this troubled period. When Pakal came to power in 615 at the age of 12 there was no reason to think that such problems were at an end. In fact, the early portion of his reign was not particularly noteworthy: the inscriptions from this era are notably silent, and there are indications that Palenque continued to struggle politically and militarily against its enemies.

In the mid-seventh century, however, K’inish Janaab’ Pakal oversaw a series of major constructions, with most of the palaces and temples of Palenque remodeled or built during that time. Politically and militarily, he sought to check the advances of Calakmul and its vassals on all fronts, allying himself with the royal dynasties at Tikal and Yaxchilan. He fought the Calakmul alliance for much of the mid-seventh century and even provided a temporary safe haven for the exiled ruler of Tikal, Nuun Ujol Chaak, when he was driven from that
site in 657. Although he was never able to confront Calakmul in its own territory, he was successful in defeating one of its allies on the Usumacinta River, Pomona, making it a tribute-paying subject state for the remainder of the Classic Period. In a time when Calakmul was still a major force to be reckoned with, this was no mean feat.

K’inich Janaab’ Pakal is perhaps best known, however, for his tomb in the Temple of the Inscriptions at Palenque. Completed by his son, K’inich Kan B’alam II (r. 684–702), this tomb was started by Pakal in 675 and is perhaps the most elaborate and famous Maya tomb of all time. Discovered by Alberto Ruz Lhuillier in 1948 and excavated over a period of 4 years, the tomb consists of a winding, vaulted stairway descending into the heart of the temple, terminating in a decorated burial chamber and stone sarcophagus. Carved with images of the deceased king being reborn from the Maya Underworld, the Sarcophagus Lid is one of the iconic monuments of the ancient Maya. Aged 80 years at the time of his death, K’inich Janaab’ Pakal was revered by every successive king of Palenque (indeed, he overshadowed them) and continues to fascinate visitors to the site today. As a testament to his fame and abilities, many scholars refer to K’inich Janaab’ Pakal simply as Pakal the Great.

Further Reading

**Kiva**

Modern kivas of the American Southwest are used in Pueblo villages for sociopolitical and religious functions; they normally consist of a circular room of masonry or adobe, with the word *kiva* being Hopi for “ceremonial room.” Most pueblos have at least one of these, and archaeologists have been able to trace such rooms architecturally back to around 500. During the Pueblo I Period (750–900) of the Colorado Plateau, pit houses—which had been the major form of household in this part of the Southwest up to that time—gave way to above-ground structures, with the pits themselves being converted into kivas. Larger versions, dubbed “Great Kivas,” first emerged at places like Grass Mesa Pueblo, Colorado, in the eighth century. By the tenth century, during Pueblo II (900–1150) drastic population increases and emerging sociocomplexity in Chaco Canyon had lead to the creation of several interlinked settlements characterized by the construction of massive masonry buildings up to four stories in size. These buildings, or “great houses;” were themselves complemented by Great Kivas.

One of the best known of these is at Casa Rinconada, the Great Kiva consists of a circular, subterranean room approximately 63 feet in diameter. Graced with numerous wall niches for offerings, antechambers, a central entrance ladder, benches, and a hearth, this Great Kiva can be thought of as an archetype for all of the major kivas of Chacoan Pueblo II. Other contemporary—and later—societies not within the Chaco sphere, such as those based at *Mesa Verde* (500–1300), employed slightly different architectural conventions, including keyhole-shaped
kivas, but the general idea of these as multipurpose ceremonial, political, and social rooms was similar.

Further Reading

**L’Anse aux Meadows**

This short-lived village, founded by the Vikings in 1000, is located in Newfoundland, Canada. Discovered in 1960, L’Anse aux Meadows does not appear to have lasted as a settlement for more than a generation. Nevertheless, it remains an important site because it marks the southernmost settlement of Vikings in the hemisphere and an important point of interaction between Europeans and Native Americans 500 years before Columbus. The eight longhouses that have been excavated may have held a population of over seventy men and women—probably from Greenland—and were built of sod as well as wood with thatched roofs. Workshops, notably those used to smelt iron and repair Viking longships, were also in evidence at L’Anse aux Meadows.

Unlike the Viking diaspora settlements in Greenland and Iceland, however, L’Anse aux Meadows was so short lived as to have left no lasting cultural impact on native peoples of the region. Certainly the Vikings ventured farther south: Plants not native to the region have been recovered from the site. But there seem to have been too few Vikings to make lasting settlement or significant cultural exchange remotely possible. In the end, L’Anse aux Meadows was left in a way similar to that of the disappearance of the Norse colonies in Greenland a few centuries later: L’anse aux Meadows was left with only scant remains of the peoples who had inhabited it.

Further Reading

**Lineage Organization**

In most Pre-Columbian cultures of the Americas, a lineage was one of the primary social units of familial, economic, religious, and political life. Defined as a descent group tracing common heritage from a known ancestor, a lineage can be matrilineal (tracing descent from the female line), patrilineal (tracing descent from the male line), or bilateral (tracing descent from both lines). The ways in which ancestry was traced could—and still can—determine who inherited property, marriage rules (e.g., who can marry whom), membership in a given
social or political group, methods of ancestor veneration (see Ancestor Veneration) and a host of other factors crucial in daily life. Indigenous cultures of the Americas today are either matrilineal or, more commonly, patrilineal: Most matrilineal descent groups are currently found in native North America, whereas patrilineal societies can be found in a wide band through both continents of the hemisphere. Given that most of the Pre-Columbian societies of the Americas did not use writing systems, it is oftentimes difficult to prove patterns of descent, but spatial distributions of cemeteries, individual burials, artifact distributions, and even settlement patterns—in addition to writing systems, where applicable—have all been used by scholars to argue for or against patrilineal and matrilineal kin organization in specific societies. In any event, it is clear that lineage organization was paramount in the lives of most peoples of the Americas.

Lineages, as some of the smallest units of sociopolitical organization, can be combined to form even larger social groupings, such as clans, phratries, or moieties. These terms are common in anthropology, and the organizations they represent can be found worldwide as well as in many Pre-Columbian societies. Clans typically involve multiple lineages, all of whom lay claim to a common—usually fictive—forebear, whereas phratries are groups of clans tracing descent through a supposed common ancestor. Moieties, by comparison, occur in societies divided into two dominant lineages (each is called a “moiety”), such as the Chiriquí of Costa Rica (see Rivas). As a general rule, hierarchies within these forms of lineage organization serve as the primary means of determining political organization in most hunting and gathering societies of the Americas. Within agricultural chiefdoms, such as those found among the Iroquois of northeast North America, chiefs would derive from only the most powerful of lineages and pass their titles to fellow lineage members.

Such organization can be found in even more hierarchically organized societies, as in the kingdoms of Mesoamérica and the Andes. However, in some contexts the lineage mode of sociopolitical organization came into direct ideological conflict with the tools of state. Strong, centralized forms of kingship, such as those found among the Classic Maya (250–909) or the Inca (1438–1533), often encouraged state worship of divine kings or similar individuals (see Divine Kingship). Although the ruling body was ultimately derived from a dominant lineage in these states, their worship—as supreme ancestors ultimately disconnected from inferior lineages—undermined the religious, social, and political authorities of lineages not connected to royal families. These were major tensions in the states of the Pre-Columbian Americas.

Further Reading

Los Buchillones

Occupied from 1220 to 1620, the archaeological site of Los Buchillones, Cuba, was one of the largest settlements of the Taino culture. Prevalent in the Caribbean islands from 500 until the fifteenth century, when it came under
increasing stress from the Caribs, who were emigrating from coastal South America to take over much of what had formerly been Taino territory. Los Buchillones is prominent as a location for the quality and preservation of its artifacts as well as architecture, which have survived to the present day largely because the site is located underwater. Underwater archaeologists have discovered, among other materials, the remains of a near-perfectly preserved, wooden Taino house (the only one of its kind in the Americas).

Los Buchillones was, like other Taino villages, built with houses surrounding an open plaza known as a batey and ruled by chiefs. As the Taino were Arawak-speaking agriculturalists who had contact with not only Atlantic South America but also portions of Mesoamérica, it seems likely that the inhabitants of Los Buchillones—one of the largest Taino villages discovered thus far—were participants in the long-distance exchange of ideas and objects in the Atlantic world. Under constant stress from the Caribs and slowly being pushed northeastwards, the Taino on Cuba were ultimately decimated by the Spanish in the sixteenth century.

**Further Reading**


**Marajóara**

The settlement of Marajó Island in the Lower Amazon was the principal center of the Marajóara culture between 400 and 1400. Characterized by large earthen mounds used for residences, burials, and sociopolitical activity, Marajó Island is the earliest place where archaeologists have encountered a widespread ceramic style known as the Polychrome Tradition: This style, consisting of large ceramic vessels painted and incised with images of animals and plants, was to become dominant in a large part of the Amazon until the period of European contact.

Other Marajóara settlements range from northern Brazil to French Guyana and collectively provide some of the earliest evidence for complex societies in the Amazon. The wide variety of mounds at Marajóara settlements, in terms of size, spatial organization, architecture, and artifact assemblage, has prompted some scholars to suggest sociopolitical hierarchies within settlements. In this scheme, the largest and most centralized mounds would have been used for politics and public ritual, whereas smaller, peripheral mounds served as the foundations for residences. Marajóara settlements with few or no mounds have also been recovered in outlying areas. These, together with the evidence from Marajó Island, may reflect degrees of Amazonian urbanism that until recently were believed to be limited in South America to Andean societies.

**Further Reading**

Maya Collapse

The collapse of Classic Period (250–909) civilization in the southern Maya lowlands stands as one of the most dramatic events of Mesoamérica prehistory. What makes the collapse so interesting, archaeologically, is that the Maya were—up until that point—at the apex of their sociopolitical, technological, artistic, and architectural complexity. Equally profound is the rapidity with which it happened. The royal dynasties of the southern Maya kingdoms fell apart beginning around 760 and accelerating by 800 in the western Maya area. The rest of the southern lowlands followed shortly thereafter, and the royal dynasties of the Maya were all but extinct by the beginning of the tenth century. Archaeologically, this decline and collapse can be seen in the cessation of monumental inscriptions as well as large-scale architectural construction. Following the demise of these royal dynasties, most Maya cities—great and small—were abandoned by the end of the tenth century. Left to squatters and scattered periods of reoccupation, most had been swallowed up by the jungle within 200 years. A few portions of the southern lowlands, most notably around Lake Petén Itzá, would see new beginnings in the ninth century. Other areas, most notably the northern lowlands of Yucatán and the Maya highlands to the south, would actually benefit. Much of the heartland of Classic Maya civilization, however, would remain unoccupied until the modern era.

Many reasons for the Classic Maya collapse have been proposed, but they generally center around three ideas: (1) systemic ecological collapse, as a result of overexploitation of agricultural land; (2) economic or political collapse brought on by warfare, competing elite factions, disruption of key trade routes, or loss of faith in the Maya leadership; and (3) droughts brought on by climate change. Applying one of these as the cause is, unfortunately, problematic: No one theory explains why the collapse happened. Rather, there is incredible diversity in the ways in which individual sites fell apart, particularly in the eighth and early ninth centuries. What we see is a “domino-effect” thereafter. Following the collapse, new Maya kingdoms would arise and flourish elsewhere, but the time of the divine king (see Divine Kingship and Popol Nah) was over.

Further Reading
Mesa Verde

The area surrounding Mesa Verde, Colorado, was sparsely settled as early as 600. It was not until the Pueblo III Period (1150–1300), however, that southwestern Colorado experienced population growth and warfare significant enough to see dense population aggregations in highly defensible locations. At Mesa Verde itself, such aggregations took the form of a host of related settlements set within the sides of cliffs. Each settlement or village was built inside caves and rock shelters along the walls of the canyon and consisted of multistoried, adobe apartment compounds with kivas. The influx of populations into this region, and the growing importance of settlements in southwestern Colorado, was likely the result of the collapse of Chaco civilization to the south (see Chaco Canyon). Although there is some continuity with Chaco in terms of artifacts, much of Mesa Verde—and cliff-dwelling sites like it—represents a break with the past.

The largest of the cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde is known as Cliff Palace and contains around two-hundred rooms and over twenty kivas. Other dwellings include Mug House, Spruce Tree House, and Square Tower House. Some of these dwellings originally had structures with up to four stories. Most appear to have been augmented as needed over time, with new buildings and features seemingly constructed without regard for an overall site plan. Unfortunately, the majority of the cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde and elsewhere were occupied for little more than a century. Severe droughts, migrations of new peoples into the area, escalating warfare, or some combination of the three may have caused the people here to abandon their homes around 1300.

Further Reading

Mesoamérican Calendar

The various systems by which Mesoamerican peoples kept track of time, commonly called the “Mesoamerican calendar,” were some of the most accurate in the world before the use of contemporary technological advances. They are important because they can be correlated with modern calendars, providing archaeologists with fixed dates for many events of the Pre-Columbian world. Most peoples used at least two cycles, consisting of 260 and 365 days apiece. The former, though it does not appear to have been based on astronomical observations, may have corresponded to the rough period of human gestation; another idea as to its origins suggests that it was a multiplication of the numbers 20 and 13, both significant in Mesoamerican mathematics and religious expression. In fact, the individual units of the 260-day calendar were written with a coefficient ranging from 1 to 13 as well as one of 20 day names; the exact same day in the calendar would repeat itself every 260 days (13 x 20).

The 365-day calendar, by comparison, was designed to approximate the solar year. Like the 260-day calendar, it was also written with a coefficient, but
this time ranging from 1 to 20 (or 0-19). That coefficient was then followed by one of 18 day names. Given that this works out to only 360 days (20 x 18), Mesoamericans added a period of 5 days to come closer to the true solar cycle. This second calendar would then be added to the 260-day calendar to create a larger set of cycles known as the Calendar Round. An example of this is the date, here in the Classic Maya calendar, of 4 Ahau 8 Cumcu; here “4 Ahau” refers to the 260-day calendar, whereas “8 Cumcu” provides the coefficient and day name of the 360-day calendar.

The exact same date (e.g., the same combination of numbers and names) in the Calendar Round occurs every 52 years. Some societies, though they kept track of these 52-year periods and saw them as significant ritually, did not use a more complicated method of reckoning time. Most noteworthy among these were the Aztecs, who would perform a complicated ritual of human sacrifice on these 52-year, liminal periods of their calendar. Other societies, however, employed a third system of reckoning to deal with these vagaries, called the “Long Count.” Invented sometime during the Preclassic (2500 B.C.E.–250 C.E.), it gradually fell out of favor with all Mesoamerican societies save the Maya, who adopted and perfected it in the Late Preclassic (400 B.C.E.–250 C.E.) and the Early Classic (250–600).

Given that the Maya, like most Mesoamerican peoples, believed that time was cyclical (see Cyclical Time), the Long Count is technically a cycle like the others. However, the origins of the present cycle—and its projected end point—were so greatly separated in time that it functioned, for all intensive purposes, as a calendar with a fixed starting date: 3114 B.C.E., corresponding to the day in which the present world was created. It consisted of a series of

Templo Mayor, Mexico City, Sun Stone Aztec Calendar stone, National Anthropological Museum Mexico City. © Tomasz Otap/Shutterstock.
small cycles arranged in ascending, notational forms. Although there were many cycles corresponding to vast units of time, most were not used in day-to-day recording (if ever). As such, we might conceive of the Long Count having five different cycles: k’in (day), winal (20 days), tuun (360 days), k’atun (7,200 days), and b’aktun (144,000 days). A sample Long Count date is written, in Roman notation, as 9.12.0.0.0, meaning that nine b’aktun and twelve k’atun have passed since the world was created. Many Maya monuments use the Long Count in combination with the 260-day and 360-day calendars; some even use further calendrical systems, such as the cycles of the moon or those of various planets. This calendar persisted well into the colonial period, and elements of the 260-day and 360-day calendars can still be found in use by indigenous communities throughout Mesoamérica.

Further Reading

Metallurgy
The earliest use of metals in the Americas dates to 4000 B.C.E. and is associated with a culture known simply as the Old Copper Culture (4000–2000 B.C.E.). Living around the Great Lakes, which bear high-quality, natural copper, they made utilitarian items from copper such as spears, knives, axes, and fishhooks as well as decorative items in more limited quantities. Stone tools were the norm in North America, however, and by the Woodland Period (800 B.C.E.–1000 C.E.) copper was being used sporadically as a prestige item, typically for decorative and ritual objects. By the Mississippian era (1000–1500), copper artifacts of upper North America were firmly in the realm of religion; they were hammered and decorated objects bearing images of supernatural imagery (see Southern Cult or Southeastern Ceremonial Complex). Notably, the regions of North America that departed from this general pattern for copper were the sub-Arctic and Arctic, where peoples like the Thule used copper, in addition to stone, for tools from the twelfth century to the modern era. Even more surprisingly, they appear to have been the only peoples of the Americas to use iron—when available—for tool use: Limited quantities of meteoritic iron, as well as terrestrial iron traded from the Norse, were regularly features of the economic landscape of the north.

The first complex metallurgy in the Americas, however, comes from the southern hemisphere. It slightly predates what is known as the Initial Period (1800–400 B.C.E.) in the Andes, when agriculture, pottery, weaving, and other technological innovations became commonplace. The first examples come from Peru, although metalworking technologies appear to have spread rapidly to places such as Ecuador and Colombia thereafter. The types of metals used in these early years included gold, silver, copper, tin, and platinum. Of these, gold was considered to be the most important: Andean as well as later
Mesoamerican peoples associated it with the sun and mystical solar properties. It was first used from river deposits and then subsequently mined by many of the earliest Andean peoples.

By the Andean Early Horizon (400–200 B.C.E.), many of the major metallurgical techniques appear to have been invented, including welding, soldering, and the ability to alloy gold with such metals as copper or silver. The major innovator at this time was the Chavín civilization (1200–200 B.C.E.) of present-day Peru, which appears to have invented tumbaga, a catch-all category of alloyed gold objects (see Tumbaga). By 500 C.E., this and other metallurgical technologies—including hammering, casting, gilding, lost wax, and raised relief—had spread all the way to the Intermediate Area, with gold being a major facet of ritual life among the polities of what is today Panama and Costa Rica. Alloys of gold and platinum, moreover, were being made in Ecuador 500 years before they were fashioned in Europe.

From coastal South America and the Intermediate Area, metal ornaments spread into Mesoamerica between 500 and 900, although the actual technologies (save soldering) for making such items was only introduced to West Mexico between 800 and 900. From there, the technologies spread into Central Mexico, such that by the time of European contact, metallurgy was common in much of the tropical Americas. In fact, some of the gold-working techniques established by these peoples, such as the Mixtecs of the Valley of Oaxaca, Mexico, have never been surpassed.

Metal usage for tools and other practical, large-scale implements was not common, however. For all intensive purposes stone remained the medium of choice for tools and weapons until European contact. Metals were primarily employed for personal ornamentation, from masks and rings to bells and headdresses. There was, however, the limited production of a type of bronze in some areas—most notably, among the Tarascans of West Mexico—and it seems possible that had the Europeans arrived a few centuries later they would have encountered a very different world than the one that they did.

Further Reading

Mitla

Archaeological remains at the site of Mitla, located in Oaxaca, Mexico, date back to the Middle Preclassic (1000–400 B.C.E.), but it was only around 200 C.E. that the site became one of the major settlements of Zapotec civilization (see Monte Albán). It is noteworthy for having some of the best-preserved architecture in Oaxaca and for having passed under the political control of a few different Mesoamerican civilizations: Although it was more or less continuously occupied by the Zapotecs, it came to be dominated by the Mixtecs (c. 1000–1200) and then the Aztecs (1494–1521), who conquered and sacked the
city in 1494. As a result, its architecture and artifact assemblage shows a blending of three of the great civilizations of Mesoamérica.

Visually, the architecture at Mitla is most noteworthy for its decorated stone-walls and door frames, which are decorated with geometric patterns called “grecas.” Composed of thousands of cut and polished stones, these patterns consist of swirls, stepped elements, and rectangular designs. The patterns date to the Postclassic, during the period of Mixtec dominance, and show a strong influence from that civilization. Tombs of the Oaxacan elites were built beneath many of these palatial buildings and are cruciform in design. The visible ruins of Mitla today consist of a palace and related structures: When the Spanish conquered the area in the early sixteenth century, they dismantled much of the original settlement for building materials, erecting a church atop one of the original temples.

Further Reading

Moche

The Moche of the north coast of Peru were one of the major civilizations of South America, forming a series of independent city-states by 200 C.E. The civilization is named after the archaeological site of Moche, which is located in the Moche Valley of Peru and seems to have governed a region spanning the Chicama and Nepeña rivers. It and its contemporaries may have been the first states, as opposed to chiefdoms, in that continent. The warring elites who governed these city-states commissioned some of the largest structures and most famous pottery in the hemisphere, the latter bearing portraits as well as pictorial, historical narratives of life in the Moche world. Although independent, the city-states had a common material culture, architectural style, and religion, elements of which persisted for centuries following the complete collapse of Moche civilization between 750 and 800.

Moche architecture, like that of succeeding civilizations on the desert coast, consisted of mud-brick temples, platforms, and walled residential compounds faced with adobe and painted plaster. The bricks themselves are often labeled with the names of the workshops in which they were made; millions of them were used in temples that the Moche commissioned, likely through corveé labor (see Corveé Labor). The largest such temples or huacas (see Huacas) occur at Moche itself and include the Huaca del Sol and the Huaca de la Luna. One of the most famous Moche settlements, however, is the archaeological site of Sipán. Intact royal tombs there and at the site of San Jose de Moro, rare for not having been looted, have revealed individuals in roles (e.g., priests, warriors, etc.) recognizable on Moche ceramics.
It is Moche pottery, in addition to ornately decorated works of gold, shell, and other precious items, that reveals the most about their sociopolitical organization and daily life. Moche ceramic vessels are often what are called “portrait vessels”: These are ceramic portraits on vases of the nobility, lifelike, and intended to represent specific individuals. Others are formed in the likenesses of deities or animals. But the most famous Moche vessels are those painted with mythological scenes, activities in daily life, the lives or deaths of rulers, and most famously, images of war and human sacrifice. One recurring set of images, known as the Presentation Theme, involves nobles killing captives and drinking their blood; one such noble, wearing accoutrements recognizable from such pictorial ceramics, was discovered in a tomb at Sipán.

In the final decades of the sixth century C.E., the Moche area was hit hard by an El Niño flood as well as a severe drought. The site of Moche, as well as several other centers, appears to have collapsed at that time, although survivors lasted well into the eighth century C.E. The weakened Moche states collapsed and gave way to the Lambayeque city-states or Sican culture (see Batán Grande; Naymlap) by 800.

Further Reading

Monte Albán

As one of the oldest major cities in Mesoamérica, Monte Albán was founded around 500 B.C.E. by the Zapotecs, a major cultural and ethnic group flourishing in the Valley of Oaxaca from the Preclassic (2500 B.C.E.–250 C.E.) to the present day. With its civic center located atop a flat hill near the center of the Valley, it was the predominant player in a loose confederation of settlements that conquered (or otherwise unified) much of the Oaxacan highlands starting around 200 B.C.E. In fact, Monte Albán appears to have entered the path to statehood via war: Prominent images of captives and other signs of an aggressive, expansionist state are the hallmarks of its architectural and artistic style. Archaeologists estimate that these wars of conquest were costly, with the population of the entire Valley declining by 20 percent during this period of Zapotec unification. Establishing administrative centers throughout the Valley of Oaxaca by 100 C.E., Monte Albán may have ruled over forty-thousand people in the Valley alone and seems to have conquered other areas of Mesoamérica as well. The specifics of this, however, are not clear.

Its greatest period was over by the beginning of the Early Classic (250–600), with some centers inside the Valley successfully asserting their independence. There are indications, moreover, of growing influence from the Central Mexican metropolis of Teotihuacá: This was a much larger and even more aggressive expansionist state that dominated Mesoamérica culturally—and in some places, perhaps politically—during the Early Classic. Monte Albán was still, however, the preeminent Zapotec city, and its time was far from over. Construction at the site continued, with an increased emphasis on defensibility (in
the form of city walls) and agricultural intensification: The population here, as elsewhere in the Early Classic, was increasing and becoming more densely settled in the Valley. By the beginning of the Late Classic (600–909), the population of Monte Albán had reached twenty-five thousand people, who lived around an urban core of pyramids, elite residences, victoriously carved monuments, and even a ball court (see Ballgame).

Local assertions of independence within the Valley and the decline of Monte Albán as a geopolitical force abroad, however, seem to have precipitated crises around 700. The site was not to recover and experienced a sharp drop in building and ceremonial activity. By 900, the population in and around Monte Albán had dwindled to the thousands, and other Zapotec centers had become more important. Never fully abandoned, however, Monte Albán continued to have a small local population until the Spanish Conquest.

Further Reading

Moundville

This archaeological site on the Black Warrior River in Alabama was one of the largest centers of the Mississippian culture (1000–1500), second only to Cahokia in Illinois in terms of size. With a population of about one thousand in its core and a regional population of approximately ten thousand, Moundville appears to have been a socially and politically complex chiefdom. Like the inhabitants of most Mississippian chiefdoms, the people of Moundville practiced intensive, maize-based agriculture to support their population and engaged in religious activities that were part of what is known as the Southern Cult or Southeastern Ceremonial Complex. Built atop a natural bluff overlooking the river, the heart of Moundville was surrounded on three sides by a wooden palisade, within which were twenty-six earthen mounds. The majority of these were arranged around a central plaza, with Mound B being perhaps the most imposing structure at the site: This steep pyramid, rising 58 feet high and accessed by ramps, overshadows most other structures at the site. Mound A, located in the center of the plaza, was equally imposing and ringed by smaller mounds. At the time of its occupation, most of these earthen mounds would have had perishable structures built atop them, housing elites or serving as focal points for large-scale ceremonies. The earthen mounds themselves often doubled as mortuary structures, with those of the highest rank being buried in structures like Mound A or B.

The elites at Moundville appear to have had these mounds built by exacting tribute—in the form of labor—from the local population. The arrangement of the residential mounds suggests a hierarchical social order: Some scholars have proposed that they were organized according to lineage groups of greater and lesser prestige. Like those at other Mississippian centers, these elites imported
luxury goods through long-distance trade, to further distinguish themselves from commoners: Archaeologists have found worked artifacts of high-status materials, such as copper, mica, and shell, in burials at the site.

Around 1350, the site seems to have been in the throes of dramatic sociopolitical change. Moundville was abandoned as a residential zone but held onto its political and ceremonial importance. Presumably, elements of the regional population became more important during this time. Whatever the social experiment, however, it did not last for long: The onset of colder climactic conditions in North America around 1400, known as the Little Ice Age, coupled with deteriorating social relations between the Mississippian centers, led to collapse of Moundville and its environs. The area was almost abandoned by the early 1500s, although pockets of settlement were still in evidence at the time of European contact in the mid-sixteenth century.

Further Reading

Naymlap

This culture hero of the north coast of Peru was believed to have founded a dynasty that ruled over the loosely federated Lambayeque city-states (also known as Sican Culture). Although written records of Naymlap date to the late sixteenth century and thus the period of European colonization, this culture hero appears to have been a major part of oral tradition on the north coast, with images of him dating back as early as the ninth century.

According to legend, he arrived at the north coast of Peru with a retinue of warriors, wives, and concubines, having sailed there from the west. Bearing a green stone representation of himself, called “Yampellec,” he established a dynasty at a city called “Chot.” As he died, he is said to have grown wings and flown away, leaving Chot to his son. That individual was believed to have had twelve sons, each one of which became ruler of a city-state on the north coast. Their descendants ruled for ten generations, until such time as one ruler of Chotona—Fempellec—invoked the wrath of the gods by moving Yampellec. The gods then brought floods, famine, and pestilence to the region, precipitating a peoples’ revolt and the end of the Naymlap dynasties.

The archaeological remains of Chotona, corresponding to Chot, and Batán Grande are two of the largest of the states mentioned in the history. They do appear to have suffered massive flooding around 1100, followed by abandonment. Yet some centers in the Lambayeque region do seem to have survived these events. All, however, were conquered by the empire of Chimor around 1370 and remained its subjects until the conquest of the entire area by the Inca Empire in the fifteenth century.

Further Reading
Nazca Lines

The Nazca civilization of the south coast of Peru, flourishing between 200 B.C.E. and 650 C.E., was at least partially contemporary with the city-states of the Moche to the north (see Sipán). With a ceremonial center at the site of Cahuachi, where they built mounds, plazas, and platforms for periodic gatherings, feasts, and rituals, the everyday Nazca lived in small and dispersed agricultural communities. Culturally, they shared some similarities with the Moche and other peoples of the desert coast, in terms of the ideas and images portrayed on ceramics (e.g., curaca elites, warfare, and feline imagery). But overall, their society was not nearly as politically complex as the Moche or later Lambayeque culture (see Batán Grande). They are most famous for having produced the Nazca lines, which were hundreds of outlines of animals, geometric shapes, plants, and abstractions created in the desert and surrounding hills. They were made fairly quickly and easily by removing dark-colored rocks and soils to expose lighter soils beneath.

Featuring in popular culture, particularly in movies and in fictional literature, the Nazca lines have been the source of many a far-fetched theory. There is no consensus on their purpose—indeed, they may have served different purposes to different groups over time—and they show no apparent organization in terms of where and when they occur. And although they are best seen through aerial photography (and hence, the fantastic theories), some were clearly meant to be seen from the ground and others from the surrounding hills. Many appear to have been forgotten or have fallen into disfavor: New lines and shapes often cross older ones without regard for orientation, shape, or any other discernable characteristic. They remain today as silent testaments to an enigmatic culture.

Further Reading

Nezahualcoyotl (1402–1472)

The king of the Acolhua known as Nezahualcoyotl, ruler of the city-state of Texcoco, spent most of his early life in fear of the Tepanec Empire. His father, Ixilxochitl I (r. 1409–1418), had spent the latter years of his reign fighting a losing battle with them and was eventually executed. As further punishment, Texcoco was given to the Mexica at Tenochtitlán (future masters of the Aztec Empire) as a vassal. Nezahualcoyotl, for his part, spent years in intermittent exile: He was forced to move between his native city and others, as the fury of the Tepanecs with him—as heir to Texcoco—waxed and waned.
Relations between the Mexica and the Tepanecs eventually soured in 1428, resulting in the assassination of the Mexica king by Maxtla, ruler of the Tepanec Empire. The new Mexica king, Itzcoatl, called for an attack on the empire and requested assistance. Nezahualcoyotl (who was technically his vassal) answered that call and rallied a number of cities to the cause, including the disaffected Tepanec city of Tacuba. After a series of military engagements between the two forces, the allies prevailed and this new force—known as the Triple Alliance, or Aztec Empire—began a series of conquests that would bring much of Mesoamérica under its rule. Nezahualcoyotl was finally crowned tlatoani, or king, of Texcoco in 1431. He had waited 18 years to accede.

Despite being one of the original architects of the Triple Alliance, Nezahualcoyotl is best remembered for being a patron of knowledge and the arts and, above all, the greatest poet in Mesoamerican prehistory. During his reign he appears to have transformed Texcoco into what was arguably the preeminent intellectual center in Mesoamérica, with scholars from many fields—including music, sculpture, philosophy, law, and engineering—living and working in the royal court. It became the “Athens” of the Americas: He is said to have established an extensive library, a zoological garden, and even a self-governing academy of scholars and poets (none of these survived the Spanish Conquest). Poems attributed to Nezahualcoyotl are among the best surviving examples of Pre-Columbian philosophy, and deal with the ephemeral nature of life, peace, love, friendship, and his own relationship to the gods. The traditions he is believed to have started were continued by his descendants, the future kings Nezahualpilli (r. 1472–1494) and Cacamatzin (r. 1494–1520).

Recently, the view of Nezahualcoyotl as a scholar king, and even a poet, has been challenged in the academic literature. It has been argued that there are some vagaries as to the authorship of his poems and that much of the favorable traits associated with Nezahualcoyotl were the products of his descendants recasting their ancestor in a favorable light following the Conquest. As a result, there is some dissension on some of the exploits of this character, but regardless he remains one of the most well known figures in Pre-Columbian history.

Further Reading

Overking

The term *overking* is one that was coined by scholars Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube to describe the nature of Classic Maya (250–909) political relationships. The southern Maya area was, at that time, home to scores of competing city-states, each one vying for local or regional supremacy. Traditional scholarly models of sociopolitical organization had focused on the physical
territories of the Maya kingdoms, with the southern lowlands carved into small or large political units with loosely defined geographic boundaries. These models, however, failed to account for an emerging pattern found in Maya hieroglyphic inscriptions: Certain rulers were being described in feudal terms, with masters and their vassal lords explicitly mentioned on many Maya monuments. Moreover, these master–vassal relationships appeared and disappeared over time, such that sites appeared to be arrayed in a complex web of ever-changing diplomatic relationships. Some sites, however, were consistently “masters,” whoever their vassals might be.

The overking model sees some political centers as dominant, with others deriving prestige—as well as possible protection, enhanced diplomatic relations, and favorable economic relationships—from alliances with powerful kingdoms. Geographic proximity, though certainly a determining factor in such relationships, is not necessarily required. Rather it is prestige, combined with real or token support from the overking, that seems to have been the motivating factor for these relationships. The most powerful overkings in the Maya area were based at the sites of Tikal and Calakmul. As these were implacable enemies and the most powerful of the Maya kingdoms, alliances with them—against others—were often made and broken in what appear to be moments of political desperation or opportunism. Thus though the Classic Maya area never saw unification or an empire, there were moments when political units larger than an individual city-state were formed. Sometimes these were real, and sometimes they were little more than fictive, but they were usually temporary.

Further Reading

**Pachacamac**

During the Early Intermediate Period (200 B.C.E.–650 C.E.), the town of Pachacamac, in the Lurín Valley near Lima, Peru, was but one of several competing coastal centers. The growth of the Wari Empire, and its corresponding expansion into this region during the Middle Horizon (650–1000), may have resulted in the transformation of this small town into a city. Surviving the collapse of Wari, Pachacamac appears to have become a local power, perhaps serving as the heart of a small state after 1000. By the Late Intermediate Period (1000–1476), Pachacamac had also become the locus of worship for a creator god of the same name (Pachacamac), serving as a religious shrine and pilgrimage center.

The majority of what we currently know about the religious and political history of Pachacamac dates to the mid-fifteenth century, when the Inca conquered the region and made Pachacamac an administrative center. They left its oracle and priests largely to themselves, allowing the city to retain its status as a major pilgrimage center. The god Pachacamac was incorporated into the Andean pantheon and—though transformed into a fire god and now subordinate to the Inca god of creation, Viracocha—maintained a substantial following.
The city of Pachacamac remained one of the holiest cities in the Inca Empire until the Spanish Conquest.

Further Reading

Palenque

This ancient Maya archaeological site near the Usumacinta River in Chiapas, Mexico, was at the peak of its power during the middle part of the Late Classic Period (600–850), when it was the capital of a kingdom (*B’aakal*) that could count its one-time enemy, Pomona, as its vassal and the major site of *Tikal* as its ally. Historically, it was engaged in long-term hostilities with some of the major powers of the Classic Maya Period (250–850), including *Calakmul*, Piedras Negras, Pomona, and Tonina.

Like some other major centers of the Classic Period, Palenque may have witnessed the incursion of Teotihuacanos into the Maya area (see *Copan*) in the late fourth century; some scholars have suggested a connection between that incursion and the founding of the Classic dynasty at Palenque in 431. From this point until the sixth century, Palenque was one of many struggling centers on the Usumacinta River, in direct competition with sites such as Pomona, Piedras Negras, Yaxchilan, and others. Its growing power on that river seems to have drawn the attention of distant Calakmul, capital of one of the most
influential and militarily powerful of the Maya kingdoms, which launched repeated, successful attacks on Palenque in 599 and 611. Years of sociopolitical disarray ensued, but the royal dynasty eventually righted itself under K’īnich Janaab’ Pakal or “Pakal the Great” (r. 615–683), who took the throne in 615 and would rule for the next 68 years until his death at age 80. Although the early years of his reign were marked by wars and possibly setbacks, by the mid-600s K’īnich Janaab’ Pakal had stabilized the situation enough to go on the offensive, attacking and subjugating Pomona. Palenque was enough of a powerhouse during his reign to be able to offer safe haven for a ruler of Tikal, who had fled the site as it was overrun by forces from Calakmul.

After the death of the long-lived Pakal, who was housed in the now-famous Temple of the Inscriptions, Palenque passed into the hands of K’īnich Kan B’alam II (r. 684–702) and then K’īnich K’an Joy Chitam II (r. 702–711), both of whom were sons of the late Pakal. During this time Palenque expanded its political influence south and west, engaging in often-successful but occasionally disastrous wars with its neighbors. Following the unfortunate capture of K’īnich K’an Joy Chitam II by Tonina in 711, Palenque suffered a dynastic disruption. Nevertheless, the site managed to right itself eventually and enjoyed some measure of stability under succeeding rulers. By the beginning of the eighth century, however, the story changed: Palenque underwent a precipitous decline, with the population dropping to a fraction of its former level as carved inscriptions and buildings ceased to be produced. Although we do not know what precise circumstances arose at Palenque to cause this, it is clear that its abandonment in the early eighth century was part of the wider phenomenon of the Maya collapse.

Further Reading

Patolli

Patolli is the Nahuatl term for a board game popular in Pre-Columbian Mesoamérica. Although its origins are unknown, it was widely played in central and southern Mesoamérica by such civilizations as the Classic Maya (250–909) and the Aztecs (1325–1521), from whom the current name of the game derives. Much like the Mesoamericán ballgame, patolli—as a game of chance as well as skill—was associated with betting activity. In the Aztec Empire patolli was a winner-take-all game, with individuals betting nearly anything and occasionally risking significant financial losses.

The patolli game board was shaped like an X and marked with 52 spaces through which several tokens would move. Colored beans, thrown by each player, would determine how many spaces those tokens could pass along the board. The overall object was to move all of one’s tokens from their starting positions to finishing ones, much like the unrelated contemporary game of Parcheesi, thereby winning the bet and whatever objects were involved.
Needless to say, patolli involved a great deal of luck—much of which was provided by the god of patolli (as well as music, dance, and other gambling endeavors), Macuilxochitl.

Further Reading

**Pleiades**

The Pleiades appear to have been one of the most important celestial bodies of the night sky observed by Pre-Columbian peoples. Peoples of northeast North America, for example, appear to have kept watch of the Pleiades in the spring and in the fall to calculate frost-free dates (e.g., when it was safe to plant and to harvest). The ancient Maya used the rising of the Pleiades, at dawn in late May, to know when it was safe to plant as well—but in their case it was tied to the beginning of the rainy season in Mesoamerica. The use of the Pleiades as a barometer for maximum agricultural productivity does not appear to have been limited to this region or to have died out with European contact: Similar ideas appear in the ethnohistoric and ethnographic records of many peoples of the Americas.

Likewise, the Pleiades—though usually connected to agriculture—had other meanings and associations. Among the Aztecs, for example, a specific position of the Pleiades in the night sky—overhead at midnight—was linked to one of their chief rites of renewal. We know that the Pleiades were important to the Aztecs specifically, moreover, because they are one of the few identifiable celestial bodies featured in the “Cronica Mexicayotl,” a document written by Fernando Alvarado Tezozomoc, a grandson of Motecuhzoma II (1466–1520), around 1598.

Further Reading

**Popol Nah**

A popol nah, or “council house” (literally, mat house), was an institution developed in the Maya area of Mesoamerica toward the end of the Late Classic (600–909). These were meeting places for nobles and thus centers of government, of paramount importance at sites where kings no longer held sole authority. The most famous Classic Maya popol nah occurs at the site of Copan, Honduras. Identified as Structure 22A, it was decorated with carved
stone versions of reed mats, one of the symbols of ruling authority in the Maya area. The building of Structure 22A, and thereby the institution of the popol nah, appears to have coincided with the death of its most famous king, Waxaklajuun U’baah K’awiil, who was captured and killed in 738. Archaeologists believe that the ensuing dynastic crisis required the new king to enter into a power-sharing arrangement with local nobles.

The popol nah was thus a sign that kings at Copan no longer had sole authority, a disturbing prospect from the perspective of ruling dynasties in the Maya area. After the collapse of Classic Maya civilization in the southern lowlands (see Maya Collapse) in the ninth to tenth centuries, council houses became a common facet of political life in the northern lowlands and the Maya highlands. Postclassic (909–1519) cities such as Chichén Itzá or Uxmal, in northern Yucatán, as well as many of the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Maya highland cities had buildings like these for dispersed leadership. They were clearly a facet of life for the K’ichee Maya, who wrote about them in the most famous extant Maya religious text, the Popol Vuh.

Further Reading

Popol Vuh

Known as the “Book of Council” and written by the K’ichee Maya in the mid-sixteenth century, the Popol Vuh is one of the most important religious texts from the Americas. Although it was written after the Spanish Conquest, it was based on Pre-Columbian Maya versions that date back—at the very latest—to the Late Preclassic (400 B.C.E.–250 C.E.). It details the creation myths of the K’ichee Maya, from the creation of the world to the birth of the K’ichee Maya as a people. It thus incorporates mythological and historical elements into its narrative. Given the antiquity of some of the stories of the Popol Vuh, it is the single most important surviving text—outside of Maya hieroglyphic inscriptions—for understanding ancient Maya religion.

The book can largely be divided into four parts, consisting of (1) multiple creations and destructions of the world, where missteps in the fabrication of human beings by the gods result in catastrophic events; (2) exploits by the mythological culture heroes Hunahpu and Xbalanque, the “Hero Twins.” who—as gods before the dawn of the present world—are born to set in motion the current world order and eventually die to become the sun and moon; (3) the creation of humanity and the K’ichee, who become differentiated from other tribes and travel under the guidance of their tutelary deity, Tohil; and (4) the events leading up to and immediately following the founding of Guamarcaaj (see Utatlán) around 1400. Stories imparting the ideals, ideas, and overall culture of the Maya can be found in all four parts. Archaeologists have been able to identify echoes of these stories in the distant past, as at the sites of Izapa, Guatemala, and Copan, Honduras, and combine the ideas of the Popol
Vuh with independent interpretations of Maya artifacts. The result has been a greater understanding of what the ancient Maya believed in—and of what links they share with present-day peoples.

Further Reading

**Pulque**

Pulque was one of the primary alcoholic drinks of Pre-Columbian Mesoa- mérica. Made from the fermented juice of the agave, pulque was of particular importance in Central Mexico. Although the origins of pulque are not clear, it played a major role in Mixtec as well as Aztec ceremonial life in the second millennium C.E. It was a main staple of feasts and festivals in Central Mexico, where consumption of pulque was a norm, but public drunkenness was not: Peoples such as the Aztecs had strong cultural prohibitions against such behavior, which was permitted in only a few select circumstances. This was due to cultural ideas about appropriate behavior as well to the ritual and religious associations of pulque. For example, it was a common substitute for human blood in sacrificial rites and may have been associated with such bodily fluids as semen or breast milk.

Pulque was even the source of specific origin myths involving famous Central Mexican gods such as Quetzalcoatl. The most widespread myth comes from the Aztecs, who believed that it was created by the gods Quetzcoatl and Mayahuel. According to legend, the peoples of earth had been created and provided with food but had nothing that provided them directly with joy. Noticing this, Quetzalcoatl persuades a young sky goddess named Mayahuel—the goddess of the maguey plant—to come with him to the surface of the earth. Her grandmother, one of the fearsome tzitzimime or “star demons” believed to attack the sun daily at dawn and dusk, rouses the other tzitzimime to pursue the two errant gods, who transform themselves into the branches of a tree when the tzitzimime give chase from the heavens. Unfortunately, the branches suddenly break and the grandmother recognizes Mayahuel, who is killed and torn to pieces as punishment for leaving the sky. Quetzalcoatl escapes this fate and buries her bones in the earth, where they become the first maguey plant and thus the source of all pulque.

Further Reading

**Quetzalcoatl**

One of the premier deities of the Aztec (1325–1521) pantheon, Quetzalcoatl or “the Feathered Serpent” is of great antiquity in Mesoamérica. His associations
change over time and space, and we do not know what various peoples before the Postclassic (909–1519) actually called him (Quetzalcoatl is his Aztec name). Like Tlaloc, the Central Mexican rain god, Quetzalcoatl appears early on in the archaeological record of Mesoamérica at the Central Mexican metropolis of Teotihuacán (300 B.C.E.–600 C.E.). The most noteworthy example of this god can be found on the aptly named Temple of the Feathered Serpent, where repetitive images of Quetzalcoatl appear alongside those of Tlaloc. A tomb discovered below this temple housed the remains of approximately forty sacrificial victims; most of these victims were young men and were probably not war captives. They appear to have been killed in a ritual involving martial prowess or military display, as most were dressed as powerful warriors.

Quetzalcoatl survived the collapse of Teotihuacán in the late sixth or early seventh century to become a major figure at some Late Classic sites, including Xochicalco in Central Mexico. Further florescence of Quetzalcoatl as a god would come with the rise of the Toltecs at Tula, also in Central Mexico, and with the preeminence of Chichén Itzá in Yucatán. In both places, Quetzalcoatl the god became conflated mythologically with a quasi-historical figure named Ce Acatl Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl. According to native chronicles from the era of European contact, he was a ruler of the Toltecs who was opposed to human sacrifice and advocated, in its place, the sacrifice of butterflies. Although he was a wise and knowledgeable figure, he managed to be tricked and humiliated by his rivals and, so shamed, departed across the sea to the east. As the native chroniclers relate, he came to rule the city of Chichén Itzá and was known in Maya languages as K’uk’ul’kan (a translation of Quetzalcoatl).

Although archaeologically there are chronological problems with this myth, having implications for the process of cultural transmission between the two centers (see Chichén Itzá and Tula), the changes to Quetzalcoatl’s persona—from a god involved with human sacrifice to one associated with “butterfly sacrifice,” knowledge, and wisdom—between the Early Classic (250–600) and the early Postclassic (909–1519) were real. By the time of the Aztecs, moreover, Quetzalcoatl was associated with the planet Venus as well as many aspects of creation mythology. He was credited with the destruction of one of the previous mythological epochs (see Cyclical Time), the creation of human beings, and the invention of books as well as the Mesoamerican calendar. He was also credited with having provided humanity with maize and was a symbol of death and rebirth. With all of these attributes, the Quetzalcoatl of the late Postclassic was truly one of the most important deities in Mesoamérica.

Further Reading
Quipu

A quipu (also spelled “khipu”) is a single strand of wool from which a series of knotted threads hang; the number of hanging threads can vary considerably, as can the knots, weave of threads, and even colors. In the time of the Inca Empire (1428–1533), quipus were used to record—among other things—tribute payments and other basic economic information vital to the functioning of the Inca state. Although not a writing system per se, quipus were used by accountants in much the same way: They were record-keeping devices that could be linked together to tell a larger economic story and passed on through time.

Recently, research by Gary Urton and others at Harvard University has suggested that the ties between the quipu method of recording and traditional forms of writing are closer than previously thought. The researchers have found that there are patterns in the types of fibers used to make the quipu and in all of the other variables of quipu construction, down to such factors as the spin direction of quipu threads and their colors. These patterns may have served to encode more than simple mathematical and economic calculations, and although the quipus are far from deciphered, the idea that they functioned beyond the Inca economy is an exciting one. Just as exciting has been the recent discovery of a quipu at the site of Caral, on the Pacific desert coast: This site is one of the earliest in the Americas and dates to the Andean Preceramic (3000–1800 BCE). This proves that quipus were of great antiquity in South America and that they existed as a form of communication from that early time all the way to the colonial period!

Further Reading

Rivas

This settlement, located near San Isidro, Costa Rica, on the Chirripó Pacifico River, was home to the Chiriquí culture of southwest Costa Rica between the tenth and fifteenth centuries. It is situated below the burial grounds of the Panteón de la Reina, an elite cemetery located atop a long ridge. One of the two major, excavated Chiriquí centers in Costa Rica, Rivas has provided archaeologists with a glimpse of life in the Intermediate Area, the area between the populous urban societies of Mesoamérica and the Andes. Characterized by petroglyphs, rings of stone cobbles, and standing stones, Rivas—like most sites of the region—was not characterized by monumental stone architecture. In fact, it seems to have started like many centers in the Intermediate Area, as a
populous farming village ruled by chiefs and competing lineages. Between 1250 and 1400, however, it was transformed architecturally into a regional economic, political, and ceremonial center.

Three separate cemeteries at the site, coupled with the elite cemetery above, appear to have made Rivas a locus of mortuary activity. Based upon the locations of these cemeteries as well as differences in house construction, archaeologists believe that there were at least four different social groups at Rivas, with only one of them having access to the Panteón de La Reina and high-prestige items such as gold. These high-status individuals appear to have been engaged in long-distance trade with societies of the Pacific Coast of Costa Rica.

As a ceremonial center, however, Rivas does not appear to have been occupied by a regular village population during this time. Rather it seems to have been a place where people came together in rites of feasting and ritual display. Such behaviors may have been designed to emphasize lineage ties or to reinforce social bonds between different gathered groups. Such behaviors seem to have ceased by the end of the fifteenth century, however, when Rivas was finally abandoned.

Further Reading

Shabik’eschee

This archaeological site in the American Southwest was one of the first sedentary, agricultural villages on the Colorado Plateau. The years between 100 and 400 had seen the widespread adoption of pottery in this region as well as the development of local strains of maize. By 400, agricultural production in the area had intensified—in large part due to changes in the ability to store food and an increase in rainfall—and the first year-round villages had developed. The founding of Shabik’eschee in the late fifth century, on the south side of Chaco Canyon, New Mexico, was part of this new trend. Houses here consisted of pits with earthen walls, roofed either with wood or wattle-and-daub. Storage facilities, located behind these houses, held crops such as maize, beans, and squash. In the years to come, these storage facilities would become less and less public, eventually being moved inside houses as the population increased and as distinctive, familial residential areas emerged. Shabik’eschee was thus one of the first in a long line of village settlements on the Colorado Plateau that eventually gave way, after 900, to densely populated communities centered about communal buildings or “great houses.” Sometime after 700, the pithouses of Shabik’eschee and other settlements were abandoned in favor of above-ground settlements, forerunners of the pueblos that were common in the region in the years before Spanish contact.

Further Reading
Sipán

During its heyday, Sipán was one of the primary settlements of the Moche civilization, on the north coast of Peru. It is most famous for the archaeological discovery of El Señor de Sipán, the “Lord of Sipán,” a noble dressed in ceremonial garb. The tomb is noteworthy for two reasons. First, the majority of Moche tombs are looted, and finding one that was undisturbed was an extremely rare occurrence: Since the collapse of Moche civilization around 800, the tombs have been periodically stripped of their gold and other precious items by grave robbers. Second, the tomb belonged to an individual of the highest status within Moche society—a ruling noble, if not a ruler himself. What makes the second point so remarkable is that from his clothing, gold headgear, and chalice, it is clear that this individual was playing the role of a familiar figure painted on Moche ceramics. Known as the “warrior-priest,” this role is part of an overall motif on those ceramics called the “Presentation Theme.”

As one of the chief narratives of Moche ceremony, the Presentation Theme usually shows the aftermath of a battle, in which captives have been taken and stripped of their clothing. Brought before the ruling nobility, their throats are cut and the blood caught in a chalice. As the other nobles stand around, the chief figure—the “warrior-priest”—drinks the blood, dressed in gold finery and accompanied by a spotted dog.

Until the discovery of the Lord of Sipán, this scene was thought to have been mythical, but the excavations at Sipán (and, subsequently, other Moche sites) suggest that ruling nobles participated in these activities regularly. As if to add further confirmation, the Lord of Sipán was buried with a host of other individuals (presumably participants) as well as a small dog.

Further Reading

Snaketown

This site on the Gila River, Arizona, was the largest settlement of the Hohokam people during the Preclassic and Classic Periods (700–1150 and 1150–1450, respectively) and is today one of the principal archaeological sites of the American Southwest. Also known as Skoaquik, “place of snakes,” this settlement was characterized by hundreds of thatched, wattle-and-daub houses arranged in small groups around plazas. At its height, Snaketown was at the center of a series of hierarchically arranged settlements with trading ties as far as Mexico. Its population of approximately two-thousand people—in the present-day Sonoran Desert—was managed agriculturally through an elaborate irrigation system.
Snaketown and the other Hohokam settlements appear to have had strong ties, in terms of trade and exchange, with peoples on the fringes of Mesoamerica during the Preclassic (700–1150). Perhaps the most striking evidence for this contact at Snaketown is its ballcourt, seemingly patterned after the earthen ballcourts of northern Mexico. The court at Snaketown consists of soil piled up along the edges of an oval playing field; it is only one of approximately two hundred ballcourts at Hohokam sites in Arizona.

The ballgame was invented very early in Mesoamerican prehistory and, interestingly enough, only appears in the American Southwest during the Hohokam florescence. Combined with the fact that the peoples of Snaketown appear to have obtained macaw feathers, copper bells, and other exotics from Mexico, the connection between the Hohokam and northern Mesoamerica appears to have been prolonged and rather strong. Nevertheless, it is not clear that the ballgame—or the exotic items traded in from Mexico—carried the same meaning in Arizona as it did in Mesoamerica. Thus far, the consensus interpretation among archaeologists is that the Snaketown ball court, like others in the area, represents public architecture with a ritual component.

The connections between Mesoamerica and Snaketown appear to have declined during the Classic Period (1150–1450), when the ballgame fell out of favor. Greater numbers of platform mounds (which replaced the ball court as the preferred style of public architecture) and adobe house compounds were the hallmarks of this era, and Snaketown became a focal point for migration from the smaller, surrounding towns. Unfortunately, the site began to decline in the fifteenth century due to environmental changes as well as agricultural problems and was abandoned to the desert by 1450.

Further Reading

Southern Cult

The *Southern Cult* or *Southeastern Ceremonial Complex* refers to a series of symbols as well as a general artistic style found in elite burials from archaeological sites of the American Midwest and Southeast during the Mississippian Period (1000–1500). The style appears to be indicative of a general belief system in which ancestors, agricultural fertility, warfare, and shamanism played a central role. Southern Cult artifacts were often made from rare or precious materials such as copper and marine shell, as well as from more mundane materials such as wood. Symbols included weeping eyes, woodpeckers, crosses within circles, birds-of-prey, warriors or weapons, skulls, striped poles, hands, and serpents. Because these symbols were found in a broad band ranging from the outer Midwest to the Gulf and Atlantic coasts, scholars initially believed that these areas were connected and integrated within a single cultural network. More recently, the recognition of significant regional variations, as well as a greater understanding of the individual Mississippian centers, has prompted
many scholars to question the existence of the Southern Cult as a “unified” or “standardized” religious tradition.

In all likelihood, there was never one religion that tied the Mississippian sites together. Rather, the Southern Cult may be viewed as a set of symbols and styles, often—but not always—regionally distinct over a broad geographic area. Elements of the Southern Cult appear to have been used by local elites or chiefs, at places such as Cahokia or Spiro, to highlight their authority vis-à-vis the general population. Oftentimes, Southern Cult objects tie leaders with supernatural beings, prominent ancestors, and even martial prowess. Some of the themes of the Southern Cult were originally thought to bear evidence of influence from Mesoamérica: Imagery involving long-nosed or solar deities, human sacrifice, and the elements was initially thought to have been derived from Central Mexico. Most scholars no longer believe this, however: the earliest incarnations of the Southern Cult seem to derive from local artistic and religious traditions first developed during the Early Woodland Period (800 B.C.E.–400 C.E.). Any connections with Mesoamérica were probably sporadic and indirect at best.

Further Reading

**Spiro**

Spiro, in present-day Oklahoma, is one of the most famous of all of the Mississippian (1000–1500) sites. Falling within the Caddoan cultural subdivision of Mississippian civilization, Spiro was the largest and most complex settlement in the region, comparable in some ways to the great centers at Moundville, Alabama, or Etowah, Georgia. Spiro is most noteworthy for its large pyramidal mound, dubbed Craig Mound. The site rose to fame in the 1930s, when looters tunneled into the mound and partially destroyed one of the most elaborate burial deposits in North America. Luckily, the looters were caught before finishing their work, and archaeologists were able to find and document the materials located therein.

Known as the Great Mortuary, the burial deposit within Craig Mound housed many burials outfitted with wooden litters, masks, marine items, and even woven materials. The artifacts from the Great Mortuary are noteworthy for their high degree of preservation as well as what they tell us about religious life among the Mississipians. After the individuals of the Great Mortuary were interred, wooden poles were used to mark the spot even as Craig Mound was modified and enlarged, suggesting a long-term reverence for these dead. Likewise, there is ample evidence that shamanism was a regular facet of religious life at Spiro, with the designs and imagery of many of the artifacts in the Great Mortuary similar to those found in religious or ritual contexts at other Mississippian sites.

Archaeologists believe that this shared symbolism is indicative of a widespread set of ideas or beliefs among the Mississipians, often dubbed the **Southern Cult** or Southeastern Ceremonial Complex. Politically, these ideas
may have been central to the power of the Mississippian chiefs at Spiro and elsewhere: As in some other parts of the Americas, public ritual at Spiro may have been one way in which the political elite expressed its authority. By the fourteenth century, this authority was gone, and Spiro—like other Mississippian centers in the Midwest—was largely abandoned.

Further Reading

Staff God
This deity, originally appearing at the Early Horizon site of Chavín de Huantar, Peru, was the primary god of Chavín civilization (400–200 B.C.E.). A composite of Amazonian animals, the Staff God is often depicted as a humanoid with a feline face, sporting serpents for eyebrows as well as hair, with claws on his hands and feet. Typically the Staff God, in his original form, was carved on Chavín stone monoliths or stelae holding staves. The Staff God functioned as a kind of oracle to local priests, and because of the relative power and influence of Chavín as a ceremonial center, his imagery spread during the Early Horizon to most of central and northern Peru.

The Staff God appears to have survived the rise and fall of several societies in Peru, as his next appearance as a major religious icon occurs with Tiwanaku. During the Middle Horizon (650–1000), his serpentine and feline characteristics merged with avian qualities: Felines and solar rays sometimes emerge from his head, as he wields two serpentine-avian scepters. These were the three basic types of animals common in religious imagery of that time. With one of his renditions standing in a key position at Tiwanaku, the Gateway of the Sun, the Tiwanaku Staff God seems to have been the most important, recognizable deity there. Moreover, he appears to have been exported to and adopted by the other major Andean civilization of that time, Wari. There his staves terminate in maize cobs, suggesting his role as a god (at least in part) of agricultural fertility. The decline of Wari around 1050, however, saw the Staff God decline in importance, as new gods—and ancestors—took a more prominent role in the Andean pantheon.

Further Reading

Stela
Broadly defined in the Americas as a stone, rectangular monolith erected for commemorative purposes, a stela was a common form of sculpture in Mesoamerica and, to a lesser extent, in Andean South America. In South America,
the earliest stelae occur during the Initial Period (1800–400 B.C.E.) and the Early Horizon (400–200 B.C.E.) at sites like Cerro Sechín, on the north coast of Peru, and Chavín de Huantar in the Andes. Images on these monuments range from warriors and dismembered victims (Cerro Sechín) to a humanoid, oracle deity known as the **Staff God**. Depictions of the latter individual persisted well into the first millennium C.E. (see *Wari*). The raising of stelae in the Andes continued well after the demise of Chavín, with stelae decorating the open plazas and other monumental architectural forms built by the **Tiwanaku** (650–1000) and Inca (1438–1533) civilizations. Some of these appear to have been decorated with royal portraits.

In Mesoamérica, the stela dates back to the time of the Olmec (1200–400). There these monoliths were not only carved with images of rulers but also inscriptions. By the Late Preclassic (400 B.C.E.–250 C.E.), the format for a Mesoamérican stela had been more or less standardized. Portraits of rulers were now complemented by dates, historical information, sociopolitical relations with other rulers, personal names, as well as a host of titles. Stelae were considered to be not only portraits of rulers but also—in a sense—sacred images or embodiments of the rulers themselves. Nearly every Mesoamerican civilization erected stelae in accordance with significant historical, astronomical, or calendrical events. Of all of these, the stelae of the Maya were the most elaborate, bearing three-dimensional portraits of kings and an elaborately decorated hieroglyphic writing system that was designed not only to convey information but also to be aesthetically pleasing.

It was, in fact, the Maya pattern of erecting such elaborate stelae that prompted scholars to define the Classic Period for Mesoamérica in the first place: The Classic Period (250–909) was initially bounded by the times in which the first and last stelae were erected in the southern Maya lowlands. This scheme quickly fell apart in light of new monumental discoveries, although the latest final date encountered—that of 909 at the site of Tonina, Mexico—has endured in the literature for a long time. That being said, stelae were being erected in other parts of Mesoamérica well into the sixteenth century, serving similar purposes.

**Further Reading**


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**Sweat Bath or Sweat Lodge**

Many societies of the Pre-Columbian Americas employed heated saunas in rituals, social activities, and medicine. They typically consisted of an enclosure wherein heated rocks would be placed; water would then be poured over or otherwise distributed on the rocks, perhaps in addition to medicinal herbs or similar substances, causing the enclosure to fill with steam. Individuals or groups of individuals would then enter the room to sweat, with the purpose being to cleanse the body, mind, and/or spirit.
That being said, the architectural, ritual and medicinal specifics of such places—as well as the types of behaviors allowed inside—varied widely. Sweat lodges at the time of European contact ranged over the entire breadth of North America, from such culturally diverse places as the Pacific Coast, the Great Plains, and the Northeast. Variability was thus likely more the rule than the exception, with evidence of different songs, prayers, complete silence, clothes (or lack of them), gender roles, and even offerings presented by European accounts and common to contemporary peoples. The origin of these traditions is unclear, although some of the earliest sweat lodges appear in the archaeological record of the Middle Woodland Period (200 B.C.E.–400 C.E.) in the American Southeast. There, they are associated with the Adena–Hopewell culture.

By comparison, there is much indigenous as well as contact-era literature on sweat baths, as they are known in Mesoamérica. Here the sweat bath was but one masonry structure in a larger bathing complex, complete with benches for sleeping as well outer and inner zones. Although sweat baths were not confined to royalty, scenes showing kings and other nobles engaged in rather bizarre activities—as well as texts describing these activities—provide us with some of the most detailed information on “bathing” in Mesoamerican cultures. Among the ancient Maya, for example, nobles might receive enemas containing tobacco, alcohol, or other inebriants as part of their sweat bath experience. Such activities could be coupled with binge eating and drinking as well as purging (e.g., vomiting). The Maya sweat baths of nobles were boisterous affairs, with the playing of music and sexual liaisons part of the overall activity. Although such behavior stands in marked contrast to that believed for Pre-Columbian North America, the overall idea was similar: The excesses of this lewd, drunken behavior were ultimately countered by the cleansing effects of the actual sweat bath. In a sense, the idea was to completely throw the body off balance so that the balance itself could be restored via the sweat bath.

Further Reading

Talud-Tablero

This architectural term refers to a building style popularized in Pre-Columbian Central Mexico and most closely associated with the metropolis of Teotihuacán. Prior to the use of talud-tablero architecture, Mesoamerican temple-pyramids were typically stepped, for example, with successive courses of stone arranged in pyramidal fashion. In the Late Preclassic (400 B.C.E.–250 C.E.), architects at Teotihuacán adopted a modified pattern in which they added, between each successive course of stone, a sloping wall (talud). Combined with the flat, rectangular and stepped course (tablero), the overall effect of talud-tablero is to create a broadly based pyramid with sloping and stepped walls. Oftentimes, portions of the tablero section were inset slightly, creating a panel on which to paint murals or affix plaster sculpture.
Talud-tablero is one of the primary diagnostic traits of Teotihuacán architecture and was oftentimes adopted by those civilizations, which wanted to emulate or to demonstrate ties to the great metropolis (real or fictive). Likewise, it appears at sites that are believed to have been conquered or dominated by Teotihuacanos: Talud-tablero architecture in the Maya area, for example, is particularly evident there around 400.

However exported, talud-tablero architecture was popular in many parts of Mesoamerica, from northwest Mexico all the way to western Honduras, and is testament to the power—military and cultural—of Teotihuacán. It was so popular, in fact, that this architectural style lasted long after the collapse of Teotihuacán: Talud-tablero, and echoes of it, carries well into Postclassic Period (850–1500) Mesoamerica.

Further Reading

Tawantinsuyu

The Quechua word *Tawantinsuyu*, or “Land of the Four Quarters,” was the name given by a Sapa Inca, Pachacuti (1438–1471), to his new empire in the Andes. Commonly known as the Inca Empire, Tawantinsuyu was created in the late fifteenth century as the Inca conquered territory after territory in the Andes and on the Pacific Coast. The story of Tawantinsuyu, however, begins around 1200, when the kingdom of Cuzco was founded by a quasi-mythical ancestor named Manco Capac. Archaeological evidence points to the emergence of an identifiable Inca culture somewhat earlier, around 1000, placing it around the same time as the states of Lambayeque and Chimor were forming. Apparently, the Inca were but one of the many groups to emerge out of the waning power of the Tiwanaku and Wari Empires (650–1000) of the Andes. In any event, it is clear that the royal origins of the Inca were humble indeed: The “kingdom” of Cuzco started simply as a precocious town, which gradually drew in allies and followers who—as the Inca became stronger—were made “Inca by privilege.”

The architecture of Tawantinsuyu is justifiably famous: With almost 25,000 miles of roads leading out of Cuzco and through the Andes in all four directions, massive stone blocks individually carved to fit into one another in walls, mountaintop shrines and noble estates, and almost vertical terracing, the architecture of the Inca Empire is staggering to behold. Although, to be sure, there were antecedents in the Andes, the distinctive “imperial” Inca style was almost new in 1400. In fact, the first examples of it around Cuzco appear in 1375, when the Inca were still struggling with their immediate neighbors, the Chanca people. Fewer than 100 years later, they would control—under one of their greatest leaders, Huayna Capac—a territory encompassing portions of modern-day Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina. It was the largest ever of the empires of the Americas before the coming of the Spanish in 1533.
Like the Triple Alliance (Aztec Empire) of Central Mexico some 12 years earlier, Tawantinsuyu was felled by disease, disorganization, and treachery: The last strong ruler of the Inca, Huayna Capac (1493–1527), was killed by smallpox, initiating a struggle for dynastic succession that had just been successfully resolved by Atalhuapa (1532–1533) when the Spanish arrived. In fact, Atalhuapa was returning from the last battle of that civil war—with tens of thousands of warriors—to formally claim his throne when the Spanish arrived in the Andes. Following a couple of months of diplomacy, subterfuge, and cultural ignorance on both sides, Atalhuapa agreed to meet the Spanish at the walled Inca city of Cajamarca. Led by Francisco Pizarro, the band of fewer than two-hundred Spanish waited as up to eighty-thousand warriors surrounded the city. Believing himself invulnerable and behaving according to established rules of diplomacy, Atalhuapa decided to leave the majority of his warriors outside the city walls and enter, largely unarmed, with a small contingent of commanders and others in the royal retinue. Of divine heritage and descended from the Inca sun god, Inti, Atalhuapa was ill prepared for what became a Spanish ambush. Most were killed, and the emperor himself was taken hostage. Given the perceived divinity of Atalhuapa and the loss of military leadership in the ambush, no counterattack came. Rather, attempted ransoms and forced decrees by Atalhuapa ensued, including measures designed to execute political rivals and exacerbate the already-deep wounds of civil war. Pizarro finally had the emperor executed, installing two succeeding puppet emperors before formally taking control of the empire for himself. Tawantinsuyu, however, effectively died with Atalhuapa in 1533.

Further Reading

Tayasal

The Postclassic (850–1500) Maya site of Tayasal, known as Noj Petén “Great Peten,” was located on the banks of Lake Petén Itzá. According to native accounts, it was founded by refugees from the famous site of Chichén Itzá, which was destroyed through treachery by the Cocom, one of the lineages of the Itzá Maya. Archaeology places the destruction of Chichén Itzá around 1050, with migrations into the Petén region occurring shortly thereafter. Tayasal appears to have been settled by these and other stragglers from the last throes of the Maya collapse. It was, however, the last in a long series of settlements on and around Lake Petén, which had been densely settled since the Late Preclassic (400 B.C.E.–250 C.E.). The new kingdom of Tayasal, forged from the islands and peninsulas of the lake, would preserve many of the traditions of the Classic Period (250–850) and those of Postclassic Chichén Itzá for hundreds of years. It was a natural draw for the inhabitants of waning societies throughout the Maya area and was the most densely populated center in the southern Lowlands during the Postclassic. Tayasal also has the dubious distinction of being one of the last Maya strongholds to fall to colonial Spanish aggression. It was taken by force in 1697.
Tenochtitlán

Founded in 1325 by the Mexica, Tenochtitlán was the capital city of the Aztec Empire. In 1325, however, it was a swampy island in Lake Texcoco: The Mexica, loyal subjects of the Tepanec Empire, had been given permission by its ruler to settle there in one of the most inhospitable locations in the Basin of Mexico. Shortly thereafter, they began to drain the swamp and build up the terrain to produce an urban space that would eventually hold two-hundred thousand people. Several roads connecting the island to different parts of the mainland were built, and by 1400 the city—by virtue of this remarkable transformation—was a thriving place rivaling many of the older centers in the Basin of Mexico. In 1428, the Mexica of Tenochtitlán would combine with the Acolhua at Texcoco and disaffected Tepanecs at Tacuba to form the Triple Alliance. This Alliance, otherwise known as the Aztec Empire, would overthrow the Tepanecs and expand its influence over much of Mesoamérica. During this time Tenochtitlán, under the guidance of the Mexica, would emerge as the most powerful of the three cities.

Organized into eighty different neighborhoods, Tenochtitlán was densely settled according to a grid plan, at the heart of which was a massive ceremonial precinct. Temples, schools, ball courts, houses for warrior societies, and living quarters for priests were all housed within this precinct. But perhaps the most architecturally significant building in this center was the Templo Mayor or Great Temple, which consisted of twin stairways leading to two different temples: one was for the Aztec tutelary deity, Huitzilopochtli, who in Aztec mythology had guided the Mexica to Tenochtitlán, and the other was for Tlaloc, the Central Mexican storm god.

In addition to the central precinct and its myriad neighborhoods, Tenochtitlán was home to vast markets, in which greater and greater varieties of goods were flowing from 1325 onwards. The Spanish, when they arrived at Tenochtitlán in 1519, saw its markets and numerous canals and instantly compared it with some of the most cosmopolitan cities in Europe. Tenochtitlán was also a place of palaces, gardens, storage facilities, and even a zoo. The imperial palace, as well as several palaces belonging to the nobility, was characterized by living quarters as well as libraries, meeting rooms, craft workshops, kitchens, and armories. Tribute in vast quantities flowed to these places, even more so after the beginning the Aztec Empire in 1428. Tenochtitlán would remain the preeminent city in Mexico until its fall in 1521.

Further Reading
Teotihuacán

The great metropolis of Teotihuacán, in present-day Central Mexico, was the sixth largest city in the world in the sixth century C.E. With a peak population of approximately one-hundred twenty-five thousand people, Teotihuacán had humble origins: In the third century B.C.E., it had been one of a host of newly founded centers competing for dominance in the Basin of Mexico. By the first century C.E., it had undergone a rapid rise to become the preeminent city in Mesoamérica and was to remain so until the seventh century. We do not know the ethnic or linguistic identity of the people who occupied Teotihuacán, in large part because what remains of their written language has not yet been deciphered. In fact, word Teotihuacán is derived from a later culture, the Aztecs, who saw the ruins of the great city and called it “place where the gods live” in their native tongue, Nahuatl.

By the year 400, Teotihuacán had expanded its cultural and political influence far beyond the boundaries of the Basin of Mexico. The city had been a home to immigrants from different parts of Mesoamérica—including Maya, Zapotecs, and various peoples from western Mexico and the Gulf Coast—for hundreds of years, each in their own ethnic enclaves much as in some cities today. Nobles, too, from different parts of Mesoamérica visited and may have even lived inside this cosmopolitan city. Outside the city, Teotihuacán appears to have had political control of the Basin of Mexico and probably a vast amount of territory in the neighboring highlands. Although the degree of political control maintained by Teotihuacán outside this immediate area is in some dispute, the Teotihuacán presence in Mesoamérica—in terms of artifacts, imagery, architecture, and even religious expression—during the Early Classic Period (250–600) is near ubiquitous.

Between 300 and 600, individuals from Teotihuacán appear in the records and archaeology of many key sites in Mesoamérica. Sometimes, they appear as conquerors: In 378, a Teotihuacáno lord known as Siyaj K’ak’ appears to have dethroned the Maya king of Tikal and installed a Central Mexican ruler.
there, whose dynasty was to flourish for hundreds of years. In other cases, the
connections are vaguer and suggest conquest, outright imitation by locals, po-
litical influence, or some combination of these. Not surprisingly, the sites that
show the most connections with Teotihuacán are those that were of political or
economic importance to the great city: The shadow of Teotihuacán looms large,
for example, over key Maya sites such as Copan and Kaminaljuyu as well as the
Zapotec capital of Monte Albán. As a result, Central Mexican gods such as Tlaloc and Quetzcoatl, as well as Teotihuacán-style pottery and dress, can be
found all over Mesoamerica during this period.

By 400, most of the major constructions at Teotihuacán had been completed. The
city had recently been renovated, perhaps a result of its expanding influ-
ence, wealth, and prestige. Characterized by a grid plan and thousands of apart-
ment compounds, the city was cut by numerous causeways, of which the Street
of the Dead is the most famous. It also had numerous palaces and temples,
including the Pyramid of the Moon, the Pyramid of the Feathered Serpent,
and the Pyramid of the Sun. The latter, on the east side of the Street of the
Dead, is as large at its base as the Great Pyramid of Khufu in Egypt.

The collapse of Teotihuacán as a major force in Mesoamerica occurred some-
time around 600. Parts of the site were violently burned, with the population
plummeting to perhaps thirty thousand to forty thousand people in the span
of 100 years. Although we do not know precisely why Teotihuacán collapsed,
most of the archaeological evidence suggests an internal conflict. Whatever
happened, the demise of Teotihuacán had serious repercussions in the fates of
many Mesoamerican civilizations: Periods of turmoil as well as political and
economic reorganization were common at this point. Teotihuacán retained a
fragment of its former influence, however, as most Mesoamerican societies—
even after its collapse—continued to equate Central Mexico with martial and
cultural prestige. By 1400, Teotihuacán was the capital of a small city-state
about to come under the influence of the Aztecs, who saw themselves as suc-
cessors to this once-great polity.

Further Reading

Terra Preta

This type of soil, literally “dark earth” in Portuguese, was created by Amazo-
nian peoples over a vast period of time, ranging from 5000 B.C.E. to the colo-
nial period. Uncharacteristically fertile for the Amazon, in which poor soil for
cultivation is the norm, terra preta was one of the ways in which Pre-Columbian
peoples of the region were able to farm and achieve high population densities.
It appears to have been made through intentional, intensive deposition of
charcoal, pottery shards, and organic matter (plant and animal); in some places
this compost-heavy soil is over 2 meters deep, in marked contrast to surround-
ing soils which are extremely nutrient poor.
Terra preta sites occur all over the Amazon and are a good benchmark for determining whether the area was settled by agriculturalists. Noteworthy centers include Acutuba and Santarem, in the Central and Lower Amazon, respectively. Some estimates of the original scope of terra preta in Amazonia are quite large. Its cultivation raises questions as to how much of the present tropical forest was in place in Pre-Columbian times (and how much of it was managed by Amazonian peoples).

Further Reading

Thule

With its origins around 700 B.C.E. in the Bering Strait, the Thule culture of the Arctic was a well-developed, marine mammal–hunting society by 400 with influences from both sides of the Strait. Marine kayaks as well as bone-, ivory- or antler-tipped harpoons enabled the Thule people to hunt whales and other sea mammals previously unavailable to peoples in the Arctic. Harpoons were decorated with distinctive, carved art styles such as Okvik (c. 500 B.C.E.), Old Bering Sea (200 B.C.E.–800 C.E.), Punuk (c. 500), and Birnik (c. 600). By Punuk times, Thule settlements were becoming larger and more elaborate: People started living in semisubterranean, wooden buildings with sod roofs, a lifestyle that would continue well into the nineteenth century.

Between 900 and 1100, Thule technology—in the form of the aforementioned marine kayaks, hunting tools and methods, and house designs as well as dogsleds and large boats—enabled Thule culture to spread far beyond the boundaries of the Bering Strait. Whether simply a cultural spread or a more direct spread of population, Thule culture largely merged with and/or replaced the other cultures of coastal Alaska, ranging as far south as the Aleutian Islands and as far west as the Siberian coastline. Around 1000, populations of Inupiat speakers—themselves part of the Thule tradition—began migrating eastwards from present-day Alaska. Far-ranging hunting techniques and technological adaptations enabled the Thule speakers to migrate quickly and expand in population rather rapidly at the expense of the other major ethnic group in the Arctic, the Dorset, and facilitated their encounter with the first Europeans to venture into the Americas, the Norse. Within a few hundred years, Thule peoples had largely replaced the Dorset and the Norse colonies had collapsed. The Dorset may have survived the Thule incursion in pockets of the Arctic well past 1400, but by this time the Thule had long-dominated a region stretching from Alaska to Greenland. Their descendants continue to populate this area.
Further Reading

Tikal

This archaeological site in the Petén region of Guatemala, one of the preeminent cities of the Lowland Maya, was settled in the Late Preclassic (300 B.C.E.–250 C.E.) and flourished during the Classic Period. Perhaps the best known and most studied of all Maya sites, Tikal was known to the ancient Maya as *Yax Mutal* (the larger kingdom was simply known as *Mutal*) and was the leader of a loose, often changing, confederation of polities that often came into conflict with those led by its primary rival to the north, Calakmul. In 378 C.E., a lord from the Central Mexican metropolis of *Teotihuacán*, known to the Maya as Siyaj K’ahk’, or “Born of Fire,” successfully invaded Tikal and installed a new dynasty there headed by king Yax Nuun Ayiin I (r. 379–410). This dynasty was to remain unchallenged, leading the most powerful and vast kingdom in the Lowlands, for the next 200 years. At its apex, the epicenter of Tikal was populated by at least fifty-thousand people.

Although there is little evidence that Teotihuacán directly controlled affairs at Tikal, the fortunes of the two sites were probably linked. The sudden demise of Teotihuacán in the sixth century was coupled with troubled times at the Lowland metropolis. Protracted wars with sites like *Calakmul* and Caracol

Temple I or Great Jaguar Temple as seen from the terrace of northern acropolis, Mayan city of Tikal, Guatemala. RJ Lerich/Shutterstock.
led to great political and social instability at Tikal: Lords fled into exile and alternated between victory as well as defeat in quick succession. Sites claiming to have been founded by members of the Tikal dynasty proliferated; some of these, like Dos Pilas or Aguateca, became major centers in their own right. Ultimately, the great Tikal was sacked by Calakmul and its allies in the sixth and seventh centuries, with many of its monuments destroyed in the process. It did not recover until the reign of its great king Jasaw Chan K’awiil I (682–734), who defeated Tikal’s enemies and restored it to “superpower” status in the Lowlands. Yet Tikal would never fully regain its preeminent status and had to contend with many other cities and their rulers. By 800, Tikal had, like many major Classic Maya centers, begun to decline in population and political influence. Unlike many of its contemporaries, however, this decline was gradual and took place over the next 150 years. By the mid-ninth century, Tikal had been swallowed by the jungle, its royal dynasty long gone. Some of the region over which Tikal held sway, however, was never fully abandoned: Some settlements around Lake Petén Itzá, for example, were not only settled but also thriving at the time of Spanish contact.

Further Reading

Tiwanaku
The name Tiwanaku (or Tihuanaco) refers to a major Andean empire and its capital city, located just south of Lake Titicaca in modern-day Bolivia. Tiwanaku civilization flourished during an archaeological time period known as the Middle Horizon, or 650 to 1000, and was one of two major empires in the Andes during that time. At its height, the Tiwanaku Empire held sway over Bolivia, northern Chile, and southern Peru; the somewhat larger empire to the north, Wari, was its neighbor and its competitor for dominance in the Andes. Unlike Wari, Tiwanaku did not incorporate many long-lived urban centers within its sphere of influence, and it is not clear how much direct control the capital had over its subject cities. In fact, some have suggested that Tiwanaku and its subjects were more a loose confederation of cities than a centralized state. What is clear, however, is that the peoples of the Tiwanaku Empire had the resources and access to labor to be able to build enormous temples, platforms, and courtyards at the capital and in its subject centers.

The religious traditions of Tiwanaku, as expressed throughout these buildings, largely stemmed from previous civilizations: Tiwanaku appears to have inherited or adopted wholesale—albeit in modified form—a pantheon of avian and feline deities represented as early as Chavin (400–200 B.C.E.) times. Such religious imagery was carved upon massive, imported stone blocks, which were either freestanding or inset within masonry structures. Some have suggested that this religious continuum, continuing at Tiwanaku, eventually made its way from the Bolivian capital to Wari. Certainly the two shared a border.
Unfortunately, they also shared the same fate: 1000 marked the beginning of a prolonged dry spell (about 200 years), during which time social and political stresses became too much for the two empires to bear. They collapsed soon thereafter, and Tiwanaku was replaced by a number of smaller, localized powers. Eventually, all would come under the dominion of the Inca during their expansion in the fifteenth century.

Further Reading

Tlaloc

This Central Mexican deity was revered in Pre-Columbian Mesoamérica by several peoples, with ceramics from the site of Tlapacoya (c. 100 B.C.E. at the earliest) perhaps being his earliest pictorial appearance. As a god of lightning and rain, Tlaloc is usually depicted in scenes or contexts involving agricultural fertility. Although his appearance varies widely between cultures on ceramics, buildings, and monuments, Tlaloc is usually depicted with large circles or “goggles” over his eyes, jaguar teeth, and a missing (oftentimes bleeding) lower jaw. By the time of the Aztecs (1325–1519), Tlaloc was a deity associated with one of the thirteen Aztec heavens (the fourth), known as Tlalocan: This was a watery place, an agricultural paradise, where the souls of the drowned resided. He had likewise become associated, at some point in the Postclassic, with caves, a consort (Chalchiutlicue), and a series of helping spirits, the Tlaloque, who lived inside of mountains and assisted Tlaloc with the production and distribution of rain.

At least some of this mythology may have developed at Teotihuacán (100 B.C.E.–600 C.E.), where he seems to have enjoyed no small measure of popularity. The most striking example of Tlaloc imagery occurs on the facade of the Temple of the Feathered Serpent, where he appears alongside an early version of Quetzalcoatl amid shells and watery layers. The Teotihuacános may have introduced this Central Mexican deity to the Maya after 378 C.E., when Teotihuacán warriors entered the Petén region of Guatemala and installed a series of friendly Maya or even ethnically Teotihuacán rulers. Bearing square shields emblazoned with this god, they had a lasting impact at such notable centers as Tikal and Copan. The Maya already revered their own storm god, Chaak, however, and as a consequence Tlaloc—although widely popular—was often invoked by Maya rulers on monuments when they wanted to link themselves to the great Central Mexican metropolis or talk about the past.

Tlaloc handily survived the upheavals of the Teotihuacán (c. 600) and Maya (c. 850) collapses and seems to have been well-entrenched in Central Mexican religion during the Chichimec invasions (see Aztlan) of 1150 to 1200. He was so influential a deity that the Aztecs (1325–1519) adopted Tlaloc and co-opted him within their pantheon, headed by the Aztec tutelary deity Huitzilopochtli.
Tlaloc was so influential in the Aztec Empire that he, and he alone, shared a place of worship with Huitzilopochtli atop the largest building at the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán: the Great Temple. Excavations beneath the Tlaloc side of the Great Temple by archaeologists have revealed a grave where numerous adolescents sacrificed to Tlaloc were buried. With these were incense burners and other artifacts bearing images of Tlaloc himself.

Further Reading

Tlatoani

In the latter part of Postclassic (909–1519) Central Mexico, each of the city-states around the Basin of Mexico—what was to become the core of the Aztec Empire—was ruled by a king known in the Nahuatl language as a tlatoani, or “speaker.” These rulers were the pinnacles of sociopolitical and religious power at their respective sites. They were also expected to exemplify a refined model of courtly behavior, which included, as alluded to by the term, great proficiency in public speech and performance.

The term *tlatoani* likely gained its first widespread political usage during the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, when Nahuatl-speaking peoples were moving into the Basin of Mexico and founding—or often conquering—cities to form new kingdoms. One such city, *Tenochtitlán*, was founded by a member of the Mexica tribe known as Acamapichtli (r. 1376–1395). As the first tlatoani there, his power was limited: He was actually a vassal of the Tepanec Empire, the most powerful state in the Basin of Mexico. By 1400, though, Tenochtitlán had seen a smooth transition to its second tlatoani, Huitzilihuitl, and the reduction of its tribute to the Tepanecs to a pittance. Huitzilihuitl and his immediate successors would support the Tepanecs in various wars, gaining in power and influence. A successful war with the Tepanecs in 1428, as part of the *Triple Alliance*, would see the tlatoani of Tenochtitlán—a figure named *Itzcoatl*—become the most powerful ruler in Mesoamérica. At this time, the title of tlatoani no longer sufficed. Itzcoatl became the first Hueh Tlatoani, “Great Speaker” or “emperor” of the Aztec Empire.

Further Reading

Toltec

The archaeological site of Toltec, Arkansas, was one of the most important settlements in the American Southeast prior to the rise of Mississippian civilization.
around 1000. Believed in the nineteenth century to have been built by the Toltecs, an ancient civilization from Central Mexico (and hence, its name), the site of Toltec was built by local peoples and flourished from 600 to 1050.

What is unusual about Toltec is that it was created in a time of sociopolitical flux. The dominant culture in the American Southeast, known as Hopewell–Adena, had collapsed around 400 and long-distance trade within the eastern portion of the present-day United States had almost ceased. Intensive, maize-based agriculture would not be adopted until 800. Moreover, populations in the Southeast were steadily increasing, but so was warfare: This era, known as the Late Woodlands (400–1000), was one of devastating conflicts between increasingly fortified centers. Ultimately, these events would lead to complex societies in the Mississippi Valley based at cities such as Cahokia, Illinois, but not for a few centuries.

Toltec seems to have anticipated all of these developments, was outside the Mississippi Valley, and was one of the first chiefdoms in the American Southeast. With eighteen mounds, plazas, and other signs of public works projects, Toltec was a bit of an anomaly in 600. Although it was abandoned around 1050, the site was eventually reoccupied around 1400. Sporadic occupation continued in the area until the sixteenth century.

Further Reading

**Triple Alliance**

The Triple Alliance, more commonly known as the Aztec Empire, was the most powerful Pre-Columbian empire in Mesoamérica between 1428 and 1519. The Spaniards, when they saw the capital city of Tenochtitlán in 1519, were exposed to a sophisticated city of over two-hundred-thousand people with vast markets bearing goods from all over Mesoamérica and beyond. Yet this was a recent vision. In fact, the Triple Alliance was not even a thought—much less an imperial entity—until the early fifteenth century. Its key members, however, were already cities by 1400: Tacuba (or Tlacopan), Texcoco, and, of course, Tenochtitlán. In 1428 they allied themselves against the major power of the day, the Tepanec Empire centered at the city of Atzcapotzalco. They succeeded—one by one—in conquering or exacting pledges of vassalage from most of the major centers in a region of Mexico stretching from Michoacán in the west to Chiapas in the east. From its base on the banks of Lake Texcoco, within the city limits of present-day Mexico City, the Triple Alliance governed an empire of perhaps 6.5 million people. Late in its history, the Triple Alliance even managed to conquer a swath of the Pacific coast from Chiapas to western Guatemala, exacting tribute from the Maya highlands. Trade entrepots were set up by the Alliance as far south as Panama, making it a truly far-reaching native state.

In terms of the Alliance members, Tacuba was by far the least powerful: It only received one-fifth of all tribute flowing into the empire. More a puppet
than true partner, Tacuba was a Tepanec city—originally subject to Atzcapotzalco—which threw off servitude to enter into a junior partnership with Tenochtitlán and Texcoco in 1428. It may have been founded in the late tenth century, but like other centers around Lake Texcoco, it was probably infiltrated and eventually taken over by Chichimec migrants (see *Aztlan*) in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Texcoco, in comparison to Tacuba, was a major player in the Alliance and received two-fifths of all tribute. Founded in the twelfth century on the eastern bank of Lake Texcoco, it became the capital of the Acolhua people in 1337 and was one of the most populous cities in the Basin of Mexico. At its height, it may have housed approximately twenty-five thousand people.

Like Tacuba, Texcoco had come to be dominated by the Tepanec Empire. Unlike Tacuba, however, it grew in power and influence—so much so, that by 1400 it was clear that Texcoco would soon be a threat to its master. During the reign of the Texcoco king Ixtlilxochitl (r. 1409–1418), this indeed came to pass: Texcoco led an initially successful but ultimately disastrous rebellion against the Tepanecs. According to native accounts, Ixtlilxochitl was killed in front of his son and successor, Nezahualcoyotl (c. 1402–1472), who was finally able to exact revenge upon the Tepanecs by convincing his neighbors to answer a call to arms by the Mexica at Tenochtitlán. Cobbling together a massive military force comprised of a host of smaller centers, he joined the rulers of Tenochtitlán and Tacuba to defeat his hated enemy.

Although Texcoco was a major player in the Alliance, Tenochtitlán was by far the most powerful of the three. Founded in 1325, Tenochtitlán was the capital of the Mexica people. According to native accounts, the Mexica were among the last of the Chichimecs to arrive in the Basin of Mexico and served in the armies of various peoples of the Basin before entering into the service of the Tepanecs, who gave them permission to settled on the swampy island that was to become the Aztec capital. They were loyal to the Tepanecs for the next 50 years, even refusing to help Ixtlilxochitl of Texcoco in his rebellion. As a reward, the Mexica were given Texcoco as a vassal state. The growing power of the Mexica after 1400, however, coincided with deteriorating relations between Atzacapotzalco and Tenochtitlán, with the end result being the assassination of the Mexica king in 1426 by Maxtla, ruler of the Tepanec Empire. Maxtla attempted to conquer Tenochtitlán formally in 1428, prompting the new ruler of the Mexica, Itzcoatl, to ask for help from his neighbors. The result was the Triple Alliance, a power that would dominate Mesoamerica for almost a century.

Despite its strengths, the Triple Alliance failed to deal effectively with the Spanish upon their arrival in the Basin of Mexico in 1519. In part, this was due to its very nature: As a tribute-oriented empire whose rule, in many places, was maintained by threat of force, the Triple Alliance suffered throughout its existence from resistance and rebellion. When Hernan Cortés (Cortez) and his small group of Spanish conquistadores (about four-hundred men) marched into Aztec territories in August of 1519, they did so with thousands of indigenous peoples disaffected with Aztec oppression. Likewise, the Aztec leadership also committed a series of political and strategic blunders: The ruler of the Triple Alliance at that time, Motecuhzoma II (1466–1520), trying to determine the intentions of the Spanish and believing himself safe in his capital, invited Cortés and his men to his palace. Not following the rules of Aztec diplomacy and taking advantage of this hospitality, the Spanish eventually took the bewildered
emperor hostage in his own palace. The death of Motecuhzoma II—either at the hands of the Spanish or the rioting populace of Tenochtitlán—was followed by a near-impossible escape by Cortés from the palace. Returning with reinforcements in 1521, Cortés found Tenochtitlán—and subsequently, much of the Basin of Mexico—decimated by disease. Unintentionally carried by Europeans to the Americas, diseases such as smallpox and typhus destroyed with equal success the flower of Aztec nobility and the general populace. Although the Alliance was to have two more emperors after Motecuhzoma II, consisting of Cuauhtlahuac (1520) and Cuauhtemoc (1520–1521), they were killed in short order by smallpox and Cortés, respectively. What resistance there was to the Spanish was quickly overcome, and the Triple Alliance was no more.

Further Reading

Tula

The archaeological site of Tula, located to the north of the Basin of Mexico, was settled during the Classic Period (250–850) but rose to prominence during the first few centuries of the Postclassic Period (850–1500). Its first settlers appear to have been peoples with strong ties to the then Central Mexican metropolis of Teotihuacán, but as time passed these settlers appear to have been eclipsed in population and culture by waves of migrants from northwestern Mesoamerica collectively known as the Tolteca-Chichimeca. At least some of this may have been in response to the collapse of Teotihuacán between 550 and 600, and by 700 a firm community of Tolteca-Chichimeca had been established within the site core. By 900, the Tolteca-Chichimeca were dominant, and Tula matured into a robust metropolis in its own right: housing approximately sixty-thousand people, Tula became a cosmopolitan political center demonstrating a fusion of Tolteca-Chichimeca and other regional cultures. As with most other Mesoamerican centers, Tula was characterized by large, stepped temple-pyramids, ball courts, and monumental art including written texts. At its height, Tula dominated much of the Basin of Mexico and may have been the center of a small, tribute-based empire, with several subject cities to its north. Its trading connections with other parts of the Mesoamerica world were, however, much more grandiose than anything that had come before in the Basin: The rulers at Tula enjoyed ties with the Pacific and Atlantic coasts, northwestern Mexico, the Maya area (most notably, between 900 and 1050, with the northern Postclassic metropolis of Chichén Itzá), Lower Central America, and perhaps the American Southwest. Between 1150 and 1200 Tula abruptly and violently collapsed, with many of its buildings burnt to the ground.

Meager settlement continued here well into the 1500s, however, and local peoples quickly became subjects of the Aztec Empire during its florescence. What is interesting about this facet of Tula’s history is that for the Aztecs, Tula was their legendary city of Tollan. Like its predecessor Teotihuacán, Tula was
viewed as ancestral to the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán. Practically speaking, this was an attempt by the Aztecs to legitimize their place in Mesoamérica, which had largely been achieved through conquest. Nevertheless, as the Aztecs borrowed much from the peoples they conquered they did have some claim to this heritage and called the civilization that produced Tula by a name well known to people today: the Toltecs. The Aztecs believed that the Toltecs had invented almost everything, were wise in all arts and sciences, and were the most skilled of all craftsmen. The downfall of Tula, in Aztec legend, was the result of a dishonorable episode involving their last king, Ce Acatl Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl and an individual named Tezcatlipoca. How much this quasi-historical episode applies to the actual collapse of Tula is unknown.

Further Reading

Tumbaga

This alloy of copper and gold appears to have been invented during the Early Horizon (400–200 B.C.E.) of Andean prehistory. Although scholars have proposed several inventors of this substance, including peoples from Lower Central America and Colombia, the Chavín civilization (1200–200 B.C.E.) of Andean Peru appears to have been the first to alloy gold with other metals, including copper and silver. With proportions ranging around 80 percent gold to 20 percent copper, tumbaga is harder and thus more difficult to work than pure gold—it is almost akin to bronze—and has a lower melting point than gold or copper alone. Likewise, tumbaga can be burned or treated with corrosives to remove copper from the surface, with the result being a golden object with a harder base of gold-copper alloy inside. Pre-Columbian peoples prized tumbaga not only for these technical qualities but also for its reddish color, associated with the morning or evening sun, and its symbolic associations: Some peoples believed it to represent the fusing of male (gold) and female (copper) properties as well as the mixing of divinity (gold) with mortality (copper). This gold-copper alloy was occasionally mixed with proportions of silver as well, so as to change its color.

Tumbaga spread throughout the Andes and Lower Central America shortly thereafter, where in all cases it was used in ritual and for ornamentation. Between 500 and 900, tumbaga objects from these areas were traded northwards into Mesoamérica, with one of the first examples recovered from the Classic Maya city of Altun Ha, Belize.

After 900, however, the technique of manufacturing tumbaga was, along with other metallurgical techniques, permanently introduced into West Mexico (see Metallurgy). Mesoamerican metallurgists there remained dominant technologically, although the basic technique was passed to most societies of this region. By 1400, the manufacture of tumbaga in all of its shades and hues, from red to yellow, was a major part of metallurgy in a band stretching from northwest Mexico to the Andes.
Further Reading

**Tzintzuntzan**

This capital city of the Tarascan Empire (c. 1300–1530) in Mesoamérica was located on the shores of Lake Pátzcuaro in present-day Michoacán, Mexico. Founded around 1300 by the first king, Tariacuri, of the P’urhépecha ethnic group, Tzintzuntzan was one of a few major centers controlled by the P’urhépecha and only later came to be the dominant center. Historically, this region was somewhat independent of the cultural traditions of other Mesoamerican regions—and was the only part of Mesoamérica where bronze working had been developed to the extent that it was used alongside stone for some agricultural implements and tools—although there is good evidence for some Teotihuacán influence in the region during the Early Classic Period (250–600). Like other Mesoamerican centers, Tzintzuntzan was characterized by ball courts and some rectangular-shaped, stepped temple-pyramids. However, oval and T-shaped buildings—characteristic of Tarascan architecture—set Tzintzuntzan apart from most Mesoamerican capitals.

Between 1300 and 1400, local P’urépecha lords were able to consolidate their power around Lake Pátzcuaro and conquer other regions and peoples, to the extent that by 1400 they held sway over several groups of Otomi, Nahua, and Mazatlinca and had become a true empire. This Tarascan Empire expanded and contracted several times as it came into conflict with the larger Aztec Empire to the southeast, but unlike most peoples who fought against that expanding empire, the Tarascans managed to hold back the Aztec tide until the Spanish arrived in the 1500s. The city was largely destroyed during the Conquest but in 1400 was the grand center of an empire competing with the Aztecs for geopolitical dominance in Mesoamérica. Its population in 1400 was perhaps twenty-five thousand people, however, a far cry from the over two-hundred thousand Aztecs living in their capital of Tenochtitlán.

Further Reading

**Upper Xingu**

Arawak-speaking peoples of the southern Amazon, including the Bauré, Parece, and Xinguano, are known to have had occupied the Upper Xingu region of present-day Brazil by 500. Yet archaeological research on the settlements
of this area has not been as extensive as in other parts of the Americas. In the Upper Xingu region, Arawak speakers lived—like their relatives elsewhere in the Amazon—in hierarchically arranged villages and towns with circular plazas. Some of the towns and their dependencies were heavily settled, with population estimates for the major communities ranging from twenty-five thousand to five thousand people. Likewise, some of the towns were characterized by outwardly radiating roads, linking one with another and facilitating socioeconomic activity. Moreover, what appear to be moats, bridges, managed forests, and even agricultural fields have also been encountered in the Upper Xingu, suggesting not only long-term occupation but also extensive remodeling of the landscape. Most of the modification in the Upper Xingu, including population increases and evidence for urbanism, appears to have taken place after 1200.

Ongoing archaeological reconnaissance in this region, as in other parts of the Amazon, is thereby revealing aspects of cultural development that have long been ignored. Although the precise nature of Amazonian urbanism in the Upper Xingu region is not clear at the time of writing, the area is promising: There is clear cultural continuity between the modern inhabitants of the region and the archaeological remains of the settled communities. Time will tell if the Upper Xingu—with its towns and villages—was as socially complex a landscape as that found in other parts of the Americas.

Further Reading

Utatlán
Otherwise known as Kumarcaaj, “the place of rotted reed houses,” this fortified mountain city was the capital of the K’iche Maya Empire in 1400. Having moved their political center here from an older city to the northeast, the K’iche Maya ruled a vast portion of what is today highland Guatemala. In the year 1400 they could count among their allies the Kaqchikel Maya to their west and could boast of an annual tribute from peoples on the Pacific Coasts of Chiapas, Mexico, and Guatemala. In many ways, then, the founding of Kumarcaaj represented a high point of K’iche dominance in the Maya area, for they had succeeded in doing what the Classic Maya (250–850) of the Lowlands and other successor states of the Highlands had not: establish a large territory, ruled from one location, which incorporated other ethnic groups within a single political entity. They had created an empire and could boast that they had largely united the highlands through alliances as well as a system of direct and indirect control.

Unfortunately for the K’iche at Utatlán, this was not to last. In 1470, internal rebellions within the K’iche state—largely precipitated by lineages who felt that they were not getting enough out of the empire—caused it to fragment. Perhaps the most devastating blow, also occurring in 1470, came from the
Kaqchikel: They broke with the K’iche and founded their own new capital, coming into military conflict with their former allies. To make matters worse, the K’iche came into quasi-military conflict with the Aztecs and eventually became their vassals in 1510. In fact, the very name Utatlán (place of reeds) is the more commonly used, Aztec term for Kumarcaaj! It has been passed down to the current era by way of the Aztecs and then the Spanish, who conquered and then set fire to the city in 1524.

Further Reading

**Venus**

The planet Venus was a particularly important celestial body for peoples of the Americas, in large part because it is one of the brightest objects appearing in the night sky. Likewise, it seems to rise in the night sky at different points depending upon the time of the year: It can appear in morning, rising just before dawn, or at dusk. Sometimes it does not appear at all. Native astronomers were quick to observe this phenomenon and determine that it was cyclical (the entire cycle takes 583.92 days). With the most complicated and precise calendars in the hemisphere, many of the peoples of Mesoamérica calculated that Venus went through five cycles almost precisely every eight solar years. What this means is that one can observe Venus exhibiting almost exactly the same behavior every eight years, on or near the exact date. Both the ancient Maya and the Aztecs were particularly concerned with this behavior, with the former keeping Venus calculation tables from at least the Classic (250–850) to the Postclassic (850–1500).

The Maya called Venus Noj Ek’ (Great Star) and, during the Postclassic Period, linked Venus with the god Kukulkán (known as Quetzalcoatl in Central Mexico). They saw Venus as the companion of the sun: The morning Venus led the Sun God out from a place of death (the Maya Underworld) into the sky, while the evening Venus followed the Sun God into the realm of death. The Classic Maya occasionally appear to have timed wars with the position of Venus in the sky. Informally called “star wars,” these battles were particularly bloody and seem to have taken place more often toward the end of the Classic Period. During the Postclassic, buildings were erected with Venus imagery (as at Uxmal) and were occasionally aligned to track the appearance and disappearance of this celestial body.

Venus became an even more malevolent force among the Aztecs (1325–1521). Although they sometimes associated aspects of Quetzalcoatl with the morning and evening versions of Venus, one of the entities most commonly associated with Venus was Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli. This was a god specifically...
tied to Venus as a morning “star,” and one of the most feared gods of the Central Mexican pantheon. In native accounts, this god is constantly trying to kill Tonatiuh, the Aztec solar deity. He (always) misses, but his early morning rays were considered extremely dangerous and personified as cosmic, fiery atlatl darts. In fact, Mexica priests undertaking rituals when Tlahuizpantecuhtli was in evidence would wear stylized turquoise masks for protection—donned because of their association with the god of fire, Xiuhtecuhtli! In any event, the idea that a celestial body was attempting to kill the sun was a frightening prospect, and one that the Aztecs took seriously.

Further Reading

**Wari**

The name *Wari* (or Huari) refers to a major Andean empire and its capital city, located west of modern-day Cuzco, Peru. Wari civilization flourished during what is known as the Middle Horizon, or 650 to 1000. At its height, the Wari Empire dominated most of the old centers of Andean and coastal South American civilization north of Lake Titicaca, including the territories of such notable cultures as Chavín (400–200 B.C.E.), *Moche* (200–800), and Nazca (200 B.C.E.–650 C.E.). Although it is unclear as to how much direct control Wari had over its subject cities, Wari does appear to have at least dominated most of what is today western Peru politically, culturally, and architecturally. Subject centers replicated the style and conventions of the capital city, from the massive terracing systems on the sides of mountains to the building compounds, which served residential and administrative functions. Networks of roads to and from the Wari capital foreshadowed those of the Inca centuries later.

Wari is perhaps the only major civilization centered in the Andes that did not regularly erect buildings of cut stone. Such structures were relatively scarce and were far outnumbered by the aforementioned compounds, which consisted of one or two stories of plastered, rough stone held together with mortar. The compounds would usually be arranged around a central patio and were occasionally augmented by small, D-shaped temples. In this way, Wari sites were architecturally distinct from what came before and what was to come afterwards, although some parallels can be drawn with prior civilizations on the Pacific Coast.

Although Wari society is generally characterized as relatively secular when compared with its contemporaries in South America, it did share a pantheon of deities with its neighbor, *Tiwanaku*. Ultimately, this pantheon derived from Chavín (400–200 B.C.E.) and consisted of avian and feline deities as well as a ubiquitous Andean god of agricultural fertility known to archaeologists as the **Staff God**. Like Tiwanaku, moreover, Wari appears to have collapsed shortly after 1000 due to prolonged dry conditions (about 200 years) and sociopolitical woes. Ultimately, the successors to Wari in the region were a host of formerly subject states, who successfully carved out pieces of the Wari Empire in the years prior to the coming of the Inca.
Further Reading


1. Leif Erikson’s Exploration of North America:  
Coming to Vinland (c. C.E. 1003)

The Viking explorations of the Americas in the early eleventh century had little, if any, lasting impact on the indigenous peoples occupying what is today northeast Canada. That being said, the voyages of the Vikings along the eastern coast of North America represented a turning point in the history of the Atlantic world: For the first time, far-ranging Arctic cultures such as the Thule would gaze upon peoples who had never crossed Beringia into the Americas and who had had a very different historical trajectory. Motivated by a search for timber and other goods valuable to the Norse colonies in Iceland and Greenland, the Vikings would soon find that they were not alone in the new lands they had “discovered,” which they called Vinland in their sagas.

They sailed to the land, anchored, put out the boat, and went ashore. No grass grew there, and great glaciers were seen inland, while the coast between the glaciers and the sea looked like one large, flat stone, and this land did not seem to them to have any value. Then Leif said: “Now it has gone better with us than with Bjarni, who came here and did not go ashore; now I will give this land a name and call it Helluland.”

After that they went on board the ship, sailed out on the sea, and found another land. They sailed again to the land, anchored, put out the boat, and went ashore. This land was flat and covered with woods, and there were extensive white sands, wherever they went, and the beach was not steep. Then Leif said: “This land shall be named according to its nature and it shall be called Markland [Forestland].” After that they went as soon as possible to the ship and sailed out on the open sea with a northeast wind and were on the sea two days before they saw land. They went ashore on an island to the north of the land. It was fine weather. They looked around and noticed that there was a dew on the grass. This dew was found to have a very sweet taste. After that they went on board the ship and sailed into the sound between the island and a cape which stretched northward from the coast, and steered westward past the cape. The water was so shallow there that the ship ran aground and stood dry at ebb tide; the sea was then visible only at a great distance. But Leif and his men were so anxious to get ashore that they did not care to wait till the water rose again under their ship, and they ran ashore at once to where a river flowed out from a lake. At next high tide they took the boat, pulled to the ship,
and took it up through the river into the lake, anchored, and carried their leather bags ashore. They first built wooden hits (sheds), but later they decided to prepare to remain there during the winter, and they built then large houses.

Salmon, larger than they had seen before, were plentiful in the river and lake. The land seemed to them so good that there would be no need of storing fodder for the cattle for the winter; there came no frost in the winters and the grass withered but little. Day and night were there more nearly of equal length than is the case in Greenland and Iceland.


2. Leif Erikson’s Exploration of North America:
The Naming of Vinland (c. C.E. 1003)

Until the 1960s, the Viking sagas referring to a place called “Vinland,” or “land of grapes,” were largely believed to have been a product of medieval Norse fantasy. Greenland was thought to have been the westernmost edge of the Viking world. This all changed with the discovery of the archaeological site of L’anse aux Meadows in 1960 by Helge Ingstad and Anne Stine Ingstad. Located in Newfoundland, Canada, the site consists of typical Norse longhouses like those described in the sagas. Perhaps just as important, the site lies within the typical range of wild grapes, also mentioned in the account below. This attempt at permanent settlement by the Norse was ultimately unsuccessful, with the experiment at life in Newfoundland lasting perhaps a generation before being abandoned.

But when they had completed their house building, then Leif said to his men: “Now we shall divide our company in two parts and explore the vicinity. Half of the men shall remain here and the other half shall explore the country, going no further than they can return by nightfall, and they must not separate.” And this they did for some time, Leif sometimes going with the explorers and sometimes staying at home. Leif was big and strong and the most noble-looking of men. He was intelligent and in all respects a most capable commander.

One evening it was found that a man was missing. It was Tyrk, the southerner. Leif was much distressed to learn this as Tyrk had long been with him and his father and had been very fond of Leif as a child. Leif therefore severely reprimanded the man and made ready to go look for him with twelve men. But they had gone only a short distance when they met Tyrk. . . . Leif saw at once that Tyrk was in high spirits. He was a small insignificant man but a good craftsman. . . .

The Leif said: “Why are you so late in coming home, foster-father, and why did you separate from the others?”

Tyrk for a long time spoke in German, rolled his eyes, and made many grimaces, but they could not understand him. Then he spoke in Norse and said: “I did not go much farther than you, but I found something new to report. I found grapes and grapevines!”
“Can that be possible, foster-father?” exclaimed Leif.
“It is certainly true,” answered Tyrk, “for I was born where there was no scarcity of grapevines or grapes.”

They now went to bed for the night, but in the morning Leif spoke to his men: “We shall now get busy with two occupations and we shall take alternate days for each. [One shall be] to pick grapes or cut vines and [the other] to cut logs for our cargo when we return home.” This plan was followed, and it is said that their stern boat was filled with grapes. They also cut the logs.

And when spring came they made ready to sail and sailed away with a favorable wind. And Leif named the land after its special product and called it “Vinland.”


3. Thorfi nn Karlsefni’s Exploration of North America: An Encounter with the Natives (c. C.E. 1005)

The Vikings traveling around Vinland (Newfoundland) very soon realized that they were not alone. Thorfi nn Karlsefni’s encounter with the inhabitants of Vinland, possibly the Thule or the Dorset, was fairly typical of the earliest interactions between Europeans and native peoples of the Americas: Neither side really understood or grasped the larger significance of what they were seeing, each viewing the other through its own particular cultural lens. The Norse came to fearfully believe, for example, that the first peoples they had seen were skraelings, or “trolls.” Although the ideas of the Dorset and the Thule about the Norse in the eleventh century were not recorded, they may have been somewhat similar: It was fairly commonplace in the Americas, for example, for indigenous peoples to question whether the people they were seeing for the first time were, in fact, human or something entirely different.

Now it is to be told that Karlsefni cruised southward off the coast with Snorri and Bjarni and their people.

They journeyed a long time until they came at last to a river which flowed down from the land into a lake and thence into the sea. There were such great sandbars at the mouth of the estuary that it could only be entered at the height of flood tide. Karlsefni and his people sailed into the estuary and called it there, Hop.

They found wild wheat fields on the low-lying land, and wherever there was woodland they found [grape] vines. Every brook was full of fish. They dug trenches on the tidal flats, and when the tide fell there were flatfish in the trenches. There were a great number of wild animals of all kinds in the woods.

They remained there two weeks enjoying themselves and not keeping any watch. They had their livestock with them.

Now one morning when they looked about they saw nine skin-boats, and staves were being brandished from these boats, and they were being whirled in the same direction that the sun moves, and they made a noise like flails.

Then Karlsefni asked: “What can this mean?”
Snorri Thorbandsson answered him: "It may be that this is a peace signal, so let us display a white shield."

This they did whenever the strangers rowed toward them and came ashore and [the Norse] marveled at them. They were swarthy people and queer looking, and the hair of their heads was ugly. They had remarkable eyes and broad cheeks. They stayed for some time, staring curiously at the people they saw before them, then they rowed away to the southward around the point.

Karlsefni and his men had pitched their booths above the lake, some of their houses being at the lake, and some farther away near the main part of the land. They remained there all winter. No snow came, and their livestock found their own food for grazing.


4. Christopher Columbus Remarks on the Generosity of the Taino People of Hispaniola (December 1492)

The early encounters between Europeans and native peoples of the Americas were filled with cultural misconceptions. Neither side understood the motives or intentions of the other. This is clear even from the account by Christopher Columbus, where the Taino chief is literally begging the European newcomer to take whatever he wants—particularly gold, which is said to be present in vast quantities—in any amount. In hindsight, we know that Hispaniola did not have gold in any amount even close to the scale that the Europeans would have desired. We also know that gold was not viewed with nearly the same sense of value by the peoples of the Americas as it was by the Europeans and that the Taino of the fifteenth century were in the midst of a losing, long-term struggle with another island people, the Carib. Therefore, though the chief in this example may indeed have been simply being generous, it is plausible that he also saw Columbus as a potential ally against the Caribs or, at the very least, a problem that might go away if he gave him what he wanted.

The Chief of this country [Guacanagari], who lives near here, sent a large canoe full of people, among whom was one of his principal advisors. He begged me to go with the ships to his country and said that he would give me anything he had. He sent me a belt which had hanging from it, in place of a purse, a mask with two large ears, a tongue, and a nose of hammered gold. These people are so generous; they give whatever is asked of them, willingly, and it seems that you are doing them a favor to request something from them. . . . Later they returned to the ships with a Chief, and with news that in this Isla Española there is a great quantity of gold and that people from other places come here to buy it. They said that there is as much gold as we desire. Others came who confirmed that there is much gold on the island, and they showed me the manner of obtaining it. I understood all this with great difficulty, but I felt certain that there was a very large amount of gold and that if I found the source I could get it very cheaply, or even for nothing. In the three days that I have been in this harbor I have received good pieces of gold, and I cannot believe that it is brought from another country.
5. Columbus Dines with the Local Taino Chieftain
Guacanagari (December 1492)

The Taino, like most indigenous peoples of the fifteenth and sixteenth
centuries, incorporated utilitarian and decorative goods as well as ideas
imported from afar into their culture. Materials that were difficult to ob-
tain were then, as now, often seen as prestigious; it is therefore not
surprising that Guacanagari wears the gloves given to him by Columbus,
particularly in what appears to have been a diplomatic context. Geo-
graphically widespread over the Caribbean and engaged in long-distance
trade, the Taino were a cosmopolitan society drawing upon foreign cul-
tural influences, including those from Mesoamérica, at the time they
encountered Columbus and his party.

The King dined with me on the Niña and afterwards went ashore with me,
where he paid me great honor. Later we had a meal with two or three kinds of
ajes [sweet potatoes], served with shrimp, game, and other foods they have,
including bread; which they call cazabe. Then the King took me to see some
groves of trees near the houses, and fully 1,000 people, all naked, went with
us. The King was already wearing a shirt and a pair of gloves which I had
given him, and he was more excited about the gloves than anything else that
had been given him. By his manner of eating, his decent behavior, and his ex-
ceptional cleanliness, he showed himself to be of good birth.

After the meal we remained at the table for some time, and we were brought
some herbs with which to rub our hands—I believe they use these to soften
the skin. We were also given water for our hands.

Source: Columbus, Christopher. *The Log of Christopher Columbus*. Translated by Robert

6. The Marketplace of Tenochtitlán, the Aztec Capital (1519)

Markets were a central part of urban life in ancient Mesoamérica. They
were hubs of economic life for most Mesoamerican civilizations, where
local and exotic goods ranging from foodstuffs to slaves to textiles were
bought, sold, or traded. The best-documented markets are those from
Central Mexico at the time of the Aztecs. Tenochtitlán was an enormous
city by Spanish standards, and certainly beyond anything the conquista-
dores had experienced in the Caribbean. This, as well as the fact that
most of the agricultural products in Aztec markets were alien to Europe-
ans, was largely the reason why Bernal Díaz del Castillo described them
in such detail: He was in awe of the range of goods available to the
population of Tenochtitlán.

Cortés at the head of his cavalry, and the principal part of our soldiers under
arms, marched to the grand square, attended by many noblemen of the court.
When we arrived there, we were astonished at the crowds of people, and the regularity which prevailed, as well as at the vast quantities of merchandise, which those who attended us were assiduous in pointing out. Each kind had its particular place, which was distinguished by a sign. The articles consisted of gold, silver, jewels, feathers, mantles, chocolate, skins dressed and undressed, sandals, and other manufactures of the roots and fibers of nequen, and great numbers of male and female slaves, some of whom were fastened by the neck, in collars, to long poles. The meat market was stocked with fowls, game, and dogs. Vegetables, fruits, articles of food ready dressed, salt, bread, honey, and sweet pastry made in various ways were also sold here. Other places in the square were appointed to the sale of earthen ware, wooden household furniture such as tables and benches, firewood, paper, sweet canes filled with tobacco mixed with liquid amber, copper axes and working tools, and wooden vessels highly painted. Numbers of women sold fish, and little loaves made of a certain mud which they find in the lake, and which resembles cheese. The makers of stone blades were busily employed shaping them out of the rough material, and the merchants who dealt in gold, had the metal in grains as it came from the mines, in transparent tubes, so that they could be reckoned, and the gold was valued at so many mantles, or so many xiquipils of cocoa, according to the size of the quills. The entire square was enclosed in piazzas, under which great quantities of grain were stored, and where were also shops for various kinds of goods. I must apologize for adding, that boat loads of human ordure were on the borders of the adjoining canals, for the purpose of tanning leather, which they said could not be done without it. Some may laugh at this but I assert the fact is as I have stated it, and moreover, upon all the public roads, places for passengers to resort to, were built of canes, and thatch with straw or grass, in order to collect this material. The courts of justice, where three judges sat, occupied a part of the square, their under-officers going in the market, inspecting the merchandise.


7. The View from the Great Temple of Tenochtitlán, the Aztec Capital (1519)

Despite the fact that Bernal Díaz, like many conquistadores with Cortés, was repulsed by Aztec religious traditions, there is ever a sense of wonder and admiration in his account for the capital of the Aztec empire. Tenochtitlán was a bustling city of perhaps 200,000 people and one of the largest cities of the world in 1519. Having been built atop an artificial island and characterized by numerous canals, aqueducts, and waterways, Tenochtitlán was by all standards a marvel of human engineering and political will. As the foremost city in the Empire, it was the center of social, political, and economic life in the Basin of Mexico. From the top of the Great Temple, Montezuma (Motecuhzoma II) and Cortés would have been able to see many of the major local towns and the organizational capacity needed to communicate, trade with, and control them. Unfortunately, the awe that Díaz and others had for the capital city of the Aztecs did not prevent them from razing most of the major buildings of Tenochtitlán after its conquest in 1521, including the Great Temple.
They went to take his arms to help him climb the 114 steps, as they did for their lord Montezuma, thinking that Cortés would tire, but he would not allow them to come near. When we climbed to the top of the great cu there was a kind of platform, with huge stones where they put the poor Indians to be sacrificed, and an image like a dragon and other evil figures, with a great deal of blood that had been shed that day.

Montezuma, accompanied by two priests, came out from an oratory dedicated to the worship of his cursed idols at the top of the cu, and said with great deference toward all of us, “You must be tired, Señor Malinche, after climbing up this great temple of ours.”

Through our interpreters, who went with us, Cortés replied that neither he nor the rest of us ever got tired of anything. Then Montezuma took him by the hand and bade him look at his great city and at all the other cities rising from the water, and the many towns around the lake; and if he had not seen the marketplace well, he said, he could see it from here much better.

Then we stood looking, for that large and evil temple was so high that it towered over everything. From there we could see all three of the causeways that led to Mexico: the road from Iztapalapa, by which we had entered four days earlier; the Tacuba road, by which we fled the night of our great rout; and the road from Tepeaquilla.

We saw the fresh water that came from Chapultepec, which supplied the city, and the bridges on the three causeways, built at certain intervals so the water could go from one part of the lake to another, and a multitude of canoes, some arriving with provisions and others leaving with merchandise. We saw that every house in this great city and in the others built on the water could be reached only by wooden drawbridges or by canoe. We saw temples built like towers and fortresses in these cities, all whitewashed; it was a sight to see. We could look down on the flat-roofed houses and other little towers and temples like fortresses along the causeways.

After taking a good look and considering all that we had seen, we looked again at the great square and the throngs of people, some buying and others selling. The buzzing of their voices could be heard more than a league away. There were soldiers among us who had been in many parts of the world, in Constantinople and Rome and all over Italy, who said that they had never before seen a marketplace so large and so well laid out, and so filled with people.


8. A Description of Xibalba, the Mayan Underworld from the Popol Vuh (early sixteenth century)

Although the Popol Vuh or “Book of Council,” one of the paramount indigenous religious texts of the Americas, was written by the K’ichee Maya in the sixteenth century, its themes and many of its stories date back to the Late Preclassic Period (400 B.C.E.–250 C.E.). One of its major tales involves the victory of two mythological Hero Twins—identified with the Sun and the Moon—over the Lords of Death and disease. The Twins,
descending into the Underworld (Xibalba, or literally “the place of fright”),
are forced to endure many trials before emerging victoriously from the
darkness. This part of the Popol Vuh is a story of rebirth and the triumph
of life over death, with which many K’ichee identified: Elites, in fact, be-
lieved that they might go through a similar journey after death.

The Popol Vuh is also a classic tale of revenge. What is represented in
the excerpt below is the prelude to the victory of the Hero Twins, where
their father and uncle try to make a similar journey to the Underworld
and fail. The Hero Twins succeed where others cannot, eventually tricking
and defeating the Lords of Xibalba as their ancestors were defeated.

Immediately they [the brothers Hun-Hunahpú and Vucub-Hunahpú] ar-
rived at the House of Gloom. There was only darkness within the house.
Meanwhile, the Lords of Xibalba [Hun-Camé and Vucub-Camé] discussed
what they should do.

“Let us sacrifice them tomorrow, let them die quickly, quickly, so that we
can have their playing gear [for the ballgame] to use in play,” said the Lords of
Xibalba to each other. . . .

There were many punishments in Xibalba; the punishments were of many
kinds.
The first was the House of Gloom, Quequma-ha, in which there was only
darkness.
The second was Xuxulim-ha, the house where everybody shivered, in which
it was very cold. A cold, unbearable wind blew within.
The third was the House of Jaguars, Balami-ha, it was called, in which there
were nothing but Jaguars, which stalked about, jumped around, roared, and
made fun. The Jaguars were shut up in the house.

Zotzi-há, the House of Bats, the fourth place of punishment was called.
Within this house there were nothing but bats which squeaked and cried and
flew around and around. The bats were shut in and could not get out.

The fifth was called Chayim-há, the House of Knives, in which there were
only sharp, pointed knives, silent or grating against each other in the house.

There were many places of torture in Xibalba, but Hun-Hunahpú and Vucub-
Hunahpú did not enter them. We only mention the names of these houses of
punishment.

Hun-Hunahpú and Vucub-Hunahpú came before Hun-Camé and Vucub-
Camé, [the latter] said: “Where are my fine cigars? Where are my sticks of fat
pine which I gave you last night?”

“They are all gone, Sir.”

“Well. Today shall be the end of your days. Now you shall die. You shall be
destroyed, we will break you into pieces and here your faces will stay hidden.
You shall be sacrificed,” said Hun-Camé and Vucub-Camé.

They sacrificed them immediately and buried them in the Pucbal-Chah, as it
was called. Before burying them, they cut off the head of Hun-Hunahpú and
buried the older brother together with the younger brother.

“Take the head and put it in that tree which is planted by the road,” said
Hun-Camé and Vucub-Camé. And having put the head in the tree, instantly
the tree, which had never borne fruit before the head of Hun-Hunahpú was
placed among its branches, was covered with fruit. And this calabash tree, it is
said, is the one which we now call the head of Hun-Hunahpú.
9. Francisco Pizarro’s First Encounter with the Inca Ruler Atahualpa (November 1532)

The first encounter between Atahualpa (Atalhuapa) and Pizarro followed years of civil war within the Inca Empire (Tawantinsuyu). The preceding Inca ruler, Huayna Capac, had died from smallpox (caught through indirect contact with the Spanish) in 1527 and had left a mighty empire without a sole heir. The war for succession that ensued had just been resolved by Atahualpa when the Spanish arrived; Pizarro actually entered the Andes as the new emperor was returning to his capital at Cuzco—with tens of thousands of warriors—to formally claim his throne. He and his subjects believed that he was descended from the Inca sun god, Inti, and that the emperor was invulnerable (understandably) to the party of less than 200 Spaniards awaiting him. Unfortunately, he chose to behave by the well-established rules of diplomacy in the Andes and did not see the Spanish as capable of causing him any harm. He finally chose to meet Pizarro in person and approached the small group of Europeans unarmed while his army waited from afar. Atahualpa was taken hostage by the desperate Spanish after a brief struggle and kept as such until the Spanish had no need of him. He was eventually executed.

While Atahualpa was speaking, thousands of them [Inca soldiers] put on breast plates of knotted palm fronds so strong that the lance and the sword find them hard, and they wore a woolen shirt to conceal their weapons. And others, thus disguised, carried slings and bags of stones, others metal clubs with long and sharp points, others ayllus [weapon with balls attached to three cords], and all wore their clothes so artfully that no one who would see them would realize that they were armed. There were also other squadrons behind these who were to enter first into battle, furnished with other arms. The lord’s litter was open and uncovered and opulently and beautifully adorned, and ahead of it went those designated to clean the road so that not a piece of grass or stone could be seen. The orejones [Spanish term for Inca leaders] and natives of Cuzco went next to the litter, dressed in livery as the king’s attendants. The guard went between them, and the litter had to be carried by the chiefs, men who came from the highest lineages or were lords of many vassals. Twelve thousand armed men went in their squadrons, as has been said, ahead of everybody as the center; then went another five thousand Indians with ayllus, instructed to capture the horses with them. The rest of the people—which they say would have been a total of seventy thousand warriors with more than thirty thousand service [Indians], not counting the women—all went, placing themselves in the order that was commanded.

The Christians saw the movement. They knew that soon they would be surrounded by those who were advancing against them. Pizarro encouraged them once again, dispelling their fear of the multitude that was with Atahualpa, to whom he sent one of the Indians who was there to tell him that he begged him to come quickly because he was expecting him to dine. Atahualpa asked this
messenger about the state of the Christians. He assured him that they were fearful, news that made him more presumptuous. And, in keeping with his design and aims, he sent one chieftain to tell Pizarro that he would have already come to see him, but he could not convince his people because they had such great fear of the horses and dogs, and this fear became deeper seeing them at closer range. Therefore, he begged him—if he wished to meet him—to order that the horses and dogs be firmly tied and that the Christians should all hide, some in place and others in another, so that none would appear while they conversed together.


10. Diego de Landa’s Description of the Clothing and Food of the Maya of Yucatan (written c. 1566)

As part of his defense against accusations of cruelty in his treatment of the Maya, the Spanish friar Diego de Landa—later Bishop of Yucatan, Mexico—produced an account of the peoples and customs of Yucatan that cast his actions there in a more scholarly, favorable light. Much of the account is descriptive and portrays the Maya shortly after Christianization efforts had begun. Although Landa was responsible for destroying much of what we could have known about the Maya of the colonial period, including scores of their painted books (codices), his account of Yucatan is one of the most valuable scholarly sources on the Maya from this era. In fact, portions of this account were vital to deciphering the hieroglyphic writing system produced by the Maya—but at what cost?

They had the custom of painting their faces and bodies red, and, although it was very unbecoming to them, yet they thought it very pleasing.

Their clothing was a band of the width of the hand, which served them for drawers and breeches. They wound it several times round the waist, so that one end fell in front and one end behind, and these ends the women made with a great deal of care and with feather-work. And they wore large square mantas and they tied them over their shoulders. They wore sandals of hemp or of the dry untanned skin of the deer, and they wore no other garments.

Their principal subsistence is maize of which they make various foods and drinks, and even drinking it as they do, it serves them both as food and drink. The Indian women put the maize to soak one night before in lime and water, and in the morning it is soft and half-cooked, and thus the husk and the stalk are separated from it; and they grind it upon stones, and they give to the workmen and traveler and sailors large balls and loads of the half-ground maize, and this lasts for several months merely becoming sour. And of that they take a lump which they mix in a vase made of the shell of the fruit, which grows on a tree by which God provided them with vessels. And they drink this nutriment and eat the rest, and it is a savory food and of great sustaining power. From the maize which is the finest ground they extract a milk and they thicken it on the fire, and make a sort of porridge for the morning. And they drink it hot and over that which remains from the morning’s meal they throw
water so as to drink it during the day; for they are not accustomed to drink water alone. They also parch the maize and grind and mix it with water, thus making a very refreshing drink, throwing in it a little Indian pepper of cacao.


Although the Inca did not invent the engineering and irrigation techniques they used in agriculture, borrowing much from prior civilizations of the Andes and the desert coast such as Tiwanaku and Chimor, they did implement such technologies on a much greater scale. The Sapa Inca, or emperor, had access to millions of workers: He owned not only all labor but also all land and claimed a special relationship with the sun and agricultural fertility by way of his descent from Inti, the sun god. The emperor was powerful enough to demand rights to periodic labor from his subjects, who built the cities, roads, and public works projects integral to the Inca Empire. Some of the terraces built on the slopes of the Andes during this time were so well made that they continue to survive and to be used in agriculture today.

When the Inca had conquered a new province he immediately sent engineers there, who were specialized in building canals for irrigation, in order to increase the corn acreage, which otherwise could not flourish in these torrid lands. In the same way, he irrigated the prairie lands, as may be seen today from the evidences of canals that still subsist all over Peru. On the mountain sides, on the peaks and on all the rocky surfaces, they built terraces, sustained by stone walls, which they filled with light soil brought from elsewhere. These terraces grew wider from the top to the bottom of the slope, where they occasionally attained to as much as to hundred and forty acres in size. These were arduous undertakings, but they made it possible to give the maximum development to the tiniest plots of barren land. Indeed it often happened that they would build canals fifteen to twenty leagues long, to irrigate only a few acres of land.

Community records of landholdings were carefully kept up to date in all the provinces and villages, and the arable land was divided into three parts: that belonging to the Sun, that of the Inca, and that of his vassals. The latter part was calculated to permit each village to provide for its own needs and, in case there was an increase in population, the Inca reduced the surface of his own holdings. Thus it may be said that he kept for himself only that part that, without him, would have remained uncultivated. The major part of the terrace crops belonged to the king and to the Sun, which was only normal, inasmuch as it was the Inca who had the terraces built. Other cereals and vegetables were raised, such as potatoes, *oca*, and *anius*, on other land which, not being irrigated and fertilized the way the corn lands were, did not yield an annual crop. *Quinoa*, which is a sort of rice, was also cultivated in the cold climates.

The following passage shows the beginning of cultural syncretism between the musical styles and practices of indigenous Andean peoples and the Spanish. The musical traditions of the Andes, largely based on flutes like pan-pipes as well as drums and other percussives, are meeting those of the Spanish. Here, as elsewhere in the Americas shortly after the Conquest, native instruments were quickly supplemented by stringed ones such as guitars and violins. The Spanish also introduced Western-style meter to music here as well; unfortunately, not much is known of Pre-Columbian musical style in the Andes and no compositions have yet been identified. It is notable that the author, Garcilaso de la Vega, is interpreting the actions of the Incas here in medieval terms (almost like troubadours).

In music they had acquired a knowledge of some tunes, which the Indians of the Collas district played on instruments made of hollow reeds, four or five being tied in a row, each one having the point higher than its neighbour, like an organ. These canes were fastened in fours, different one from another. One of them ran in high notes and the others each higher in the scale; so that the four natural voices, treble, tenor, contralto, and counter-bass were represented by the four sets of reeds. When an Indian played on one of these pipes, another answered on a fifth or any other note; then another played on another note, sometimes rising to the high notes, and at others going down, but always in tune. They did not understand accompaniments on different keys, but always played in one compass. The players were Indians instructed for the amusement of the king, and for the lords his vassals, and although their music was so simple, it was not generally practiced, but was learnt and attained to by study. They had la flutes with four or five notes, like those of shepherds; but they were not made on a scale, each one being of only one note. Their songs were composed in measured verses, and were for the most part written to celebrate amorous passions expressive now of joy now of sorrow, now of the kindness now of the cruelty of the fair. Each song had its appropriate tune, and they could not put two different songs to the same tune. Thus the enamoured swain, playing his flute at night, with the tune that belonged to it, apprised the lady and the whole world of the state of his feelings, arising from the smiles or frowns of the object of his love. But if two tunes were used for the same song, it could not be known what sentiment the lover wished to express; for it may be said that he talked with his flute. One night a Spaniard met an Indian girl of his acquaintance, and asked her to go with him to his lodging. The girl said, “Sir! let me go whither I desire; for know you not that that flute is calling me with much love and tenderness, so that it obliges me to go towards it. Leave me, then. I cannot help going, for love drags me to where the flute-player will be my husband, and I his wife.”

They did not play the songs composed to celebrate their warlike deeds, because they were not fit to play before ladies, nor to express on their flutes. But they were sung at the principal festivals, in memory of their victories. When I departed from Peru in the year 1560, I left five Indians in Cuzco who played the flute very well, from any music book for the organ that was placed before
them. They belonged to Juan Rodríguez de Villalobos, formerly a citizen of that town. At present, being the year 1602, they tell me that there are so many Indians expert in playing on instruments, that they may be met with in all directions. In my time the Indians did not use their voices, because, no doubt, they were not sufficiently good, and because they did not understand singing; but, on the other hand, many mestizos had very good voices.

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Appendix: Mesoamerican Rulers and Historical Periods

Aztec Rulers
Acamapichtli (1376–1396)
Huitzilihuitl (1397–1417)
Chimalpopoca (1417–1427)
Itzcoatl (1428–1440)
Moctezuma Ilhuicamina (1440–1469)
Axayacatl (1469–1481)
Tizoc (1481–1486)
Ahuitzotl (1486–1502)
Moctezuma Xocoyotzin (1502–1520)
Cuítlahuac (1520)
Cuauhtémoc (1520–1525)

Inca Rulers of Cuzco and the Inca Empire
Manco Cápac (c. 1190–c. 1230)
Sinchi Roca (c. 1230–c. 1260)
Lloque Yupanqui (c. 1260–c. 1290)
Mayta Cápac (c. 1290–c. 1320)
Cápac Yupanqui (c. 1320–c. 1350)
Inca Roca (c. 1350–c. 1380)
Yáhuar Huaca (c. 1380–c. 1410)
Viracocha Inca (c. 1410–1438)
Pachacuti Inca Yupanqui (1438–c. 1471)
Túpac Inca Yupanqui (c. 1471–1493)
Huayna Capác (1493–1527)
Huáscar (1527–1532)
Atahualpa (1532–1533)

Periods of Mesoamerican History

Paleo-Indian Period (c. 10,000–c. 3500 BCE)
First human presence in the region; beginnings of agriculture and pottery making

Archaic Period (c. 3500–c. 1800 BCE)
Development of agriculture; permanent villages established; development of pottery making and loom weaving

Preclassic or Formative Period (c. 1800 BCE–c. 200 CE)
Rise of the Olmec civilization; first Mayan cities develop

Classic Period (c. 200–900 CE)
Teotihuacán becomes great metropolis that dominates Mesoamérica; great era of Mayan lowland cities, such as Tikal, Palenque, and Copán

Postclassic Period (c. 900–1520)
Rise of the Toltec civilization, the Aztec empire, and the Mayan cities of the Yucatán; ends abruptly with the Spanish Conquest
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Preface for Users of Global Medieval Life and Culture

Two concepts have dominated the twenty-first century: globalization and the information explosion facilitated by the Internet. When we decided to present a new history of the medieval world—also called the Middle Ages—we knew these modern principles could help guide us to new insights into the past. In these volumes, globalization shapes the content that we have chosen to cover, and the electronic age has guided our organization. In addition, the features are carefully considered to make these volumes engaging and pedagogically useful.

**Global Content**

The medieval age was a European concept. From about the fourteenth century, Europeans defined the 1,000 years from the fall of the Roman Empire to the Renaissance as the “middle,” separating the classical world from the “modern” one. Practically from the time of this designation, scholars have argued about whether this periodization makes sense, but scholarly arguments have not substantially changed the designation. Textbooks and curricula have kept the period as a separate entity, and we study the medieval world that extends from about 400 to 1400 C.E. with undiminished fascination.

Scholars of medieval Europe have shown that, during this formative period, many of the ideas and institutions developed that shape our modern world. The rise of democratic institutions, a prosperous middle class, and a vibrant Christianity are just a few of the developments that marked medieval Europe. These are some of the reasons that have kept the field of study vibrant. But what of the world?

Scholarship has disproved the Eurocentric analysis that defined the period of the Middle Ages. Exciting innovations took place all over the world during this pivotal millennium. Religious movements such as the rise of Islam and the spread of Buddhism irrevocably shaped much of the world, innovations in transportation allowed people to settle islands throughout the Pacific, and agricultural improvements stimulated empires in South America.

Furthermore, these societies did not develop in isolation. Most people remember Marco Polo’s visit to the China of the Yuan Dynasty, but his voyage was not an exception. People, goods, and ideas spread all across the Eurasian land mass and down into Africa. This encyclopedia traces the global connections that fueled the worldwide developments of the Middle Ages.
To emphasize the global quality of this reference work, we have organized the volumes by regions. Volume 1 covers Europe and the Americas. We begin with Europe because this was the region that first defined the medieval world. At first glance, linking Europe with the Americas (which were not colonized until after the Middle Ages) might seem to join the most disparate of regions. However, we do so to remind us that Vikings crossed the North Atlantic in the Middle Ages to discover this rich new land, which was already inhabited by prosperous indigenous peoples. The organization of this first volume demonstrates that Europe never developed in isolation!

Volume 2 considers the Middle East and Africa. These regions saw the growth of Islam and the vibrant interactions that took place in the diverse continent of Africa. Volume 3 takes on the enormous task of focusing on South Asia, East Asia, and Oceania.

This organization forces us to compromise on some content. Because we are not taking a chronological approach, we must collapse 1,000 years of history in regions that had many diverse developments. We partially address this issue in the Historical Overviews at the beginning of each section. These essays will point readers to the varied historical events of the regions.

However, we gain modern insights through our on Global Ties essays within each section. These essays offer a great contrast with other medieval works because they show the significance of global connections throughout this millennium. Readers will learn that globalization was not invented in the twenty-first century. Indeed, the great developments of the past flourished because people from diverse cultures communicated with each other. Perhaps this was the greatest contribution of the Middle Ages, and this encyclopedia highlights it.

**Organization for the Internet Age**

The Internet brings an astonishing amount of information to us with a quick search. If we Google Marco Polo, castles, or windmills, we are given an immediate array of information more quickly than we could have imagined a mere decade ago. However, as teachers too readily realize when reading the results of such searches, this is not enough. The very volume of information sometimes makes it hard to see how these disparate elements of the past fit together and how they compare with other elements. We have organized this encyclopedia to address these issues.

Each volume contains two or three regions of the world, and each region includes seven in-depth essays that cover the following topics:

1. Historical Overview
2. Religion
3. Economy
4. The Arts
5. Society
6. Science and Technology
7. Global Ties

These essays provide coherent descriptions of each part of the world. They allow readers readily to compare developments in different regions, so one can
really understand how the economy in Africa differed from mercantile patterns in China. In-depth essays like this not only provide clear information but model historical writing. But there is more.

Like other good encyclopedias, we have A–Z entries offering in-depth information on many topics—from the general (food, money, law) to the specific (people, events, and places). All the essays indicate the A–Z entries in bold, much as an online essay might have hyperlinks to more detailed information, so readers can immediately see what topics offer more in-depth information and how each fits in with the larger narrative. In the same way, readers who begin with the A–Z entries know that they can see how their topic fits in a larger picture by consulting the in-depth essays. Finally, this integration of essays with A–Z entries provides an easy way to do cross-cultural comparisons. Readers can compare roles of women in Islam and Asia, then see how women fit in the larger context of society by consulting the two larger essays.

This is a reference work that builds on the rapid information accessible online while doing what books do best: offer a thoughtful integration of knowledge. We have enhanced what we hope is a useful organization by adding a number of special features designed to help the readers learn as much as possible about the medieval millennium.

Features

• Primary Documents. In this information age it is easy to forget that historians find out about the past primarily by reading the written voices left by the ancients. To keep this recognition of the interpretive nature of the past, we have included primary documents for all regions of the world. These short works are designed to engage readers by bringing the past to life, and all have head notes and cross-references to help readers put the documents in context.

• Chronologies. The chronologies will help readers quickly identify key events in a particular region during the medieval period.

• Maps. History and geography are inextricably linked, and no more so than in a global encyclopedia. The maps throughout the text will help readers locate the medieval world in space as well as time.

• Illustrations. All the illustrations are chosen to be historical evidence not ornamentation. All are drawn from medieval sources to show the Middle Ages as the people at the time saw themselves. The captions encourage readers to analyze the content of the images.

• Complete Index. The key to gathering information in the twenty-first century is the ability to rapidly locate topics of interest. We have recognized this with the A–Z entries linked to the essays and the extensive cross-referencing. However, nothing can replace a good index, so we have made sure there is a complete and cumulative index that links the information among the volumes.

• Bibliographies. Each of the long essays contains a list of recommended readings. These readings will not only offer more information to those interested in following up on the topic but also will serve as further information for the A–Z entries highlighted within the essays. This approach furthers our desire to integrate the information we are presenting.

• Appendixes. The appendixes provide basic factual information, such as important regional dynasties or time period designations.
The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Global Medieval Life and Culture has been a satisfying project to present. In over 30 years of research and study of the Middle Ages, we have never lost the thrill of exploring a culture that’s so different from our own, yet was formative in creating who we have become. Furthermore, we are delighted to present this age in its global context, because then as now (indeed throughout history) globalization has shaped the growth of culture. In this information age, it is good to remember that we have always lived linked together on spaceship earth. We all hope readers will share our enthusiasm for this millennium.
AFRICA

Victoria B. Tashjian
Chronology

c. 100  
Aksum emerges in the Ethiopian Highlands

c. 300  
Camel, which was introduced to North Africa by the Romans, is taken up by the Berbers of the Sahara revolutionizing desert life and the scale of trans-Saharan trade

The Bantu expansions that began millennia earlier spread Bantu languages across the southern half of Africa by this date

c. 340  
King Ezana of Aksum converts to Christianity

c. 400  
Ironworking, cattle herding, and agriculture practiced across Africa by this date

Christianity adopted by most Egyptians and many North African Berbers by this date

c. 4th century  
Empire of Ghana founded by the Soninke in the West African sahel/savannah

c. 4th–7th centuries  
Aksum stelae and palaces constructed

5th–6th centuries  
Christian Nubia emerges along the Middle Nile

c. 5th century on  
Ethiopian and Nubian ecclesiastical art produced

6th century  
Aksum briefly extends its authority into southwestern Arabia

639–642  
Muslim Arabs conquer Egypt

641–651  
Nubian archers twice defeat and repel Muslim Arab invaders

7th–10th centuries  
Islam becomes dominant religion across much of North Africa

711  
Muslim Arabs reach the Atlantic coast in Morocco after sweeping across North Africa

8th century  
Sijilmasa founded at the Tafilalt oasis in the northwestern Sahara

c. 9th century  
An identifiable Swahlii culture emerges along the East African coast with the expansion of Indian Ocean trade

Songhai emerges as a small state and becomes the dominant West African empire in the 15th century

Al-Qayrawiyyin University founded in Fez
c. 9th–10th centuries  Igbo-Ukwu cast metal sculptures produced in Igboland, to the east of the lower Niger River
Berbers adopt Islam

9th–11th centuries  The city of Jenné-jeno, which emerged in the Inland Niger Delta around 200 B.C.E., at its apogee

C. 10th century  Kanem emerges in the lands lying north and east of Lake Chad
Al-Azhar University founded in Cairo

969  Cairo founded by the Fatimids

Late 1st millennium  Yoruba states emerge in the lands lying west of the lower Niger River

Early 2nd millennium  State of Benin emerges in the lands lying west of the lower Niger River and becomes an empire in midfifteenth century
Tuareg Berbers found Timbuktu on the desert–sahel border above the Niger Bend

11th century  First identification of Takrur, an early West African state located along the Senegal River, in writings by Muslim visitors
Mapungubwe emerges on the Zimbabwe Plateau

11th–12th centuries  Almoravid Movement expands its control from its place of origin in the western Sahara to the North African Maghrib and Muslim Spain

C. 11th–15th centuries  Yoruba cast metal and terra-cotta sculptures produced

C. 11th–16th centuries  Construction of Benin earthworks

1068  Al-Bakri writes history of the western Sudan

12th–13th centuries  Zagwe dynasty’s rock-hewn churches carved out of living rock at Lalibela
Almohad Movement supplants the Almoravids

1137  Zagwe dynasty emerges in the Ethiopian Highlands

13th century  Zimbabwe emerges on the Zimbabwe Plateau

13th–14th centuries  Stone wall enclosures constructed at Great Zimbabwe

C. 1200–1500  Swahili city-states at their peak

C. 1203  The Soso sack Kumbi Saleh, hastening the decline of Ghana

C. 1205  Birth of Sundjata, founder and first ruler of the West African empire Mali

C. 1235  Mali emerges under the leadership of Sundjata following the defeat of the Soso at the Battle of Kirina

1255  Death of Sundjata

1270  Solomonid dynasty emerges in the Ethiopian Highlands

14th century  Kongo kingdom emerges in Central Africa
First Luba kingdom emerges in Central Africa
Construction of Sankoré Mosque and University, Timbuktu
Kilwa rises to prominence as the wealthiest Swahili city
Construction of Husuni Kibwa (a palace), Kilwa

**14th–15th centuries**

Construction of the Great Mosque, Kilwa

**14th–16th centuries**

The Beta Israel of the Ethiopian Highlands embrace an “Israelite” identity

**1312–1337**

Reign of Mansa Musa of Mali

**1324–1325**

Mansa Musa’s pilgrimage to Mecca

**1331**

The great medieval traveler Ibn Battuta visits East Africa’s Swahili coast

**1352–1353**

Ibn Battuta visits Mali

**1375**

Catalan Atlas, famed European map of Africa, created by Abraham Cresques

**c. 15th century**

Emergence of Mutapa and Torwa states, successors to Zimbabwe

Walled Hausa city-states appear in the grasslands of today’s northern Nigeria and southern Niger

**c. 1400**

First Akan state, Bono, appears in the savannah-forest fringe of West Africa

Saïfawa rulers of Kanem move their capital to Bornu, in the lands to the south and west of Lake Chad

**1433**

Tuarag Berbers seize Timbuktu from Mali

**1464–1492**

Reign of Sonni Ali, who transforms Songhai into a powerful empire

**1468**

Sonni Ali takes Timbuktu from the Tuareg Berbers

**1473**

Sonni Ali conquers Jenné-jeno

**c. 1490**

Massacre of Jews of the Saharan oasis of Tuat

**1492**

Jews expelled from Spain, increasing Jewish populations in North Africa and some Saharan oases

**1493–1528**

Reign of Askia Muhammad of Songhai, founder of the Askia dynasty

**1591**

Sultan of Morocco sends across the Sahara troops that defeat Songhai

### Timeline of Sub-Saharan African Medieval States

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Period</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aksum</td>
<td>1st century c.e.-long decline begins 7th century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>c. 4th–13th centuries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian Nubia</td>
<td>6th–15th centuries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swahili City-States</td>
<td>c. 9th–16th centuries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Songhai</td>
<td>c. 9th century–1591</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kanem-Bornu</td>
<td>c. 10th–19th centuries</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Yoruba States  late 1st millennium on
Takrur        ?-13th century
Mapungubwe   11th–13th centuries
Zagwe dynasty 12th century–1270
Benin         early 2nd millennium–19th century
Mali          c. 1235–15th century
Zimbabwe      13th–15th centuries
Solomonid dynasty (Ethiopia) 1270–1974
Kongo         14th–18th centuries
Luba          14th–19th centuries
Hausa City-States  c. 15th–19th centuries
Mali Empire
Rise and Fall of Songhay
Swahili States

Swahili City-States
Portuguese Colonies
Mwenemutapa, c.1550
Portuguese Forts
Trade Routes

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1. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

This essay first explores the problems inherent in applying the framework of the medieval period to Africa. An overview of key events in African history during the centuries from 400 to 1400 C.E. follows. An introduction to the physical geography of this large continent, highlighting its great diversity, comes next and includes discussion of ecological zones, major mountains and rivers, environmental change, key weather systems, and disease. The following section addressing methodology considers the range of sources consulted by the interdisciplinary scholars of the African past, assesses their strengths and limitations, and concludes with a discussion of the scope and organization of this work. This essay and those that follow it demonstrate that there is much we know about Africa in the medieval centuries, and that the picture which emerges is of a vibrant continent whose inhabitants engineered ongoing and constantly evolving innovations in social institutions, religion, governance, technology, productive activities, artistic expression, and commerce, in the process engaging in extensive interactions with others on the continent and outside its borders.

Was There a Medieval Period in Africa?

This may seem an odd question to pose for an encyclopedia of global medieval life and culture. However, the idea of a medieval era derives from the history of a different continent, Europe, whose scholars have long identified the period from approximately 400 to 1450 C.E. as a time that can be differentiated in meaningful ways from what came before and after. Historians of Europe distinguish the medieval period from the earlier Classical Age by the fall of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century C.E. On the other end of the spectrum, the medieval period segues into the modern age in the fifteenth century (many would add a bit earlier for Italy) as a result of two things. First, the intellectual movement known as the Renaissance led to new ways of understanding and portraying the human condition and the natural world as a result of scientific, cultural, and artistic developments including a passionate reembrace of the intellectual achievements of the now-distant Classical Age, whose surviving texts—a number of which had, in a neat example of global interconnections, been kept alive by Arab intellectuals—began to be studied again and interpreted anew. Renaissance thinkers, known as humanists, valued reason over faith, the secular over the religious, and championed the rights of the individual. Second,
the age of European global exploration, ushered in by advances in maritime and navigational technologies—some once again reintroduced to Europe from the Arab world—first mastered among Europeans by fifteenth-century Portuguese mariners, opened the world’s oceans and from thence their bordering lands to European exploration and, eventually, commerce and in many cases conquest, events that profoundly changed the shape and trajectory of the history of the modern age not only for Europeans, but for people around the globe.

Are these demarcators in any way relevant to Africa? To take the onset of what has been labeled “medieval” for Europe, it is the case that since the Roman Empire acquired territories all along the North African coast after conquering and destroying the prominent Phoenician-founded city of Carthage in 146 B.C.E., and also controlled lands far up the Nile into Egypt, Roman affairs do impinge upon the history of at least this portion of Africa. But on the other hand, the fall of the Western Roman Empire that concluded Europe’s Classical Age is not what ushered in epoch-making changes even for the very limited portions of the African continent affected by Roman overrule. Instead, it was the arrival in North Africa of Muslim Arabs in seventh- and eighth-century waves of conquest that marked the onset of a new era in this region.

There is more substantial overlap between Europe and Africa when the end date of European medievalism is considered. It is the case that the onset of the European age of exploration that was in part responsible for drawing the medieval period to a close ushered in new developments for Africa. Indeed, the earliest Portuguese voyages of Atlantic exploration were made in a southerly direction, down the western coastline of Africa, with stops off the coasts of what are today Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Ghana during the 1440s to 1470s. Exploration continued, with Bartolomeu Dias rounding the Cape of Good Hope at the southern tip of Africa in 1488 followed by the famed navigator Vasco de Gama, who continued up East Africa’s Indian Ocean seaboard in 1497 to 1498.

The arrival of Europeans on Africa’s coastlines had profound ramifications for the continent. Africans and Europeans developed extensive new trade relations in which Africans exported gold, ivory, and a host of raw goods destined for transformation into manufactured goods in Europe’s burgeoning factories, while Europeans exported guns, cloth, metal wares, and a variety of other manufactured goods to African consumers. This new Atlantic-based trade affected Africa deeply, providing new markets and greatly increased demand for Africa’s commodities, creating new commercial venues for enterprising individuals who seized with alacrity and often great business acumen the new opportunities stemming from trade with Europeans, redirecting long-distance trade, for example to the Atlantic coasts at the expense of older trans-Saharan routes, greatly increasing the amount of iron available to Africans, and undermining the production of certain African commodities such as cloth that were replaced by less costly European imports. The slave trade, which eventually (and postmedievally) followed, changed life irrevocably for those who lost their freedom, and in too many cases their very lives, to the brutal institution of chattel slavery in the Americas. It must be remarked that the values of the Renaissance, the second event held to mark the end of the medieval period in Europe, were not taken by many Europeans to apply to Africa and Africans, as can be seen in the fact that the slave trade and colonial conquest that followed were marked by a crude and all-consuming racism that denied African people, at least in the minds of most “modern” Europeans, their humanity.
Yet when considering these changes it is important to remember that with very few exceptions Europeans did not venture into the interior of sub-Saharan Africa until 400 years after the age of exploration began but were instead limited to Africa’s coastlines as a result of tropical diseases for which Europeans lacked immunity and African military resistance. For the first four centuries of what has been termed “postmedieval” for Europe, then, a majority of Africans had no direct contact with Europeans, and the impact Europeans had on the continent was highly uneven.

If the notion of a medieval Africa thus has some limited meaning but is also deeply, perhaps fatally, flawed, how else have the continent’s chroniclers periodized its history? Historians of Africa, like historians of Europe with their delineations of classical, medieval, and modern ages, have sometimes utilized a very broad tripartite understanding of the continent’s history, dividing Africa’s past into precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial eras. However, this approach has fallen out of favor today, collapsing as it does the entire long, complex human history of a vast continent up to the nineteenth century into one unwieldy whole that in no way does justice to the complexities and diversities of Africa’s past; privileging the brief period of European conquest in a problematically Eurocentric fashion; and ignoring the many continuities that bound precolonial to colonial Africa, and link the postcolonial era to what preceded it.

No standard way of periodizing African history of the past 3,000 years has followed: A perusal of textbooks shows that authors choose approaches to covering the African past as varied as moving from region to region, state to state, and ethnicity to ethnicity. Alternately, some break this part of the continent’s history down into chunks that are centuries or even millennia long, with great variation between authors in the points at which one era ends and another begins. Others highlight innovations in production and technology; for example, a very common demarcator of a new era in African history is the transition to an iron age, a development associated with a host of society-shaking outcomes.

Thus there are correspondences as well as disjunctures, legitimations as well as illogicalities, associated with applying to Africa or indeed to any non-European part of the world the notion of a “medieval” period defined by events central to European history. Nevertheless, there is tremendous value in studying what was occurring in Africa during the vibrant centuries from 400 to 1400. This remains a history unfortunately all too often unknown outside the relatively small group of Africanist specialists, a history that it is hoped will be made at least in broad outline accessible to nonspecialists through this section of this encyclopedia.

**Historical Overview of Medieval Africa**

Medieval Africa was a dynamic place, and one key event driving its dynamism was the continent’s entrance into the Iron Age. Although ironworking in Africa predated the medieval period by some 1,400 years—there is a growing body of evidence dating smelting sites as far back as 1000 B.C.E. and corroborating the spread of ironworking technologies throughout virtually the entire continent by around 200 C.E—it is the case that the influence of ironworking on the lives of most of the continent’s inhabitants continued to intensify in scope well into the medieval centuries. For example, the southern half of the continent, where ironworking became widespread early in the Common Era,
experienced a constellation of essentially contemporaneous developments that unfolded for this area over the first millennium C.E. These developments included not only ironworking but also the introduction of fixed agriculture with a focus upon grain cultivation, intensified herding of cattle and other domesticated animals, the production of pottery marked by great similarity of style over a very wide range of this territory, life in settled village communities, and the linguistic dominance of Bantu languages (see Bantu Expansions). The previous Stone Age preeminence of nomadic hunting and gathering was thus done away with, though many continued to practice this older foraging episodically alongside the new cultivating and herding.

Ironworking—and the medieval expansion of copper working, particularly in the Copper Belt of what is today the Congo and Zambia, and gold mining in East and West Africa—affected many aspects of human life throughout the continent. For example, iron tools such as hoes, scythes, machetes, axes, and knives made farming far more productive than it had previously been, resulting in notable increases in harvests and the generation of significant surplus wealth. This in turn allowed for much greater occupational specialization in medieval Africa because all no longer had to produce their own food supplies, and growing numbers of individuals focused their energies on activities such as craft production, political or religious leadership, trade, and even warfare.

The generation of more and surplus goods, which occurred as a result of the Iron Age, also affected trade very deeply. Local and regional trade networks cutting across broad swathes of the continent intensified in the medieval centuries, in no small part because places with rich deposits of iron or copper ores traded them to regions lacking these now critically important resources. The finished products of smelting and smithing, particularly from regions noted for a high quality of work, further stimulated trade on the continent. Regional trade also involved the exchange of goods produced in neighboring but ecologically distinct zones, which most bountifully produced different commodities, as for example in the trades linking the desert, sahelian, sudanic, and forest zones of West Africa (see Ecological Zones). At times and in certain places trading was dominated by particular ethnic groups, whereas in other instances involvement in the occupation of long-distance trading came to confer a sort of ethnic identity, as with the West African traders who came to be known as the Juula/Dyula.

The medieval centuries witnessed Africa’s greater involvement in intercontinental trade too. This was concentrated in the two major trading networks, trans-Saharan and Indian Ocean, which linked Africa with Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. External demand for gold and ivory helped to drive this long-distance trade. Trade through the Red Sea further connected Africans with the Mediterranean Basin. Intercontinental connections also led to the introduction into Africa of new religions, most notably Christianity and Islam, as well as a continuing Jewish presence in the Ethiopian Highlands and North Africa (see Judaism). Pilgrimages to Jerusalem and Mecca made by, respectively, Africa’s Christian and Muslim faithful further cemented intercontinental links. In a different kind of reinforcing cycle of change, one of the offshoots of these intercontinental interactions was the introduction of new food crops. The banana and plantain from Asia further heightened the growing productivity of African agriculture as these became staple starchy crops in many parts of the continent; Africa in turn introduced the cultivation of sorghum and cowpeas to Asia.
A history of continuous interactions between closely neighboring and more distant peoples on and off the continent was thus a constant in the medieval centuries and resulted in ongoing and reciprocal flows of technological information and occupational knowledge as well as the sharing and borrowing of varied cultural norms, practices, and beliefs. The ripple effects of such contacts reached far beyond those individuals in direct association with outsiders as goods and ideas spread via intra-African trading networks. These interactions led also to a norm of multilingualism, and the development of regional lingua francas such as Hausa in West Africa and Swahili in East Africa. In short, continuous cultural sharing over short distances and vast expanses, which led to a continuous process of innovation and evolution, is the hallmark of African societies during the medieval centuries, rather than the stagnation and isolation so often and so erroneously assumed of Africa.

The developments just discussed led in turn to the heightened social complexity, which is another hallmark of medieval Africa. These centuries were characterized for much of the continent, though not all of it, by greatly increased social stratification. For example, some managed to monopolize a disproportionate share of the continent’s greatly increasing wealth, and the copper and gold jewelry that were among the products of metalworking became one of the ways of distinguishing the elites who arose in this heightened social stratification, as numerous sites such as Great Zimbabwe and Igbo-Ukwu demonstrate (see Igbo and Zimbabwe Plateau). Other manifestations of this expanded social complexity included the emergence across the continent of large states and empires, which privileged centralized systems of governance. It is also the case, however, that many on the continent experiencing these far-reaching changes eschewed centralized governments in favor of the diffuse political authority of acephalous societies (see “Society” section), a form of organizing society that could and did reflect as much social complexity as centralized authority. Yet other examples of social complexity include the great artistry and technical sophistication of medieval artworks and monumental architecture, and much-expanded urbanization. Well-known African cities of today that date back to the medieval period include Cairo and Fez in North Africa, Jenné-jeno and Timbuktu in West Africa, Mogadishu in the Horn of Africa, and Mombasa and Zanzibar Stone Town on the East African coast. Cities important and widely known in their medieval day, which have not survived to the present, include, to mention just a few, Kilwa, Kumbi Saleh, Sijilmasa, and Adulis. Many of these medieval cities had populations in the tens of thousands, while mighty Cairo reached a half million or more inhabitants.

Physical Geography: A Continent of Diversity

The African continent is notable for its size and diversity. Slightly more than three times the area of the United States at just under 11.7 million square miles, and nearly 5,000 miles north to south and east to west at its broadest length and width, all of the United States, India, Australia, and Brazil could be comfortably accommodated within its borders. Its mass is often surprising to those who grew up with Mercator projection maps of the world, which artificially inflate areas further from the equator making Africa, which lies across this line, appear artificially small.
In terms of geography and environment, Africa, which is located mostly with the tropics, contains within its borders many different climate zones. Along portions of the equator, which runs across the continent roughly equidistant from its northern and southernmost points, rainforest predominates and the continent receives its heaviest rainfall averaging 80 inches and more per year. With movement north and south from the equator comes a steady decrease in rainfall and a concomitant change in environment, with savannah and savannah-woodland bands followed, as one continues moving further away from the equator, by sahel and then desert zones—the mighty Sahara in the north and the Namib and Kalahari deserts in the south. Finally, with an increase in rainfall once again, Mediterranean strips are found along portions of North Africa’s Mediterranean and South Africa’s Atlantic coastlines.

Places of high elevation include the Ahaggar, Tibesti, and Atlas Mountains and the Ethiopian Massif in the northern half of the continent, the Drakensberg Mountains in South Africa, and mountains including the continent’s highest peak, Mount Kilimanjaro at 19,340 feet, found alongside the Rift Valley, a massive rupture in the earth’s crust, which runs from far south of the Great Lakes (Table 6) region of East Africa through the Ethiopian Highlands, with their many peaks and gorges (Table 7), before continuing as the Red Sea. Great rivers such as the Nile in the Northeast, the Niger in West Africa, the Congo in Central Africa, and the Limpopo and Zambezi in southern Africa form major watersheds; the Nile and the Niger are also noted for their floodplains that are inundated on a predictable, annual basis as these mighty rivers overflow their banks, depositing silt and enriching nutrients and thus creating some of the richest agricultural land on the continent.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lake</th>
<th>Surface Area in Sq Mi</th>
<th>Greatest Depth in Feet</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>26,560</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>Largest lake in Africa in surface area; second largest freshwater lake in world in surface area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanganyika</td>
<td>12,700</td>
<td>4,820</td>
<td>Second largest lake in Africa in surface area; deepest lake in Africa; second deepest freshwater lake in world; second largest freshwater lake in world by volume.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nyasa</td>
<td>11,500</td>
<td>2,320</td>
<td>Third largest lake in Africa in surface area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kivu</td>
<td>10,040</td>
<td>1,575</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkana</td>
<td>2,500</td>
<td>360</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albert</td>
<td>2,050</td>
<td>190</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Lake Chad, formerly an inland sea, has shrunk precipitously over recent centuries and would have been among the largest lakes in Africa, and in the world, in the medieval period.

The African environment has not been unchanging over the medieval centuries, and variations in it have affected how people live their lives—as well as being caused by how people have lived their lives. During the medieval period, people in Africa engaged in activities as varied as hunting and gathering, fixed agriculture, herding, and metalworking that could and did affect the environment very directly. For instance, the medieval expansions of fixed agriculture
and iron smelting led to clearing of forests to create farmland and to fell and burn trees to make the charcoal that fired iron-smelting furnaces, activities that significantly expanded the portions of the continent composed of grasslands. Greater reliance on cattle herding—an activity advantaged by the expansion of grasslands—sometimes led to overgrazing and consequent environmental degradation. It is believed that Great Zimbabwe, a powerful state whose economic base included cattle herding, declined in part because of such overgrazing. Elsewhere, West Africa has experienced long-term wetter and drier phases, with a wetter phase from 700 to 1100, while the subsequent four centuries were far drier. Some connect the twelfth-century decline of Ancient Ghana to the pernicious effects on agricultural production of this decreased precipitation, though whether this was truly a causal factor remains debated.

Vitally important annual weather systems affect rainfall and thus human life in Africa. Two prominent examples are the Intertropical Convergence Zone (ITCZ) and the monsoon. The ITCZ is a region of low pressure created where the Northeastern and Southeastern trade winds meet, resulting in a front that produces heavy rainfall on some 200 days annually. Over the course of the year the ITCZ moves north and south, driving annual patterns of rainy and dry seasons across broad stretches of the continent. These seasons in turn shape the annual cycles of agriculture and herding. For example, many West Africans practice transhumance, moving herds to the drier north in the rainy season and the better-watered south in the dry, thereby ensuring an ongoing food supply for their cattle by protecting the pasturage in both locations from overgrazing. The monsoon winds that affect the lands on both sides of the Indian Ocean, East Africa as well as South Asia, is critically important to eastern and southern Africans, bringing rain annually to the southeastern coast and creating winds in the Indian Ocean that change direction semiannually, blowing from Africa to Asia for one-half of the year and from Asia to Africa for the other half, facilitating maritime travel and thus the Indian Ocean trade so vital to the history of East Africa.

Another natural phenomenon that has shaped human life and society is disease. A host of tropical illnesses, some of them caused by parasites carried by insects that thrive in the more humid parts of the continent, played important roles in the lives of medieval Africans. For example, they affected where people

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Higher Mountains</th>
<th>Height in feet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kilimanjaro</td>
<td>19,340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mount Kenya</td>
<td>17,058</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mount Meru</td>
<td>14,979</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mount Toubkal</td>
<td>13,665</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mount Cameroon</td>
<td>13,435</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Mountain Ranges</th>
<th>Their Highest Elevations in Feet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethiopian Massif</td>
<td>&gt; 14,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atlas Mountains</td>
<td>&gt; 13,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drakensburg Mountains</td>
<td>&gt; 11,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tibesti Mountains</td>
<td>&gt; 11,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marra Mountains/Jebel Marra</td>
<td>just under 10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ahaggar Mountains</td>
<td>just under 10,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
lived, with avoidance of malarial regions or places where the river blindness carried by black flies was prevalent. Disease also affected the range of productive activities engaged in by people: A parasite carried by the tsetse fly caused the illness known as trypanosomiasis or sleeping sickness. It affected cattle and horses as well as humans, making broad swathes of the medieval continent unsuitable for either of these domesticated animals with the result that cattle herding and the use of ox- or horse-drawn plows and carts were impossibilities for many Africans, and exacting a heavy price in human deaths too. Diseases such as malaria and guinea worm, endemic to many parts of the continent, took their toll by limiting the productivity of people weakened, often chronically, by these illnesses. Plague has also been a factor in African history; the Black Death, which decimated medieval Europe, did not leave Africa unscathed, and is estimated to have resulted in the deaths of four-tenths of Egyptians in the midfourteenth century. Dysenteries and intestinal parasites also affected many. The climate change discussed above could affect some of these diseases, for example by pushing the regions hospitable to the humidity-loving tsetse fly further south during the dry phase of late medieval West Africa. More positively, the host of diseases found on the continent led to deep local knowledge of herbal pharmacopeias as remedies or palliatives for many of these illnesses.

Sources, Methodology, and Organization

There have long existed institutionalized ways of keeping history on the African continent, different though they have often been from Western forms. Upon turning to history as it is practiced in the Western academic tradition, however, the field of African history is still in its infancy. It is the case that until surprisingly recently—the middle of the twentieth century—it was routinely assumed that Africa had no history, had undergone none of the evolutions in politics that were then taken to be the legitimate stuff of historical inquiry, and this conviction left the African past unexplored by scholars from the Western historical tradition. Stasis, the antithesis of history, was assumed for an entire continent’s human population. This is literally true. For example, British histories of the imperial age penned by eminent scholars repeatedly asserted that nothing had happened, no change had occurred, in Africa’s past that was worthy of attention. Resulting from a combination of the virulent racism that has permeated this “modern” age as well as the challenges posed to the dominant methodologies of the Western historical tradition by a very finite set of written sources for most of the premodern African past, this lack of attention, which lasted until the field of African studies emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, means that many aspects of African history are still either hazily understood or the subjects of vigorous dispute. This also, however, makes the field of African history richly vital and interesting to engage.

As a result of the scholarship of the last 50 years there is much that is known about medieval Africa; there is also much about the continent that remains unclear, some of which doubtless never will be known. The study of medieval Africa is a study bounded by the sources that are available to students of the continent’s past. Documents written by Africans do exist for select portions of the medieval continent such as parts of North Africa and the
Ethiopian Highlands, but a majority of medieval Africans lived in oral cultures and thus did not leave behind written records of their times. However, an additional source of written documents is found in the words penned by literate visitors, such as the great and peripatetic medieval Muslim travelers Ibn Battuta and al Masudi who visited places including the West African Sudan and East Africa’s Swahili coast. These sources have their limitations: Most of these visitors, drawn by involvement or interest in long-distance trade or simply the ease of traveling via its established trade routes, focused their remarks first upon this sector of the economy and second upon political organization and elites, leaving the history of everything else virtually unremarked upon. Their emphases skewed our knowledge base toward intercontinental trade (with a notable overemphasis upon Arab/Muslin agency) and societies with centralized governments, which remain the best-investigated parts of medieval Africa. Furthermore, as outsiders their observations could be alternately astute and obtuse. On the positive side they were unaffected by the norms of the societies they were observing, leaving them free to “see” what might be invisible to those who took the shape of their own societies for granted. Yet they were also hampered by lack of knowledge and context for the places they toured, at times misunderstanding what they witnessed. Thus it is always illuminating to have recourse to documents produced by Africans themselves, and with the arrival of Islam on the continent in the seventh century came, for some, literacy and the Arabic script. Nonetheless, for vast swathes of medieval Africa historians have recourse to no written records at all.

Other sources are, however, available to those who attempt to understand Africa’s past, and African history is distinctive in the Western academic tradition for the broad range of sources its interdisciplinary scholars routinely consult. Archaeology, the interpretation of artifacts excavated in their original contexts to construct an understanding of the past and its trajectories of change, has proved extraordinarily important to knowledge of the medieval centuries given the relative paucity of written materials. Much of what is known about iron technologies and metalworking more generally, for example, as well as farming, herding, pottery, and other productive activities, comes from archaeology, as does evidence of the great reach of local, regional, long-distance, and intercontinental trade and the growing understandings of urbanization, state formation, social stratification, architectural achievements, religious history, and much, much more.

There are, however, limitations to what can be learned from the tangible remains of a place and time that are the focus of archaeology. For example, though an artifact and its context shed much light on many aspects of a culture, they cannot deeply reveal the mentalities or the thought processes of the people who lived then and there. And the focus has most often been upon elites, leaving the lives of commoners far less fully understood. Additionally, with the exception of long-ago Ancient Egypt, Africa has been a poor stepchild in the field of archaeology, with relatively little money spent upon digs on the continent. In part this reflects the presumption, until recently so widespread, that little worthy of investigation had happened. It also reflects the newness of the field of African studies, the high costs of conducting digs there, and the difficulty of locating sites in certain environments such as the rainforests of West and Central Africa, with their imposing and often impenetrable blankets of vegetation. It remains the case that archaeologists have barely scratched the surface of the continent, with most places of archaeological promise as yet unexcavated.
Oral traditions, through which people in oral cultures keep their histories alive through the faculties of human memory and public recitation, remain a critically important source of information about Africa’s past. In acephalous societies oral traditions were in essence community property, to be related by any who could tell a history intended for public performance compellingly and well. In other societies, particularly some states and empires with centralized governments, serving as an oral historian was the purview of a professional class, such as the griots of West Africa. These oral traditions typically focused upon political events such as the emergence of new states, the doings of rulers, and their genealogies. In regards to their accuracy, long suspect as unverifiable by the dominant Western historical profession, it has been found through the use of outside corroborating sources, such as written traditions where they are available or archaeology, that core events of oral traditions are often—though far from uniformly—accurate. They can also be used for entrée into the social mores and mentalities of a particular time and place. On the other hand, it is also the case that the chronology of events in oral traditions is often inaccurate, with anachronisms occurring with regularity. Bias, for example toward the perspective of the rulers of the society creating the oral tradition or recounting it long after the fact—who may be seeking through history to legitimize their own contemporary political authority—is routine. Clearly this is not a concern unique to oral traditions, as any critical examination of written sources and histories quickly reveals. The performative aspect of oral traditions has also received much consideration in recent years, with recognition of the need to consider the creative impulses of individuals, the performative norms of their societies, and the performer’s own subjectivity. In short, the imperative to consider oral traditions critically rather than taking them at face value, the need to interrogate them as a careful historian would any other source, is now the norm in African history, which has led the way in developing methodologies for judiciously using these oral texts.

Art forms such as the continent’s extraordinarily rich history of sculpture and rock art provide additional windows into the African past, shedding light upon social stratification, medieval preoccupations such as disease, subsistence activities, technological developments, and in-migrations of new peoples. The question of how to interpret extant works of art from long ago remains central, and Africanist art historians often work in concert with archaeologists who can analyze the context in which a particular artwork was found. Yet a majority of the artistic production of medieval Africans has not survived for contemporary consideration, made as it was out of perishable media such as wood, gourds, textiles, and animal skins. The natural sciences have also contributed extensively to our understanding of the African past, for example through identifying and charting significant environmental change that as discussed above affects human history, using botany to substantiate and understand technological developments in agriculture such as the domestication and ennoblement of crops, and demonstrating linkages (or the lack thereof) between members of different human societies via genetics. Historical linguistics has also shed light upon the evolution and movement of languages on the continent.

These richly varied sources of information, when mined to piece together knowledge of the African past, are used by historians in mutually reinforcing ways, and this interdisciplinarity is another of the methodological contributions of the field of African history. For example, oral traditions can be used to
identify fruitful sites for archaeological digs, and the findings from such exca-
vations can then be used to test the oral traditions, either upholding or refut-
ing the claims of these oral texts. Likewise, the accurate chronologies of events
that can result from carefully conducted archaeological excavations can com-
pensate for the errors in chronology that are one of oral tradition’s shortcomings. Used in concert with one another, the many types of sources that currently
inform the study of the African past are expanding knowledge of medieval
Africa far beyond the focus on states, empires, and long-distance trade that
until recently received the lion’s share of attention. This methodology also has
the potential to reshape and invigorate historical inquiry in other parts of the
world, though this interdisciplinarity created and utilized by Africanists holds
promise as yet too little fulfilled outside of Africa.

Further Reading

2. RELIGION

The three largest religious traditions found in medieval Africa were African
traditional religions, Islam, and Christianity. In addition to these three domi-
nant faiths, medieval communities of Jews existed across North Africa and at
some Saharan oases, and immigrants belonging to other religious traditions,
such as Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, and Manichaeanism, arrived on the contin-
ent from time to time as well (see Judaism). The majority of medieval Afri-
cans, however, practiced African traditional religions. Because of a lack of
sources—there are no sacred scriptures leaving a written record of these faiths,
and the intangible nature of religious thought means it is not clearly reflected
even in the surviving religious artifacts unearthed in archaeological digs—
we have little specific information about medieval African traditional religions
outside of the indirect evidence of a continuation among early Christian and
Muslim converts of earlier religious practices, and some very brief references
to religious practices recorded by medieval visitors to Africa. However, the
elements of African traditional religions discussed below existed in many
places in the early modern period, as attested to by literate visitors of that
time, making it a near-certainty that they existed at least in the late medieval
years too. Unfortunately, though, the specifics of African traditional religions’
beliefs and practices in the medieval centuries, and their variations from place
to place, are generally unknowable today, as are the trajectories of change in
those years. Thus the discussion of African traditional religions below is prob-
lematically ahistorical. Extensive documentation does exist for Islam, which
became well established in Africa during the medieval centuries, and for the
Christian communities also found in the medieval period, in large part because of the traditions of literacy attending these two religions with their holy books and scriptures, and extensive literatures of religious treatises and texts. The religions that depended upon literacy for their transmission strongly influenced the education in Africa.

**African Traditional Religions**

The religious traditions indigenous to the African continent reach backwards at least into the medieval period and continue to be practiced by many into the present. Although the specifics of any one African traditional religion vary from ethnicity to ethnicity, there are broad similarities found in these religions across much of the continent such as beliefs in numerous gods, goddesses, and spirits, as well as unseen powers and the ability of human beings to wield special powers. There is also much overlap across African traditional religions in the forms of religious observance, which highlight prayer, sacrifice, and offerings, conducted either personally or with the assistance of a religious leader, and performed either individually or in community-wide acts. The existence of religious specialists such as priests, priestesses, spirit mediums, healers, diviners, seers, and prophets are another commonality. Finally, across Africa there are parallels between African traditional religions regarding beliefs about the causes of misfortune for either individuals or communities, and how best to either prevent problems or treat them once they arise. Alongside all of these broad similarities, there are also variations in African traditional religions from culture to culture and place to place; it has not been the case that one unvarying African traditional religion has existed for the entire continent. For example, divination has been practiced in very different ways in different settings, with variety in the materials cast and how the results are read. African traditional religions have followed very different historical trajectories in different parts of the continent too. Sacred spaces have differed from place to place, as has the range of recognized deities. Although such differences have existed, on occasion gods, goddesses, spirits, or oracles have developed such strong reputations that they have been taken up by a host of neighboring peoples as word of the divinity’s power and prowess spread, creating regionally recognized divinities. In short, the similarities that link various African traditional religions are numerous and profound, and this essay focuses upon the commonalities that can be found across them.

African traditional religions are polytheistic, and in their belief in a multitude of gods and goddesses stand in contrast to the monotheistic traditions of Islam and Christianity also found in medieval Africa. Deities found in African traditional religions commonly have included creator, earth, sky, weather, water, and heaven gods or goddesses, with the creator god, when one existed, often privileged as the supreme deity. African traditional religions include another category of divinities known in English translation as spirits. An important example is ancestral spirits. African traditional religions teach that after death, a person who has led a good life and left still-living descendents behind becomes an ancestral spirit, living in a realm close by though not visible to the world of its living descendents who are yet walking the earth. Thus, the now-living and their ancestral spirits coexist in connected worlds that
allow for interaction between the two. It is further believed that ancestral spirits, like all spirits, have the ability to affect either positively or negatively the lives of their descendents, in whom they continue to hold a lively interest because of their family bond. It is appropriate and right—and prudent—for the living to pay homage to their ancestors, for example by making offerings of food, drink, or sacrifice, and making reference to them in the course of carrying out certain family activities such as prayer or infants' naming ceremonies. The living thus remembers with honor and respect those who preceded them.

Ancestral spirits, recognized for their wisdom, may also be applied to for support or advice about any troubles or pending decision, with consultation occurring either directly or through the assistance of a religious specialist such as a diviner. Although ancestral spirits are respected they may also be feared, because they do have the ability to intervene problematically in their descendents' lives. Ancestral spirits who are forgotten or unduly ignored may seek to revenge themselves on their neglectful descendents by causing problems such as infertility, ill health, crop failure, or any sort of trouble. Ancestral spirits continue to exist for as long as living people have specific memory of them, typically for four to five generations. They then move into a more nebulous world of unnamed spirits. The belief in ancestral spirits has often been misidentified by outsiders as ancestor worship, although that wording is a misnomer; the ancestors are venerated as those who went before, without whom the living would not exist, but are not worshipped or prayed to.

In addition to the ancestors, African traditional religions share a belief in large numbers of spirits that can reside in all kinds of naturally occurring bodies including streams, rivers, lakes, trees, groves, caves, rocks, hills, mountains, and certain animals, as well as in shrines and temples. All of the gods, goddesses, and spirits of African traditional religions can affect the lives of people for good or ill. They may be approached in an attempt to ensure their support by people who hope to receive favorable outcomes for all kinds of things, ranging from such intangibles as peace of mind and spiritual strength to highly specific desires such as for children, wealth, health, success in battle, a good harvest, or any of the range of things that can be wanted by human beings.

Complementary to the range of recognized divinities in African traditional religions is the wide range of religious specialists. These include priests and priestesses, men and women with deep religious knowledge who are often dedicated to the service of a particular god, goddess, oracle, or spirit, and engage in activities as diverse as leading prayers or making offerings or sacrifices to the deities they serve, diagnosing and treating illness, making protective or healing charms and medicines, leading community-wide religious observances, and responding to allegations of witchcraft or sorcery. Diviners, skilled in the art of divination, can communicate with spirits by interpreting cast stones, bones, nuts, shells, or other objects. They address all sorts of questions or problems, spiritual and secular, profound or mundane, present or future oriented, brought to them by clients. Spirit mediums, as the name implies, serve as the medium or link between a particular divinity and the secular world of the living. When not possessed, a medium is a regular person, fully immersed in the normal, nondivine world of living people. But a medium has the capacity to be possessed by a spirit, a state often entered into in the context of dance and drumming. While possessed the medium transmits the word of the spirit to the human community, thereby creating a link between the secular and the
divine. Their utterances, made while in an altered, trance-like state and often not remembered once the possession ceases, are frequently translated or interpreted by another religious leader.

Healers, who may be male or female, address physical illness and more metaphysical woes such as misfortune. They possess significant knowledge of an extensive African pharmacopeia drawn from the local flora and fauna and create medicines to treat a broad range of diseases. Some also set broken bones and provided treatments for sprains and strains through the careful manipulation of limbs. They also incorporate spiritually based techniques into their treatments, in keeping with the widespread belief that illness, though it might be treated with a medicine or manipulation, often has a deeply significant spiritual component that when properly considered can help to answer the question of why one person gets sick rather than another, or identify the root cause of any of the many illnesses believed caused by supernatural machinations. For example, healers might identify offended relatives or neighbors and treat instances of witchcraft or sorcery perpetuated by these aggrieved individuals. Or they might identify offended spirits or gods to whom redress has to be made through prayer, offerings, or sacrifice before an illness or woe such as infertility will abate. Healers might also address community-wide problems deemed to have a religiously based origin such as epidemic, drought, famine, or warfare. As is clear from this roster of religious leaders, women and men serve as religious specialists though, at least in more recent centuries, women have usually been the spirit mediums whereas divination has been the province of men. It is also important to note that religious leaders can have expertise in more than one area; they did not have to specialize in only one of the aspects of religious leadership covered here.

African traditional religions share a belief in the existence of special or unseen powers. Outsiders have often labeled these convictions “magic” or “superstition,” though these terms are problematic insofar as they connote irrational and fear-laden thinking. In fact, such negative implications do not accord at all with the highly developed African religious cosmologies in which beliefs in unseen powers form a critically important element. Followers of African traditional religions believe that in addition to deities and spirits, some people can harness special powers, have the ability to control unseen forces that exist in the world, that they can then employ against others for either good or ill. Those people who make use of these forces only to harm have become known, in English translation, as witches (female) and sorcerers (male) practicing witchcraft or sorcery. The belief in these powers is intimately connected to notions of causation in African traditional religions; if things go wrong in a person’s life—if pregnancy cannot be achieved or sustained, if a child dies, if one’s life activities fail, if illness or epidemic strikes, if one suffers any of the host of causes of human dissatisfaction, deep unhappiness, or despair—the cause will not be understood simply as bad luck. Instead, the assumption is that someone is wielding special powers against the aggrieved person. The person causing the harm might do so because of jealousy or anger toward the target. It is therefore unsurprising that the person believed responsible for another’s woes is most often a relative, neighbor, or coworker, someone with whom the person transgressed against lives in close contact, and with whom there may in fact exist a history of stresses or strains.

There are specific steps to be taken when people believe special powers are being wielded against them. A common response is consultation with a
religious specialist such as a priest or priestess who has a reputation for skill in identifying the person causing the harm, and devising ways to neutralize these actions and even prevent their future occurrence. It might be necessary to identify or find any charm or medicine made by the person harnessing special powers that is actually causing the harm, so it can be destroyed or its power otherwise nullified. Or, the specialist might recommend certain ritual actions to eradicate the threat, or make a protective charm or medicine for his or her client, often a small container or pouch containing any of a variety of spiritually charged objects such as plant or animal matter, or earth, believed to confer a protective power when made by a skilled religious practitioner. These objects might then be worn by the person seeking assistance, or placed in his or her home, or on property thought to be at risk, to block the efficacy of the other person’s malevolent powers. On other occasions there is public identification of the individual believed to be wielding harmful powers, who is then put through trials to ascertain guilt or innocence. A finding of guilt often leads to that person’s exile or death to safeguard individuals and the community from their destructive actions.

In sum, when life’s unhappinesses, troubles, great sorrows, and unpredictabilities strike, followers of African traditional religions may seek explanation and relief through these beliefs in unseen powers. A functionalist explanation of this understanding of misfortune typically focuses upon its usefulness in creating a structure through which to make sense of and rationalize the otherwise inexplicable, and give remedies that allow people to assert some sense of control over painful life events. It is also important to keep in mind, as T.O. Ranger and Benjamin Ray point out, that African traditional religions express a worldview and set of ideas that stress relationships—among people, between the living and the ancestors, between people and the natural world that they inhabit, and between the natural world and the world of the divine—and the construction and maintenance of these relationships in appropriate ways as necessities for the harmonious unfolding of human affairs.

Positive applications of special powers include the actions of religious practitioners who use their understanding of and command over unseen powers to protect people against those who utilize such powers to harm. Individuals approach them for charms or medicines not only in the face of witchcraft and sorcery, but also to help them achieve any desired life end and protect them from any harm. African healers, who historically have combined understandings of physiology, psychology, and the medicinal properties of numerous plants with spiritually based methods of healing, are another category of individuals who use special powers as well as secular knowledge to help. Rainmakers represent a third category of positive users of special powers, in this case to bring the waters so necessary to the survival of individuals and communities dependent upon harvests and grazing lands. Those who can foretell the future, such as seers, priests or priestesses of oracles, and diviners, also assist positively by helping people understand and plan for what lies ahead.

The practices of African traditional religions, its forms of religious observance, are woven throughout daily life and form part and parcel of it: It is a truism that the religions are not separable from lived human activity. Indeed, because of the link between the supernatural and notions of causation, much of the human experience is closely linked to spirituality according to African traditional religions. Hence it is not surprising that religious observances are
scattered throughout daily life. For example, prayer, conducted often daily by an individual, the head of a family, or a religious leader, on behalf of an individual, a family, or an entire community, and directed toward any of the divinities of African traditional religions, might request desired things or outcomes, give thanks when desired events occur, or give praise. Likewise, people frequently turn to religious specialists such as healers, seers, diviners, mediums, prophets, priestesses, or priests for advice, insights, and remedies. Community-wide observances such as harvest festivals, which celebrate the new crop, are yet another type of religious practice, and such festivals often occur on an annual cycle closely tied to subsistence activities such as farming and herding. Prayers and ritual observances also accompany important activities like iron smelting, forging, fishing, and hunting. Families regularly recognize and honor the spirits of their departed ancestors, and it is also quite common to have family shrines, which serve divinities associated with a lineage. Individuals might also have a particularly close relationship with a divinity if their parents sought the assistance of a god, goddess, or spirit in conception, bringing a pregnancy to term, or keeping an infant or young child alive, and the surviving child might then have an association to that deity throughout his or her life. Offerings made to a divinity form another important and frequent category of religious observation. These typically consist of food or drink, the latter known as libation, which might take the form of water, milk, or alcohol, often poured upon the ground in recognition and appreciation of the spirit receiving it, and as an act of hospitality toward that spirit and a symbolic rendering of the relationship between the divinity and the person making the offering. Finally, sacrifice exists as a kind of offering in which the living being so proffered to a divinity is killed in recognition of the fact that all life flows from the divine, and so as not to approach a divinity empty-handed when making application to it.

**Christianity**

At times Christianity had a very significant presence in parts of northern and northeastern medieval Africa. It initially came to Alexandria shortly after the time of Christ, during the first or second century C.E. and rapidly became established as the majority religion in *Egypt*. By the end of the fifth century it is estimated that some 90 percent of Egyptians practiced the faith through Egypt’s *Coptic Church*. Early Egyptian Christianity was marked by a strong embrace of monasticism, the appeal of which may in part be connected to parallels in the religion of Ancient Egypt that favored austere living for its priestly class, and in part to the development of monasticism as a new form of asceticism that arose as persecutions waned. The Coptic Church also stood out for its allegiance to what supporters of the Chalcedonian Creed called Monophysitism, a doctrine that asserts that Christ had only one nature—divine—rather than the two natures, divine and human, embraced at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 that declared Monophysitism heretical.

Further west, in the Maghrib, Christianity also gained a firm hold among the predominantly *Berber* population of this part of North Africa, who had turned to Christianity in significant numbers by 400 C.E. Initially, this development was resisted by the Romans, who then controlled the North African
In the early fourth century, under the influence of Coptic Christians from Egypt or the Levant, Christianity spread to the kingdom of Aksum in the Ethiopian Highlands during the rule of King Ezana, who converted around 340. Christianity continued to flourish in Ethiopia under the Zagwe and Solomonid dynasties that succeeded Aksum, and Ethiopian Christianity was closely linked to the Coptic Church throughout the medieval period, sharing its Monophysite beliefs and receiving bishops from that church too.

The final foothold of Christianity in medieval Africa, Nubia, received the religion as Egyptian traders brought the faith with them in the fifth and sixth centuries as they moved south down the Nile into northeastern Africa’s interior and to the three Nubian kingdoms of Nobatia, Makuria, and Alwa. Egyptian Christians were joined in Nubia in the sixth century by Byzantine missions, at which point Christianity became quickly and firmly established throughout Nubian society. Christian Nubia flourished for almost a millennium and like the Ethiopian Church initially had close ties to the Coptic Church from which it in part sprang, with the Coptic Church appointing Nubia’s bishops. Archaeological excavations conducted at the cathedral at Faras, the capital city of Nobatia, have yielded an incredibly rich heritage of Nubian Christian artwork, including exquisite depictions of Nubian bishops and biblical and nativity scenes.

Christianity appealed to these diverse populations of Africans for a variety of reasons. For Egyptians and North Africans of the Maghrib who were suffering under oppressive Roman rule, one appeal of Christianity lay in its promise of a better life in the hereafter. In Aksum, linked through Red Sea trade to growing Christian populations in the Mediterranean, it was politic to adopt the Christianity of valuable trading partners, a motive that also operated in Nubia. The fact that African Christians typically molded the religion in accordance with their own cultural norms and religious antecedents further hastened its acceptance.

Although Christianity initially flourished in these parts of Africa, the religion faced a profound challenge from the east as Muslim Arabs swept out of the Arabian Peninsula into northern Africa in a series of invasions during the seventh and eighth centuries. Christianity survived in Egypt, where the Coptic Church remains to the present day, but the Muslim conquest led to a radical decline in the Egyptian Christian population to what has been estimated at less than 10 percent of the total Egyptian population by the end of the medieval period, a process hastened through conversions sparked by practices such
as taxing non-Muslims and excluding them from various offices. Except in iso-
lated pockets Christianity did not survive Muslim incursions in the Maghrib,
though its Berber practitioners there put up spirited and initially successful
military defenses. Christian Nubia’s renowned archers repelled Arab Muslim
forces, which attacked in the seventh century. The early victories did not
hold, however, and the twelfth through fourteenth centuries witnessed a grad-
ual evolution in Nubia as ever-expanding numbers of Muslim immigrants
profundely changed its religious makeup, until by the end of the fifteenth
century, Christianity was virtually exterminated there. Only in Ethiopia did
Christianity flourish uninterrupted, and indeed the Ethiopian Church remains
vital to the present day in a tradition unbroken since the arrival of Christianity
in this region nearly seventeen centuries ago.

Islam

Islam, founded by the Prophet Mohammed in the Arabian Peninsula early in
the seventh century C.E., spread immediately into North Africa. Between 639
and 711, Arab Muslims conquered the North African coast from Egypt to Mo-
rocco and introduced their religion in these regions in the process of this con-
quest. Here and elsewhere on the continent where Islam spread some converted
to avoid enslavement and taxes levied by the conquerors on unbelievers, or to
share the religion of the newly dominant Muslim political class. Others wanted
to share the religious identity of merchants in Muslim-dominated trading net-
works of intercontinental reach and great economic importance. Yet others em-
braced Islam due to an appreciation of its religious teachings and practices, and
the social and political norms and morés that formed the Muslim cultural order
that attended the religion. And still others saw a potent source of special powers
in aspects of the new religion, particularly its script.

In Egypt Islam gradually replaced Christianity as the majority religion, and
Arabs replaced the Byzantines as the ruling class by 642. Berbers in the Maghrib
accepted Islam only after the initial decades of successful military resistance to
the unwelcome Arab conquerors failed in the early years of the eighth century,
and most came to embrace Islam over the next 200 years. However, their resis-
tance to Arab overrule continued even after conversion, with many Berbers
drawn to the Kharijite branch of the faith, which stressed a radical egalitarian-
ism very attractive in light of the Arab political and cultural dominance that
attended their North African conquest.

From North Africa Islam spread south with trans-Saharan trade, first to the
nomadic Berbers of the Sahara who began converting in the ninth and tenth
centuries. Sanhaja Berber Muslims of the western Sahara dominated the Al-
moravid Movement of the eleventh century, which ushered in a turn to an ex-
tremely rigid and puritanical form of Sunni Islam in this part of the continent.
Almoravids then achieved military conquests as far afield as Morocco and An-
dalusia in southern Spain, before falling in Africa to a new Muslim power, the
Almohads, and in Spain to the Christian Reconquista (see Almoravid and Al-
mohad Movements). During the tenth to twelfth centuries Islam moved yet
further south from the desert to the West African sahel and Sudan that lay
below the Sahara and were also involved in trans-Saharan trade. Conversion
in these regions typically began with the rulers of states such as Gao, Takrur,
and Kanem-Bornu, whose leaders accepted Islam in the late tenth and eleventh centuries no doubt recognizing the political and commercial acumen of conversion. The same process unfolded in the important medieval West African empire of Mali, whose rulers first embraced Islam after which the religion made inroads into the general population. Mansa Musa, a famous thirteenth-century ruler of Mali, is noted for the very lavishly conducted hajj, or religious pilgrimage, he made to Mecca, the holiest site of Islam, in 1324 A.D. His fantastic expenditures of gold in Cairo brought the attention of Europeans to his kingdom, which was for the first time identified as the specific source of the West African gold, which medieval Europeans used to strike their coins. Mansa Musa also began the development of the Malian city of Timbuktu into a center of medieval Islamic scholarship and learning, which in its heyday attracted Muslim scholars from far afield.

Islam also traveled from its birthplace in the Arabian Peninsula to East Africa, brought there by Muslim merchants via the maritime trade routes running from Arabia south through the Red Sea, into the Indian Ocean, and down the East African coast. Islam appears to have arrived as early as the eighth century C.E., though it did not become widely embraced by coastal East Africans until the eleventh century. The Swahili culture that was at its peak from around 1200 to 1500 was characterized in part by its embrace of Islam, but the religion did not move from the coast into the East African interior during the medieval centuries. The Red Sea also facilitated the movement of Muslims across its relatively narrow waters from Arabia into the Horn of Africa and as far west as Nubia which lay along the Middle Nile, while simultaneously Muslim teachers and merchants came to Nubia from Egypt.

The rapid spread of Islam across North Africa, into the Sahara and West Africa, along the Nile, and down East Africa’s coast, is striking. One factor underlying its successful transmission was the relative ease with which the basic obligations of the faith, the Five Pillars of Islam—five practices incumbent upon all Muslims—could be met even by converts not yet fully conversant with the tradition. Another factor aiding its spread was the ability of new converts to combine Islam with a continuation of certain pre-Islamic religious practices. For example, the belief in spirits intrinsic to African traditional religions found an easy home in the jinns or spirits of Islam. The use of amulets containing passages written in the Arabic script, which were believed by many to be powerful charms, further connected the new religion to the ones that preceded it. Frequently the social and political orders dictated by Islam were adopted selectively too, making conversion less culturally disruptive than would otherwise have been the case. These sorts of religious blendings were engaged in by most converts, and the continuation of older religious and social traditions no doubt eased the transition from one religion to another.

The African traditional religions practiced by a majority of medieval Africans addressed a world richly populated by gods, goddesses, spirits, and unseen forces, all of which had the ability to affect for good or ill the lives of the living. Through their cosmologies, religious practices, and religious specialists, African traditional religions focused upon the construction and maintenance of relationships among people, between people and the divine, and between people and the natural world. These religions provided explanations, understandings, treatments and preventions for the adversities and misfortunes that are intrinsic to the human condition. Medieval Africa was also home to significant
numbers of Christians and Muslims. The inroads Christianity initially made in northern and northeastern Africa were eventually muted by Islam. This left only the Egyptian Coptic Church and the Ethiopian Church to continue as representatives of Christianity in Africa throughout the medieval period, as Islam became dominant in North Africa and the Sahara and on the East African coast and developed a significant presence in West and northeastern Africa. In the case of Christianity and Islam, the introduction of a new faith caused social and cultural as well as religious change. Yet simultaneously, Africans remade both faiths in profound ways by blending old religious traditions with the new. This process is reflected in the widely used nomenclature of African Christianity and African Islam, labels that distinguish their practice on the African continent and speak to the very active rather than passive responses to these imported faiths, which characterized their reception by Africans.

Further Reading

3. ECONOMY

In the medieval centuries, people across the vast African continent engaged in a broad range of economic activities. Small Stone Age communities practicing hunting and gathering continued to exist in parts of southern and Central Africa, whereas societies utilizing fixed agriculture, herding, and iron smelting formed the majority of the medieval African population. In the medieval period craft production, engaged in within the household and also practiced on a larger scale, played an important role in producing a wide range of items people used in their daily lives. Systems of exchange including barter and local, regional, and long-distance trade were additional critical features of African economic life during these centuries. This mix of economic activities, in addition to the hunting, fishing, and foraging of earlier millennia, which continued to be practiced at least sporadically by many in medieval Africa, produced surplus wealth in the continent, allowing growing numbers of individuals to avoid subsistence activities in favor of specialized occupations (see *Hunting and Gathering*). This specialization also supported the emergence of the large states found across Africa in the medieval centuries.
Agriculture, Herding, and Iron Technology

Fixed agriculture developed many millennia before the medieval period in some parts of Africa, though in other places on the continent it was not practiced until just before the medieval era began. The transition from foraging for naturally occurring edible plants to the intentional farming of food crops represents a major change in how human populations support themselves. Farming opens up the possibility of surplus production of foodstuffs and the consequent ability of some members of society to specialize in nonsubsistence occupations. It also allows for settled life, and thus an increase in personal possessions. Population generally increases too, as a result of the greater security of food supply and the greater ease in raising children, which is associated with settled life. Exchanges of goods with neighboring peoples follow the creation of surpluses too. All these developments, as well as a need for heightened social organization to regularize access to farmland and the organization of cooperative labor, are in turn linked to the development of more complex political entities.

The earliest archaeological evidence for farming in Africa dates to 7000 B.C.E. in the Western Desert of Egypt, located near what is today the border of Egypt and the Sudan. Cultivation along the Nile River Valley followed by around 5000 B.C.E. Archaeological evidence for farming dating to 5000 B.C.E. has been found in the Saharan region too, which was at that time well watered and fertile rather than the desert it is today. Although until recently most scholars believed farming in Africa to be an import from western Asia, more and more scholars are exploring the possibility that farming techniques diffused from the Western Desert to the Nile River Valley, and a minority even argue that perhaps the knowledge was transmitted from the Saharan region to the Nile. Although there no longer exists a consensus on what was until recently a widely held belief that agriculture in Africa arose in the Nile River Valley based on transmission from Asia, and from there traveled down the Nile and thence to points west and south, it can be stated that agriculture was firmly established in portions of the northern half of the continent by 5000 B.C.E., whether it developed at one or more locations indigenously, diffused from western Asia, or resulted from a combination of these two sources. Farming spread throughout the entire continent by the first centuries C.E.

The earliest crops grown in northeastern Africa were the cereals wheat and barley, most likely domesticated in western Asia and brought to Africa. These crops cannot be cultivated in the tropical and subtropical parts of the continent, so the cultivation of other grains and cereals indigenous to Africa developed in the grasslands of the West African Sudan and in the Ethiopian Highlands. These starchy staples included pearl and finger millet, sorghum, African rice, ensete, and teff; nonfood crops including cotton and indigo were cultivated too. In the vegetation of the forest regions of West Africa, where cereals and grains are not easily grown, Africans farmed yams, melons, fluted pumpkins, gourds, cowpeas and the crops of the oil palm, raffia palm, and kola nut trees. Across the continent Africans planted and harvested many vegetables too. Before and during the medieval centuries, African agriculture was enriched further by the diffusion of crops from Asia including cocoyam, coconuts, sugar cane, citrus fruits, Asian rice, and perhaps the banana and plantain too. Strains of crops domesticated by Africans including sorghum and cowpeas, and the kapok and baobab trees, were diffused from Africa to western and South Asia too.
By the medieval period, then, the planting and harvesting of crops was well established across the continent. The dominant form of farming practiced in Africa was hoe agriculture because the presence across broad swaths of Africa of the tsetse fly, whose bite transmitted trypanosomiasis to cattle, made it impossible in many places to use draft animals to do the heavy work of plowing. The fact that people in some areas where cattle thrived used them as a form of currency, as a way of holding wealth, as they did in parts of southern and eastern Africa, also mediated against using these animals for the more prosaic work of plowing. In addition to relying on hoe agriculture, frequently African cultivators practiced shifting plot agriculture wherein farming sites were used intensively until the soil fertility was depleted, at which time the land was either left to lie fallow and regenerate, or was simply abandoned permanently in favor of a new plot. In other instances, though, land was cultivated continuously due either to its high natural fertility or the use of fertilizers. Sometimes Africans utilized additional farming techniques such as the construction of irrigation channels or hillside terracing. Cultivation occurred at Saharan oases too, made possible through the construction of underground irrigation channels to provide the necessary water and dependent on an underclass of workers who undertook the heavy labor needed in this system of farming.

If more recent gendered patterns of production held true for the medieval era too, women played a key role in producing food crops in Africa, in large part due to widespread beliefs that women were responsible for providing the bulk of the food for their children, their husbands, and themselves. While women did the sowing, weeding, harvesting, processing, and storing of food crops in the majority of the continent, typically men bore responsibility for clearing new plots of land, a recurring need in many places given the dominance of shifting plot agriculture. Farming was gendered entirely male among a small minority of African societies, including the Hausa and Yoruba of what is today Nigeria, and mixed-sex farming occurred in some locations also, including the West African sahel.

Like agriculture, the origins of domesticated animals in Africa are a matter of some dispute. Many argue that domestication came to Africa from western Asia, whereas others assert that it was an indigenous development. In any event cattle raising may have been established in Egypt’s Western Desert by 7000 B.C.E., whereas widely accepted evidence of cattle rearing exists from around 5000 B.C.E. for the Nile River Valley, the North African coast in what is today Libya, and the central Sahara. Cattle herding spread more slowly in the southern half of Africa and reached the southernmost portions of the continent only by the early centuries of the Common Era. Cattle, whether indigenous or imported in origin, sheep and goats indigenous to Asia, camels from the Arabian Peninsula, donkeys very probably domesticated from the African Wild Ass, and poultry were the main domesticated animals, though in forest and some savannah regions of Africa cattle, horses, donkeys, and camels could not survive the trypanosomiasis transmitted by the bite of the tsetse fly. After the spread of fixed agriculture, the benefits of interweaving herding and farming were quickly recognized by some African cultivators, with farmers who raised cattle using manure to fertilize their fields while feeding their animals the roughage that remained following harvests.

By the medieval period, then, animal husbandry like farming held a prominent position in the African economy across the continent. Unlike farming,
herding livestock was the work of males, often boys or young men, while women bore responsibility for milking and churning butter. Migration to fresh pastures and sources of water, often following a seasonal cycle of movement, was common among herders. Although it was the ideal of pastoralists to be able to live entirely from their animals, who were valued for their meat, milk, blood and hides, it was typically impossible to sustain life solely from this source. In reality, activities such as hunting, fishing, foraging, and exchanges with local farmers generally supplemented animal husbandry. Indeed, hunting and gathering activities continued in the medieval period, not only among the remaining peoples for whom this remained the primary subsistence activity. These practices were also engaged in at least occasionally by farmers and herders: For many, they remained important sources of foodstuffs, either routinely or during times of crisis in herding or agriculture.

Knowledge of how to smelt iron emerged in a number of places in West and East Africa in the first millennium B.C.E. and then spread across Africa between approximately 1000 B.C.E. and 400 C.E. The expansion of ironworking skills was facilitated by the broad availability of iron ore across much of the African continent. Once again, it is a matter of some debate whether iron-smelting technologies arose independently in Africa or were transferred to the continent from western Asia. In any event, iron smelting spread across virtually the entire continent by 400 C.E., so at the beginning of the medieval period the Iron Age already encompassed all the peoples of Africa with the exception of some hunting and gathering societies which remained in the Stone Age. The production of metal tools and weapons allowed for a great expansion in agriculture using iron hoes and axes, and more effective hunting and greater military capabilities using iron-tipped spears and arrows and metal knives. Metallurgy also had profound effects upon African art, notably with the eventual production of striking cast metal bronze and brass sculptures produced at Igbo-Ukwu and Ife (see Igbo).

It is important to note that for the African continent as a whole in the medieval period the production of iron remained less than the demand, some argue to such an extent that in places it served as a brake on economic development. Indeed, after Europeans began sailing to the continent in the fifteenth century, iron emerged as one of the most important African imports, revealing a hunger for additional supplies of this metal. However, it is also important to recognize that the scale of iron production varied widely in medieval Africa, ranging from small-scale smelting targeted only to local consumption, to large-scale smelting involving from hundreds to thousands of furnaces at one location. Additionally, a second significant brake on economic expansion lay in the relatively low population density of Africa: People to work land and other resources, not the resources themselves, generally limited the amount of production that occurred in medieval Africa.

Smelters, who transformed ore into usable metal, often held a special place in medieval African life. Although African cultures are far too varied to generalize accurately about the role of metallurgists, and though the distinction is critical between smelters who created metal and smiths or forgers who simply worked it, in some cultures smelters, who often closely guarded knowledge of their craft, were respected for their generative ability to create much-desired iron, while people feared them for what seemed the occult powers of creation they thus possessed. Other cultures drew positive links between ironworking and
political leadership. And some cultures saw smelting as just an occupation. In certain societies any man (it was an occupation gendered male) could become a smith, while in others the profession was open only to members of particular families. In addition to ironworking, mining and smelting of gold, tin, lead, and copper existed in medieval Africa and formed activities agricultural peoples might engage in seasonally when the demands of farming were at a low ebb.

**Craft Production and Domestic Work**

In the medieval period craft production led to the creation of all kinds of items used in daily life. Sometimes artisans produced just for their households, whereas at other times they worked on a far larger scale with exchange of the resulting goods the end result. The many aspects of cloth making could include collecting and processing raffia or bark and/or growing cotton, producing thread, weaving, tailoring and often decorating the cloth through dye, stamped designs, embroidery or some other technique, and significant cloth industries grew up in a number of locations. Salt production also occurred on a larger as well as smaller scale, for example in the Niger Delta where the Niger meets the Atlantic, where salt collected after evaporating ocean waters was traded for agricultural products with the people of the coastal hinterland. Gold smithing was another craft commonly done for exchange rather than self-use.

Particular crafts were gendered male or female and though in many cases these genderings were constant across the continent, in others they varied from society to society. Women tended to dominate pottery, salt processing, beer-brewing, weaving of mats and baskets, broom making and spinning, whereas leather and woodworking, palm wine tapping, the construction of homes, smelting, and smithing were typically the purview of men. Cloth weaving might be gendered male or female; usually though not exclusively male weavers produced for exchange while women weavers produced for their households. Some crafts were restricted only to certain families, while others could be engaged in by anyone. In the latter case, apprenticeship to a specialist was typically how one learned the skill.

Women across the African continent bore responsibility for most domestic work, which included cooking, fetching water and firewood or other fuels, laundry, child care, nursing the sick, and providing a variety of personal services to husbands. Largely because of their constant responsibility for the ongoing work involved in the never-ending, indeed daily, demands of food cultivation and household work, on average women in medieval Africa worked several hours a day longer than men, even when men’s responsibilities for hunting, fishing, and military work are factored in. The notable exception to this pattern was hunting and gathering societies, in which a hierarchy based on gender did not exist and where the number of hours spent daily in subsistence activities was far lower than in agricultural and pastoral communities; hunting and gathering societies have considerably more leisure time available to their members than is available to people who practice other ways of sustaining life.

**Regional and Long-Distance Trade**

Medieval Africa was notable for its extensive trade networks, which not only criss-crossed many parts of the continent but linked Africa and the outside
world through intercontinental trade. Significant trading partners of Africa included Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. Indeed, Africa played a key role in the economy of the medieval world, for example, as a primary source of gold for Europe. Two commercial networks critically important to Africa and other continents in this time period were trans-Saharan and Indian Ocean trade.

Throughout the medieval period, trans-Saharan trade plied the inhospitable and dangerous Sahara desert, connecting West Africa, located south of the Sahara, and North Africa, to the desert’s north, while also funneling African exports to a much broader world via the Mediterranean. Trans-Saharan trade was based most fundamentally upon a gold-for-salt transaction in which gold from sub-Saharan West Africa was traded north, while salt from the Sahara went south. This vast trading network connected the communities and peoples of sub-Saharan West Africa with the peoples of the great Sahara desert and North Africa. In the medieval period, the most important West African export, gold, was mined primarily at the Bambuk and Bure goldfields, located, respectively, between the headwaters of the Senegal and Falémé rivers and near the headwaters of the mighty Niger River. In the late medieval period, the Akan goldfields located in the forest region of what is today Ghana also began to send their output north into trans-Saharan trade. In addition to gold, other significant West African exports included ivory, captives destined for slavery, agricultural products, ostrich feathers, animal pelts, and kola nuts. In return for these products from the savannah and forest regions of West Africa, salt produced in the Sahara at places such as Taghaza and Bilma was traded south. Other Saharan exports included copper ore from Agades and Azelik in the central desert’s Aïr region and Akjoujt in the western Sahara, among other sites, and dates cultivated at desert oases. North African exports sent south in exchange for the goods of West Africa included a variety of what can be thought of as luxury goods, such as fine cloths, either whole or sewn into garments; precious stones; metal wares; horses, used for civilian and military purposes in the grasslands of West Africa; and books, which were in high demand among the growing literate, Muslim population in West African cities such as Timbuktu, which from the 1300s began to emerge as a center of Islamic learning under the patronage of Mansa Musa, ruler of the empire of Mali.

Transportation took a variety of forms along the reaches of the trans-Saharan trade network. In the West African savannah, people transported goods across the grasslands by head loads (human porterage) or donkeys and along the Niger River by boat. People of the Sahara, such as the Tuareg and Sanhaja Berbers, made the dangerous desert crossing in camel caravans of as many as thousands of animals that moved commodities north and south across the sands. Camels, well-suited to desert travel due to their ability to travel for 10 days between water sources, and the spreading of their hooves in a “snow-shoe” effect that keeps them from bogging down in the sand, allowed for the reinvigoration of trans-Saharan trade after the widespread adoption of their use in the Saharan region in the early centuries of the Common Era. Oases such as Awdaghust also played key roles in making the crossing possible. The length of the desert journey varied considerably depending on whether the routes traversed the desert in a fairly straight north-south axis of 2- to 3-months’ duration, as they would do going from West African goldfields to the North African city of Fez, or veered far east, as was the case with caravans headed to the highly significant North African city of Cairo.
Interest in the goods exported from West Africa via trans-Saharan trade lay not only in the Sahara and North Africa. From the Arab-controlled cities of the North African littoral, where gold was in demand to mint the coins of Islamic states, West Africa’s exports traveled the long-established maritime trade networks of the Mediterranean, thereby making their way north into Europe, where Africa’s gold undergirded the medieval European turn to a gold-based currency, recognized at a later date in the elephant mint mark of the famous Golden Guinea of King Charles II, and also east into western Asia, where African gold was again in high demand. Before the Americas emerged as a new, less costly source of the precious metal in the modern era, West Africa served as the main supplier of gold to Europe and the Islamic world, producing fully two-thirds of their supply of this valued commodity.

The second intercontinental trade route of great importance in the medieval period traversed an ocean not of sand, but of water. Indian Ocean trade created a world of commerce and cultural exchange linking the peoples of Egypt, the Horn of Africa, and the East African coast with trading partners in the Arabian Peninsula, Persia, South Asia, Indonesia, and the southern ports of China. Indeed, the Indian Ocean world is now increasingly understood as a medieval and even premedieval locus of activity and exchange parallel to what has much longer been recognized as the Atlantic World, which emerged following the age of Atlantic maritime exploration in the modern era.

Deeply involved in Indian Ocean trade was a portion of the East African coastline affected by the annual monsoon winds, which drove this maritime network by facilitating the ocean crossing. This approximately 1,000-mile length of coast stretched from Mogadishu in the north to Cape Delgado in what is today Mozambique in the south. A new people, the Swahili, emerged along this coastline late in the first millennium C.E. and created a spectacular and opulent culture that derived a significant share of its wealth from the role of Swahili merchants, who acted as intermediaries buying and selling goods central to Indian Ocean commerce. In its heyday that lasted from approximately 1200 to 1500, some fifty Swahili towns, the most prominent of which was Kilwa, and several hundred settlements in total, dotted the shoreline, peninsulas, and off-shore islands of this stretch of the East African coast.

Swahili merchants facilitated the movement of goods from the East African interior and the East African coast into Indian Ocean trade. Prominent among these commodities was gold that was mined in the interior to the southwest of the coast on the Zimbabwe Plateau, located between the Zambezi and Limpopo rivers. The movement and sale of this gold was controlled by Zimbabwe, which directed it from the plateau east to the coastal town of Sofala, from where it was moved north along the coast to Kilwa and other Swahili towns. Other commodities included ivory from the elephant herds of the inland grasslands of East Africa, in demand in India and China to make a variety of luxury goods eagerly consumed by their elites as well as bangles worn by women of all social strata; enslaved peoples from Ethiopia and the interlacustrine region surrounding the Great Lakes of East Africa, sold into slavery in western Asia where they labored in backbreaking work such as draining swamps and mining salt in what is today southern Iraq; and rock crystal, which traveled to the Mediterranean world via the Red Sea. Products of animals such as leopard skins and rhinoceros horns, the latter in demand in parts of Asia for their purported qualities as an aphrodisiac, formed another category of East African exports. Swahili merchants also
traded East African coastal products including iron, tortoise shell, spices including cloves produced primarily on the offshore island of Zanzibar, and mangrove poles, the last in high demand for constructing buildings in the sandy, unfor-ested desert lands surrounding the Persian Gulf.

Via the Red Sea, medieval Africans from Egypt and Ethiopia also contributed commodities to Indian Ocean trade. Egyptians exported linen and cotton cloth, a variety of iron tools and weapons, and agricultural goods including wheat and wine produced in the rich agricultural lands around the Nile, whereas the people of the Ethiopian Highlands exported the aromatics frank-incense and myrrh as well as gold, ivory, captives, and other goods. In return for its exports, Africans imported from India items including silk and cotton textiles and small glass beads. Africans also imported China’s celebrated fine porcelain, which wealthy Swahili merchants displayed in wall niches in their elaborate stone homes as a sign of their prosperity, and incorporated into their pillar tombs. Beads and other imports from Asia attesting to the broad reach of Indian Ocean trade have been found not only in coastal locations, but far into the eastern and southern African interiors in what are today Zimbabwe, Botswana, and the Transvaal.

The monsoon winds of the Indian Ocean, which blow in a northeastern direction from East Africa to the Persian Gulf and India between April and October, and reverse direction to blow southwesterly from India and the Persian Gulf to East Africa between November and March, made it relatively easy to transport goods by dhow across this sea. Knowledge of how to beat against the prevailing wind in a series of tacks came to East African sailors at least 2,000 years ago, most likely from sailors further east, further facilitating ocean-based trade off of East Africa many centuries before the development of African-European commerce via the Atlantic emerged following fifteenth-century maritime innovations in Europe.

Adding to the broad geographic scope of Indian Ocean trade was the utilization of other waterways, including the Red Sea and Persian Gulf, which incorporated Egypt, Ethiopia, the Mediterranean world, Arabia, and Persia into this network, in addition to the Indian Ocean links to India, Indonesia, and southern China. The earliest surviving written record of this trading network dates to around 100 C.E., when *The Periplus of the Erythraen Sea*, a mariner’s account written in Greek and published in Alexandria, left a detailed record of the route, terrain, market towns, peoples, trading relationships, and merchandise that made up the Red Sea and East African portions of Indian Ocean trade. Given the scope and regularity of trade described in this document, it is clear that the trading network was already very well established and thus of considerable age at that point in time, if smaller in scale than in subsequent centuries. For Indian Ocean trade grew quite dramatically from around the ninth and tenth centuries, an expansion attributed first to East Africa’s connection to the larger Islamic world that occurred at that time and served as an economic stimulus to the East African economy, and second to rising demand for African ivory, gold, and rock crystal in the Mediterranean world.

Like trans-Saharan trade, Indian Ocean trade was thus intercontinental in scope and of considerable significance to the medieval economies of the parts of the world involved in it. East African ivory was very important for ceremonial, ritual, and display purposes in India and China; the slave trade that took so many East Africans to western Asia flourished for centuries, well into the
modern era; East Africa was a significant purveyor of gold not only to western Asia but, through Red Sea links, to the Mediterranean world. Rock crystal followed the same route and was in demand in Mediterranean workshops until it was replaced by the use of clear glass in the eleventh century.

In addition to archaeology and oral traditions, information about trans-Saharan and Indian Ocean trade comes from literate travelers. Arabs, who moved from the Arabian Peninsula to the North African coast in waves of conquest in the decades following the emergence of Islam in the seventh century, as well as culturally Arabized North Africans, traveled south deep into the West African interior via the camel caravans plying the trade routes of the Sahara, and elements of what they witnessed were recorded. For example, the tenth- and eleventh-century writers Ibn Hawqal and al-Bakri described the wealth, size and grandeur of Sijilmasa, a northern oasis city very important in trans-Saharan trade. Others followed trade routes to eastern Africa. Al-Masudi, who visited the just-emerging Swahili coast in 922 to 926, described the towns of this coastline in a piece most memorably titled, “The Meadows of Gold and the Mines of Gems.” Ibn Battuta, a particularly well-traveled Arabized Berber born in North Africa in 1304, traversed trans-Saharan and Indian Ocean networks as well as venturing to what are today Crimea, the Balkans, and southern Russia; Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Jordan, and Arabia; India, Malaya, Indonesia, and China; and southern Spain. In 1331, this world traveler described the preeminent Swahili town of Kilwa as “one of the most beautiful and well-constructed towns in the world” (Freeman-Grenville, p. 31).

Although many Africanist scholars have focused upon long-distance and intercontinental trade as most important engines driving the creation and accumulation of wealth and the rise of states in medieval Africa, more recently historians and archaeologists have turned greater attention to the role of local and regional exchange occurring within the African continent through markets and other systems of exchange such as barter. For example, scholars of West Africa have established that vibrant trade in the area around the inland Niger Delta was a hallmark of the early medieval period and began even earlier, in the last centuries of the first millennium B.C.E., and led to the founding of towns and many kinds of heightened social complexity in these centuries. This local and regional trade, driven by the creation of surpluses and the fact that different places within Africa produced different goods, is increasingly recognized as an important motor of economic activity and growth leading to social change. In short, within and between societies, in medieval Africa many goods changed hands through a wide variety of systems of exchange, in total doubtless much larger in economic scope and impact than the long-distance trade that has so often gained greater attention.

In the medieval centuries Africa had a multifaceted economy that included foraging, hunting, farming, herding, metal production and metalworking, crafts, and domestic work. Most Africans partook in a number of these activities as they worked to support themselves and their dependents. Medieval Africans also engaged in local, regional, long-distance, and intercontinental systems of exchange through which they transferred surplus goods to other peoples in return for desired items. These exchanges not only linked Africans of different communities, but also connected Africans and peoples of Europe, the Middle East, and Asia through far-reaching intercontinental trading networks of great importance to global medieval economies. See also Documents 1 and 2.
The study and understanding of medieval African artworks is complicated by a number of challenging factors. First, much of the corpus of medieval African art is unavailable today because virtually all objects made from wood, textiles, plant fibers, gourds, and animal skins, media that were widely used in the production of medieval African arts yet are highly susceptible to decomposition, have not survived to the present. Written descriptions of medieval poetry, and performing and musical arts, are similarly rarely available. What have survived are examples of medieval architecture, beads, rock art, pottery, paintings, and sculpture from various parts of the continent. Although the body of surviving artwork is relatively small compared to what was originally produced, these artifacts attest to the artistry and technical skills of medieval African artists.

Another challenge to the understanding of medieval African art derives from the fact that works of art are best understood and appreciated when the viewer is familiar with their cultural and historical contexts, because art records and reflects a society’s values, mores and points of tension, as well as its aesthetics. But the deep understanding of medieval African art forms that would come from context is limited by the very circumscribed knowledge that exists of many of the cultures that produced them: For many of the surviving examples of medieval African art, these contexts are understood either incompletely or not at all. Further archaeological work on the African continent will help to expand knowledge of the contexts in which medieval African artworks were produced, and indeed today archaeologists and art historians routinely draw upon one another’s work to enrich the analysis and understanding of this art.

An additional challenge comes from the fact that Western art historians have accepted African art as a legitimate field of artistic achievement and hence inquiry only since the 1950s, and consequently African arts (Table 8) of
all time periods have only been studied by them for half a century. This lack of recognition of Africa artistry outside of the continent resulted in large part from the fact that Africans and their arts have been all too routinely stigmatized as primitive or tribal, traditional or unchanging, closed to innovation and hence uninfluenced by other traditions—racist misconceptions that have been successfully challenged only in the last 50 years.

Table 8. Highlights of Medieval African Art and Architecture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place of Artwork</th>
<th>Approximate Dates of Production</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rock art, paintings and engravings</td>
<td>Continent-wide c. 27,000 B.C.—present</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aksum stelae and palaces</td>
<td>Aksum c. 4th–7th centuries</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethiopian and Nubian Ecclesiastical art</td>
<td>Ethiopian Highlands and Nubia c. 5th century on</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lydenburg heads</td>
<td>Southern Africa c. 6th–7th centuries</td>
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<tr>
<td>Igbo-Ukwu cast metal sculptures</td>
<td>Igbo-Ukwu, Igboland 9th–10th centuries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terra-cotta sculptures</td>
<td>Inland Niger Delta c. 900–1400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yoruba cast metal and terra-cotta sculptures</td>
<td>Ife c. 1000–1500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benin bronzes</td>
<td>Benin c. 1000–19th century</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rock-hewn churches</td>
<td>Lalibela, Ethiopian Highlands 12th–13th centuries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coral-stone houses</td>
<td>Swahili Coast c. 1200–1500</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stone wall enclosures</td>
<td>Great Zimbabwe 13th–14th centuries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sankoré Mosque</td>
<td>Timbuktu 14th century</td>
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<tr>
<td>Husuni Kubwa (palace)</td>
<td>Kilwa, Swahili Coast 14th century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Mosque</td>
<td>Kilwa, Swahili Coast 14th–15th centuries</td>
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Finally, Western criteria for judging artistic achievement, which have tended to privilege objects understood to be created for aesthetic enjoyment rather than practical use and, until the advent of photography, naturalism—the most realistic or true-to-life portrayal—has led to the further devaluing of African arts that most commonly though not uniformly tend to the abstract or stylized rather than strictly representational, and often serve purposes other than solely ornamental—though this did not mean that their aesthetic qualities were not highly valued in the societies that produced them.

In sum, knowledge of medieval African art is bounded by the limited artifacts that survive, by dominant Western definitions of art that have too often excluded, devalued, or stigmatized African art forms, and by limited knowledge of the cultures that produced it and thus incomplete understandings of the meaning and aesthetic appeal of African arts to the artists, patrons, and consumers who produced, underwrote, utilized, and appreciated them in the medieval era. These challenges notwithstanding, in the last 50 years scholars of the African arts have greatly deepened their knowledge of medieval African rock art, jewelry, sculpture, architecture, painting, and pottery.
Africa is recognized for an extraordinarily rich tradition of sculpture. Two stunning and well-known collections of medieval African sculpture come from what is today Nigeria in West Africa. The earlier of the two are the Igbo-Ukwu sculptures, some of which were first unearthed in the late 1930s by a farmer named Isaiah Anozie as he dug a cistern behind his home in the village of Igbo-Ukwu, located near the eastern bank of the lower Niger River (see Igbo). Formal excavations at this and two neighboring sites were carried out by the archaeologist Thurstan Shaw between 1959 and 1964. Igbo-Ukwu yielded magnificent bronze sculptures radiocarbon dated to the ninth and tenth centuries C.E. and made by the lost-wax casting technique. The cast sculptures recovered at Igbo-Ukwu include basins, pots, bowls, and other vessels, two cast in the unusual shape of forest snails, with an extraordinarily rich profusion of delicately worked details covering the surface of the objects. Abstract designs include spirals, lines, dots, filigree, and concentric circles, though equally finely worked representations of animals and insects include frogs, flies, locusts, beetles, snakes, and leopards. The delicacy and extraordinary detail of these objects attest to the exquisite artistry and technical skills of the individuals who achieved these results through the lost wax process. Ceramic vessels of great artisanship that likewise display extensive and detailed surface decoration, different in style from that of the cast vessels, were also excavated from these sites, as well as objects made from hammered copper and iron.

Many of the artworks from Igbo-Ukwu were recovered from one burial chamber, obviously that of a very powerful and wealthy man, who appears to have been interred sitting erect with his feet on an elephant tusk, a common symbol of authority in West Africa. Other regalia associated with rulers found at this burial site include statues of leopards and elephants, a fly whisk, staffs, bells, and a fan holder. This site also contained over one-hundred thousand glass beads, many imported from outside the continent, whose immense profusion attested to the prosperity of this individual, hammered copper ornaments, and a hollow, cast bronze stand, striking for the delicacy with which it portrays on its openwork panels two human figures surrounded by twining vines and snakes. These cast bronze objects recovered at Igbo-Ukwu demonstrate the extraordinary artistry achieved by ninth- and tenth-century West Africans.

The second great Nigerian example of cast metal medieval sculpture comes from the city of Ife, also known as Ile-Ife, historically the spiritual and political center of the Yoruba. These sculptures initially came to the attention of the Western world in 1910 through the actions of Leo Frobenius, a German ethnologist who, in keeping with the racism of his time, thought these beautiful and striking naturalistic sculptures of life-size human heads could not have been produced by Africans. He attributed them, variously and on the basis of no evidence, to the classical Greco-Roman tradition and even the lost city of Atlantis, whereas others posited an Egyptian or South Asian provenance; these invented attributions have since been thoroughly discredited. Interest in this artistic tradition heightened with the accidental unearthing of more artifacts, first in 1938 in the course of excavating house foundations at the Wunmonije Compound that abutted the medieval palace of the oni, or king, of Ife, and then in 1957 through the actions of workers building near an important gate in the medieval city wall. The cast sculptures thus unearthed date to 1000 to 1400,
the Pavement Period of Ife history, so called because of the practice of paving gateways, shrines, and some courtyards and verandahs of the royal palace and private houses with mosaics constructed from potsherds and white stones. The Ife sculptures dating to the Pavement Period were produced through the lost-wax casting technique also practiced at Igbo-Ukwu. They were made primarily of brass but occasionally of pure and almost-pure copper. Archaeological digs conducted by Frank Willet, Ekpo Eyo, and Peter Garlake in the 1950s through the 1970s followed in an attempt to provide an archaeologically reconstructed context for these accidentally uncovered artworks.

In contrast to the vessels of cast metal discovered at Igbo-Ukwu, the focus of the Ife sculptures is the human face and form. Fewer than thirty cast metal pieces have been recovered, a majority of which depict life-size heads that in their calm beauty and composure most likely depict the ideal oni or king, rather than actual individual rulers. These brasses are studded with lines of holes located along the hairline and jaw as well as around the mouth. It is conjectured that crowns and veils made from strings of beads were attached to the sculpted heads via these holes, because Yoruba rulers avoid showing their faces and mouths publicly. They might also have served as attachments for recreations of facial hair. Some of these heads are covered with vertical striations, which don’t resemble actual Yoruba scarification designs and according to Garlake might be either aesthetic devices or representations of the shadows, which would have resulted from a veil’s strands of beads (Early Art and Architecture, 125, 136). The remaining cast metal sculptures include smaller-than-life-size heads, the complete figure of a standing oni, the joined figures of two royals, staff and mace heads, a vessel, and one final and most unusual metal sculpture from Ife: a copper mask that was not unearthed but has been kept continuously at the oni’s palace. The great difficulty of casting copper, combined with the perfect execution of this graceful and beautiful mask, speaks to the immense technical skills of Ife artists.

In contradistinction to a common African sculptural preference for stylized depictions of people, the Ife cast metal full-size heads stand out for a significant degree of facial naturalism—in fact it was in part this characteristic that led Frobenius to think they could not have been West African—combined however with the nonrepresentational elements of small, almond-shaped eyes, simplified ears, and stylized lips—what Frank Willett labels the “idealized naturalism” characteristic of this Ife art (African Art, 72). The Ife heads are noted for capturing a serene beauty that not only articulates the kingly ideal, but also has drawn many who know nothing of their cultural context to these artworks for their deep and abiding innate appeal.

In addition to the brasses, Ife artists produced large numbers of terra-cotta pieces. These include naturalistic full-size heads, exquisitely executed, which are similar to the brass heads in style. Other Ife terra-cotta faces, however, are deeply stylized and bear strictly limited resemblance to actual human form. Terra-cotta renderings of full-size figures have also been excavated. The surviving full-size sculptures made of brass and terra-cotta follow the typical African sculptural convention of a disproportionately large head. Terra-cotta animals and pots have also been found.

Current interpretations of the uses or symbolic meanings of the full-size cast metal Ife heads focus upon their striking uniformity of style, which makes it probable that they were produced quite rapidly by a small group of artists.
working cooperatively. Suzanne Preston Blier has proposed that the sixteen heads related to coronation ceremonies legitimizing the kingship of the sixteen Yoruba rulers most closely connected to Ife. Peter Garlake has focused upon the great personal character, inner power, and divine authority of Yoruba monarchs, ideals that are reflected literally and figuratively by the form and beauty of these heads. Rowland Abiodun connects these sculptures to the complex and multifaceted Yoruba concept of *ase*, which in part can be understood as the vital force or energy of a living thing. In regards to political leadership, *ase*, which also connotes power, authority and control, is conferred upon a new ruler verbally at his or her installation. In the visual arts, he adds, heads are the most important symbols of *ase*, because it resides in this part of a person, and representations of heads can, if well executed, transmit *ase* as potently as words. Thus sculpted heads are well-chosen symbolic as well as literal representations of Yoruba political authority and beliefs.

Another very rich example of medieval African sculpture exists in the thousands of terra-cotta forms, which have been found in the Middle Niger region of West Africa. The Middle Niger stretches across the Inland Niger Delta, a large flood plain of the Niger River with very fertile soil and rich agricultural harvests that has created an environment highly conducive to human settlement. It contains sites of early urbanization, trade, and cultural achievement in West Africa stretching back even before the medieval period. The majority of Middle Niger sculptures have been removed through looting and subsequent sale in international art markets rather than controlled excavations, making their contexts lost forever. But happily, and in contrast to the Ife finds, some Middle Niger sculptures have been unearthed in the course of carefully structured archaeological digs, most notably excavations conducted by Roderick and Susan McIntosh over some 30 years at the Middle Niger site named Jenné-jeno. The Middle Niger figurines whose provenance is clear have radiocarbon datings of 900 to 1400. The figures, typically 4 to 10 inches in height, most commonly depict individuals who are kneeling or sitting, with arms placed either on knees or raised and crossed with hands on shoulders. Individuals on horseback, people exhibiting disfigurement and disease, and animals are also well-represented subjects. Like numerous African sculptural traditions, many of the figurines exhibit a stylized rather than strictly representational depiction, in this case with ovoid and upturned heads characterized by prominent, bulging eyes, and a jutting jaw. Substantial detail is often paid to body decoration in the forms of jewelry and scarification. In regards to the context in which these artworks were created, based on the urbanization and social differentiation that intensified at Jenné-jeno from around 500, the McIntoshes hypothesized that these developments led to increasingly complex categories of social identity and concomitant desires to emphasize group solidarity, and that each group’s identity may have been maintained in part through art forms such as these extraordinarily numerous terra-cotta sculptures.

Many examples of surviving medieval sculpture are also found in southern Africa. Among these are the Lydenburg heads, hollow terra-cotta sculptures decorated with hatching and incisions which may represent scarification, dating to the sixth or seventh century C.E. and found in the early 1960s in what is today South Africa. The Lydenburg heads fit into a broader southern African tradition of Early Iron Age terra-cotta sculpture, frequently small human or animal figurines, though these ceramic works were more often solid rather
than hollow like the heads. Another important sculptural find from southern Africa is a small statue of a rhinoceros constructed from gold sheeting, originally affixed to a wooden core. This sculpture was found at a burial site at Mapungubwe, a hilltop polity dating from the eleventh century C.E. located on the Zimbabwe Plateau. Its artists produced a variety of objects from gold sheeting fastened to wood and also worked gold into wire, tacks, and jewelry such as beads and bangles. A final southern African example are the well-known if little understood soft greenish soapstone carvings of birds perched atop pillars found at Great Zimbabwe.

Although the sculptures discussed above are among the best-known examples from medieval Africa, other sculptures from throughout the medieval period and produced in a range of media including rock, ivory, terra-cotta, and metal have been found widely across sub-Saharan Africa. Doubtless new finds will continue to be made that will enable future scholars of African art to more fully comprehend medieval African sculpture.

Generalizations about African arts are always problematic given the immense cultural and artistic variation found on this large continent, so exceptions to all of the following statements can certainly be found. Nonetheless, some stylistic conventions and aesthetic preferences do emerge from a study of sub-Saharan African sculpture. For example, the most common subject is a single person. Although depictions of individuals dominate, a person on horseback, a mother (or far more rarely father) and child pair, and twins are not unusual sculptural subjects. Individuals with physical anomalies or diseases such as hydrocephaly, elephantiasis, and boils form another common motif, reflecting environmental challenges Africans have had to face. Animals are frequently depicted too. It is certain that masks formed another significant sculptural genre in medieval Africa, given the clearly deeply rooted tradition of masking that is richly documented in the accounts of European visitors to Africa’s coastlines from the early modern period and descriptions of masked dancers made by some medieval visitors. But because masks would typically have been carved from wood to lighten them and thus make them more easily worn, medievally produced masks have not survived to the present with rare exceptions such as the copper face mask from Ife and, some conjecture, the hollow Lydenburg heads, which might have served as masks though their weight makes this questionable.

Other aesthetic and stylistic conventions are common in medieval African sculpture. For example, sculptures typically present people in the prime of young adulthood, even if the actual age of the individual being depicted was far older or younger. There is also a preference for facial expressions of serenity and calm. A body to head ratio of 3–4:1 dominates African sculptural traditions, in contrast to the usual adult human body to head ratio of approximately 5:1, which the Western sculptural tradition often extends in the opposite direction from African sculpture to an artificially elongated ratio of 6–8:1. These differing Western and African preferences, combined with the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western tendency to dismiss Africans and their artistic traditions as primitive, led early Western collectors and students of African art to misidentify the preferred African ratio as an indication of imprecision, childishness, or incorrectness in this art form, rather than as the deliberately chosen stylistic convention it actually represents. Finally, African sculpture shows a strong though certainly not uniform preference for abstraction over realism.
Thus sculptures most commonly depict individuals according to the stylizations of a given cultural/artistic tradition (though with variation from artist to artist within a given genre reflecting personal aesthetic and style) in preference to creating as realistic as possible a replication of an individual’s actual features or a given animal’s precise form.

**Architecture**

As with other African art forms, relatively little of medieval architecture remains today due to the perishability of common building materials such as wood, mud, clay, and thatch. The architectural traditions that have survived are mainly either far more durable stone constructions, or mosques and churches that have been maintained carefully over the centuries because of their religious significance. Examples of the latter will be covered in the next section. Two other notable architectural traditions from medieval Africa are found in a pair of places whose economies were intertwined in their joint contributions to the intercontinental Indian Ocean trading network, yet whose cultures, including architectural styles, influenced each other very little: Zimbabwe and the Swahili coast.

Great Zimbabwe, located on the Zimbabwe Plateau in the East African interior, is noted for its magnificent and awe-inspiring massive stonewall enclosures. Constructed from the thirteenth through fourteenth centuries A.D., these majestic walls, still deeply impressive today, were built of blocks of the local granite found in the surrounding hills. The earliest walls at Great Zimbabwe were constructed from slabs, which had split away from the bedrock naturally as a result of daily changes in temperature, whereas thereafter workers built fires on the granite slopes and then doused them with water to cause additional slabs to break free. Each wall, which is actually formed of two parallel walls with granite slab fill in between them, is composed of blocks fitted together without mortar with great care in a series of courses, which retain their stability to the present day. As much as 20 feet thick at their base, the walls taper as they rise to heights of over 30 feet. Abutting walls simply adjoin one another rather than being bonded together. Inside the large enclosures formed by these walls, which have perimeters reaching 800 feet, were raised platforms, a striking conical stone tower in shape resembling a granary, the carved soapstone birds mentioned above, and narrow passageways with high walls through which people had to walk single file, giving a sense of solitude, privacy, and grandeur to the sites. Increased sophistication of style and mastery of technique developed over the approximately two centuries of construction, with a change from irregular to regular courses, square to round and buttressed doorways, and greater use of decorative motifs such as chevrons, herringbone patterns and strips worked into the upper levels of later walls as the masonry skills of the workers became increasingly refined.

Great Zimbabwe today incorporates three main ruins, all closely linked in their location on a hilltop and its valley below: the Hill Complex, the Great Enclosure, and the Valley Complex. In regards to purpose, the walls of Great Zimbabwe could not have served a defensive function given their numerous open entryways and lack of defensive fortifications. The Great Enclosure appears to have surrounded the royal palace of the rulers of Great Zimbabwe,
and walls also encompassed sites of religious importance. Additionally and probably most important, all of the walls served a prestige function by virtue of their imposing size and the ability of the state to command labor they so clearly represented. In addition to Great Zimbabwe, stonewall enclosures are found at numerous sites on the Zimbabwe Plateau and even beyond it, indicating that this architectural tradition expanded far beyond Great Zimbabwe itself. As the most powerful of the Zimbabwe plateau polities, though, it is unsurprising that Zimbabwe’s walls reached a more colossal size and impressive style than those of its neighbors in East Africa.

Much as Frobenius asserted a Western provenance for the Ife brasses, the first Europeans to see the mighty walls of Great Zimbabwe assumed they must have been constructed by non-Africans, variously and spuriously identified on the basis of no evidence whatsoever as Phoenician or Arab, even including King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Also sadly similar is the fact that early excavations in Great Zimbabwe had a focal point not of archaeological exploration and preservation, but in the case of Great Zimbabwe looting for gold. Thus far less is known of Great Zimbabwe than would be the case if controlled digs had been conducted before the site was so deeply disturbed. Nonetheless, archaeologists working subsequently at Great Zimbabwe have found a clear African provenance for these walls with confirmed African habitation of the site dating back to the early medieval years.

Contemporaneous with Great Zimbabwe is the rise of a highly distinctive form of architecture found on East Africa’s Swahili coast. Here, between 1200 and 1500, wealthy East African merchants who made their fortunes as intermediaries buying and selling goods in the trans-continental Indian Ocean trading network (see “Economy” section) developed a unique style of opulent home construction. Swahili merchants built their lavish homes from coral. When quarried from the reefs located just off the East African shoreline and kept underwater, this building material is soft and easily shaped into decorative elements of the houses, like door jambs, which upon removal from the water and exposure to air harden into a very durable construction material. Already hardened coral gathered on shore was typically shaped into basic building blocks with which to form the four outer walls of these rectangular homes. The coral blocks were joined together with mortar and plastered dazzling white with lime, whereas short rafters made from mangrove poles were used as ceiling and roof supports. Due to their sturdy walls and high ceilings, the interior rooms of these houses tended to remain pleasantly cool no matter the temperature outside. Constructed on a north-south axis around a central courtyard, the houses also possessed systems of internal sanitation in the form of dry pit toilets, stored water in cisterns, and the tallest reached three stories in height. As testament to the wealth and financial stability of the merchants who owned them, elaborately carved niches and recesses were built into the interior walls of these homes for the display of valuables such as imported Chinese porcelain wares or a copy of the Qur’an, and many interior surfaces were not only plastered white but richly carved and decorated.

Swahili stone house architecture put a very high premium upon privacy in domestic space, due in part to the upper-class practice of excluding women from the gaze of outsiders in keeping with the tenets of their Islamic faith, and in part to the implied purity and thus family respectability associated with privacy. Therefore, movement farther and farther into the interior of a Swahili
home also represented movement into places of greater and greater seclusion and purity. Immediately inside the intricately carved wooden doors leading from the street into the northern side of a Swahili home was located first a porch and then the interior courtyard, in which Swahili merchants welcomed visitors and conducted business with Middle Eastern and South Asian trading partners. Only rarely would anyone other than a family member or very close friend be allowed beyond the porch and courtyard into the inner reaches of the home. Indeed, the inner doorway that led from the courtyard to the interior rooms on the southern side of the house was purposely unaligned with the house’s exterior door so that a casual visitor could never see accidentally into the home’s true interior. Behind the courtyard, at the southern end of the house, lay one or more inner galleries, each raised a step above the one preceding it, where much of the daily life of a family such as eating, socializing, and sleeping took place. Long and narrow, the shape of the inner galleries was limited by the unavoidably short length of the mangrove pole rafters to a typical width of approximately 9 feet, and a length, which stretched as long as the east-west extent spanned by the house’s side walls. Beyond these inner galleries, continuing the spectrum of most public to most private space, lay the private bedroom of the wife and husband of the house. Behind this bedroom, and hence most secluded, was a bathroom used by the inhabitants of this room, and the chamber in which took place the most intimate activities of women such as childbirth and preparation of bodies for burial. In their comfort, size, beauty and symbolic meanings, these homes reflected the riches, sophistication, material comfort, and beliefs of their owners.

Other Art Forms and Global Influences

In Africa, rock art is a continent-wide phenomenon though the most numerous finds are concentrated in southern Africa and what is today the Sahara Desert. Rock art had its origins long before the medieval period. Although difficult to fix in time, the earliest dated rock art is believed to have been produced in what is today Namibia some 27,000 years ago. Saharan rock art appears to be a much more recent phenomenon dating back some 8,000 to 10,000 years. In any event, it is an art form that has had a continuous history, as medieval examples indicating the introduction of camel or cattle, and modern subjects depicting nineteenth-century colonial officials and soldiers and twentieth-century airplanes, attest. Common subjects of medieval rock art include wild and domesticated animals; depictions of people engaged in hunting, farming, pastoralism, warfare, and other activities; handprints; and abstract designs incorporating ovals, dots, spirals, concentric lines, and more. Techniques of rock art include painting and engraving. Common locations for paintings are cave walls and ceilings and rock overhangs, which would have protected artists and their creations from the elements, whereas the more enduring engravings or petroglyphs are more often found in exposed locations. Styles of rock art range from naturalistic to idealized to abstract.

Another form of art that existed in medieval Africa, modification of the surface of the human body, yet again utilized a perishable medium so that today it can be observed only indirectly, through depictions of scarification, raised keloid scarring, cicatrices, and the like in surviving medieval statuary from traditions as
diverse as the Middle Niger terra-cottas, Igbo-Ukwu and Ife sculptures, and the Lydenburg heads. Body art in the form of elaborate styles of hair arrangement are also documented, as is body ornamentation using beads. Decorated gourds are represented in surviving sculptures too but like most domestic art forms have not survived first-hand. Medieval textiles, which have been preserved to the present only in extraordinarily rare instances, have been cursorily described for some parts of medieval Africa such as Ghana and Mali through the writings of visitors to the continent, but for the most part information about what was undoubtedly a very important medieval medium for artistic expression is absent.

Significant outside influences on medieval African art include the arrival of Christianity in the first century and Islam in the seventh. For example, a stunning example of ecclesiastical architecture is found in the highly unusual rock-cut churches of medieval Ethiopian Christianity. Built in extremely arduous acts of deep piety in the mountainous Ethiopian Highlands beginning in the twelfth or thirteenth centuries under the royal patronage of kings of Zagwe, these eleven churches were actually carved from living rock, working from the surface downward, according to tradition in an attempt to create a “New Jerusalem” as a response to the Islamic warrior Saladin’s conquest of Jerusalem in 1187. They incorporate domes, pillars, archways, basilicas, naves, sacristies, windows, aisles, galleries, and many finely worked decorative details, among other things, and clearly draw on extraordinary skills of architectural planning and masonry since the finished structure had to be planned in complete detail before any carving of the rock began, and the method did not allow for significant error in the subtraction of the bedrock. As new finds of churches and tombs continue to be made, it appears that these eleven churches at Lalibela actually draw upon an older, pre-Christian regional tradition of rock-cut edifices such as the stelae of Aksum. In addition to these rock-cut churches, Ethiopia and Christian Nubia to its northwest developed traditions of ecclesiastical painting such as wall murals, frescoes, and illuminated manuscripts that seem to draw upon Byzantine conventions such as frontal poses, very large eyes, and little attempt to create the appearance of depth, as well as local traditions such as the use of regionally dominant color palettes and the replacement in Nativity scenes of the wise men’s usual camels with horses by the artists of equine-loving Nubia. Among the subjects of these paintings are portraits of Nubian bishops and well-known Biblical scenes.

A prominent Islamic influence upon the arts of medieval Africa is found in mosque architecture. Modifications in keeping with local aesthetics, building materials, environmentally imposed needs, and patterns of religious observance are characteristic of mosques across the continent, though the precise forms these regional variations take differ from place to place. For example, with the notable exception of the expansive Great Mosque of Kilwa, wealthiest and most prominent of the Swahili cities, mosques along the Swahili coast were typically small places of worship serving very localized neighborhoods, their size in part dictated by the tightly knit ward-based identity of Swahili towns. In savannah regions of West Africa, medieval mosques constructed of the dominant local building material, mud brick, were and are characterized by the bristling appearance of large wooden beams that jut out horizontally up and down their exterior walls to create a permanent scaffolding, an adaptation that allows for easy repair of the walls that frequently incur damage during the rainy season. Calligraphy is another important Muslim contribution,
valued for its use in creating copies of the Qur’an and because of the widespread tradition of decorating artworks produced in the Islamic world with writing such as verses from the Qur’an and other religious texts, or benedictions.

Medieval African art stands out for the exquisite technical virtuosity displayed by its creators in media as varied as clay, ivory, wood, rock, and metal sculpture; jewelry and beadwork; rock paintings and engravings; domestic arts; body decoration; textiles; regalia; pottery; painting; and architecture. The scope of artistry and aesthetics demonstrated in these art forms, which range from naturalistic to stylized to abstract, also stands out—indeed, it was the stylization and abstraction of many African arts that underlay the early-twentieth-century modernist movement of Picasso and other Western artists who were inspired in new nonrepresentational directions by their exposure to African artworks. Although varied regional styles and aesthetic preferences certainly existed in medieval Africa, as they do today, the African art of that time also reveals a history of adaptability and innovation, for example the incorporation of new art forms in response to the introduction of Christianity and Islam. Other global influences on the arts came from medieval trans-continental trade, which led to African importation of artifacts including Chinese porcelain and South Asian and Italian beads. Although in this still-new field an understanding of the meanings attached to medieval African art forms by those who produced and consumed them is anything but complete, it is clear that African art works reflected not only local aesthetics, and the individualized vision of a given artist, but also the beliefs, concerns, social structures, and cosmologies of their communities.

Further Reading

Web Sites

5. SOCIETY

This essay covers two critically important aspects of medieval African societies. First, a section on social organization addresses kinship, descent, and marriage.
Although it is often assumed that ethnicity must have played a critical role in the social framework of medieval Africa, in reality ethnicity—though not unimportant—was a very fluid concept, for instance affected by place/environmental zone of residence, occupation, or intermarriage, and consequently it was often overshadowed by very localized kinship identities. Thus this essay focuses on kinship rather than ethnicity. Significant social stratification existed in medieval Africa too, so this first section also explores the varied sources of social hierarchies. Second, a section addressing political structures looks at the broad division of medieval African societies into, first, places with centralized political authority, some of which were culturally homogenous states and others of which were heterogeneous empires that included conquered peoples; and, second, those places, typically referred to as either stateless or acephalous societies, in which political power was diffused throughout a broad range of community members. This second section also addresses legitimations of political authority. Effects of gender are noted throughout the essay. The social complexity attested to by this essay clearly reflects the increase in surplus wealth that characterized medieval Africa and existed as a result of the greater productivity of fixed agriculture, herding, ironworking, and the resulting local, regional, long-distance, and sometimes intercontinental trade in surplus goods also characteristic of the medieval centuries.

**Social Organization**

Kinship played the most fundamental role in social identification and was the basic building block of most medieval African societies. Kinship typically defined who was and was not family, where one lived, with whom one lived, and who was a legitimate marriage partner. Kinship also determined access to some key forms of political authority, for example via membership in royal clans, and at times imposed a broad range of rights and obligations upon family members, such as with whom or for whom one worked. Although kinship provided a deep sense of belonging, place, and security for individuals, it also introduced strains and tensions between family members who had to live, share resources, and in certain circumstances work together in occasionally stiflingly close interaction, and in ways which typically privileged some family members over others, notably men over women and elders over those junior in age. In short, kinship shaped, mediated, and controlled most key aspects of a person’s day-to-day life for good and ill.

In regards to how kinship was structured, most African societies were divided into a number of large descent groups, or clans, all of those members were considered to belong to one extended family by virtue of shared descent from a common ancestor. Because in a large society a single clan might encompass literally tens or hundreds of thousands of individuals, this demarcation was often unwieldy in practice. Therefore clans were typically broken down into a number of distinct sub-units that typically were limited to all of the descendents of a common ancestor to a fourth, fifth, or sixth generation, known in English translation as lineages and sublineages. Generally it was in these smaller, more meaningful subdivisions of a clan that kinship matters played out for any given individual.

Numerous methods of tracing descent—of determining who was considered a bona fide member of a particular descent group, be it clan, lineage, or sublineage—existed in medieval Africa. Most common on the African continent
then (as now) was unilineal descent, in which family membership and identity were derived either from one’s father or mother but never from both parents. Patrilineal descent traced family membership through the paternal line and created patriclans and patrilinages, whereas matrilineal descent traced family membership through the maternal line resulting in matriclans and matrilinages. In sum, in patrilineal societies children belonged to their fathers’ families, whereas in matrilineal societies children belonged to their mothers’. Over the course of the medieval centuries a number of societies moved from matrilineal to patrilineal descent, making matrilineality a distinctly minority practice as it remains today. An even smaller minority of medieval African societies practiced bilateral descent—also known as dual, double, or cognatic descent—wherein a child possessed membership in the families of both parents. Examples of well-known medieval societies practicing the more common unilineal descent include the matrilineal Soninke rulers of Ghana and the patrilineal Malinke rulers of Mali.

Although membership in a particular descent group created an individual’s most important and fundamental social place, marriage, a near-universal expectation for adults in medieval African societies, was also a key social institution. The vast majority of African societies practiced exogamy, the requirement that an individual marry someone from outside of his or her clan or lineage, which broadened the network of social connections for both families. This was critically important in African societies because wealth in people was most valuable: The continent’s low population density meant that people and their labor power, not other productive resources like land, set the limits of productivity. Because marriage was an affair affecting more than individuals, typically both families were actively involved in choosing a spouse, approving a potential spouse, and formalizing the union. Exceptions to the general rule of exogamy were found primarily in certain occupational castes. For example, Mande smiths and griots formed closed castes; only individuals born into smithing or griot families, which practiced endogamy or marriage within the extended caste group, could take up these occupations.

For the majority of Africans practicing exogamous marriage, for women from patrilineal societies, which typically practiced virilocal residence, marriage meant movement away from the security of family to the status of a stranger (outsider) in her husband’s village, often with relatively low status until she gave birth to a son. In matrilineal societies, however, married wives and husbands commonly resided separately, each remaining in his or her own lineage home, in the practice known as duolocal residence. In matrilineal societies wives and husbands also typically remained financially independent of each other and kept their resources separate rather than melding them in one conjugal pot, and though this was true also of some patrilineal societies such as the Yoruba, in others it was not. Women also bore greater responsibility for raising children in matrilineal societies—often with the assistance yet also under the ultimate authority of male members of their matrilineage—than did women in patrilineal societies where the children belonged to their father’s family.

Many medieval African societies practiced polygyny, allowing men to marry more than one woman simultaneously. Only wealthy or otherwise successful men were likely to attract second, third, and subsequent wives, though the practice was broadly appealing to men insofar as the conjugal unit of wife, husband, and children most commonly formed the productive unit, with the result that
the more wives, the more a man benefited from their labor power. Institutionalized practices to minimize the inherent potential for conflict among cowives (women married simultaneously to the same man) could include regular rotations for sex and cooking; sharing the burden of domestic work such as child care and the production of food for the family; and the imperative—often, however, honored in the breech—that cowives be treated equally in all respects. In patrilineal societies, family compounds generally contained a separate house for each wife as well as one for the husband, giving privacy, autonomy, and an independent home to each woman and her children, while in matrilineal societies the practice of duolocal residence achieved the same result. Nonetheless, clearly in a polygynous marriage the husband represented the scarce resource, and it is thus not surprising that the word for co-wife in more than one African language translated as “the jealous one.” Significant differentials in age of first marriage, with men marrying much later than women, to some extent ameliorated the scarcity of marriageable women polygyny created for some men, but contributed also to intergenerational tensions between older and younger men. The privileged access older men in a family typically had to family resources also gave them in edge in marriage, not least in the many southern African societies which required men’s families to pay bride wealth to women’s families as part of the process of marrying.

The near-universality of marriage was connected to the social imperative to bear children, in order both to continue the lineage and produce the descendants who would honor the family’s ancestral spirits. The death of a lineage, and thus of individuals who could keep alive the memory of those members of the family who had preceded them, was among the worst of all possible fates. Children also provided valuable assistance in work such as farming, cattle herding, and domestic labor and served as a form of social security for old age. The prevalence of tropical diseases such as malaria, yellow fever, and sleeping sickness, as well as dysenteries, parasites, and the plague, which were endemic to broad stretches of the continent and caused very high rates of infant and childhood mortality, made successful childbearing and rearing all the more important and valued.

In short, marriage was a centrally important social institution. It was most commonly through marriage that women in matrilineal societies and men in patrilineal societies continued their lineages (exceptions included when individuals such as immigrants and slaves were incorporated into a descent group even though their descent from the common founding ancestor was putative rather than literally true). Yet like kinship, marriage had the capacity to create a variety of profound tensions. For most individuals, the dominant exogamous form of marriage caused a strong pull between lineage and conjugal ties and obligations. Between men and women, the access to women’s productive and reproductive labor and capacities that marriage gave men could cause strains. Polygyny, which sanctioned nonmonogamy for men, often while requiring monogamy of women, created an additional source of stress. Polygyny also had the potential to create tensions between individual women who lived as cowives, whereas among men the greater access to marriageable women held by older men could create intergenerational conflict.

The profound social importance of kinship in medieval Africa, which existed side-by-side with the concomitant reality of people traveling frequently to conduct regional and long-distance trade, created the social category of strangers
(outsiders or nonkin): people far removed from the safety and security of their own families. One solution, explored with great elegance and detail by George Brooks, was the creation of a longstanding, many-centuries-old West African tradition of offering hospitality and security of person and property to strangers. The epic of Sundjata, an orally transmitted history recounting the thirteenth-century emergence of the mighty West African empire of Mali, gives evidence of this tradition of hospitality in its descriptions of the food and shelter freely offered by so many to the young prince Sundjata and his mother and sisters as they wandered in exile before his eventual triumphal return home. A similar tradition was described by the great medieval traveler Ibn Battuta for East Africa’s Indian Ocean coast; he wrote of the regularized hospitality afforded visiting merchants by their Swahili hosts. The frequent travels of African peoples also created conduits for the cross-cultural sharing and dissemination of ideas for which the medieval period is noted. For example traveling merchants played a key role in the spread of Islam, and the Mande-created Sande and Poro secret societies became important and influential across a broad swathe of West African societies as a result of traveling to trade.

Although kinship and marriage constituted the basic pillars of the social order, medieval African peoples also lived with a number of widely utilized social hierarchies derived from other loci for social identity. These differed in detail, importance, and even existence from place to place on the continent and over time; what follows is a very broad overview of some of the most common delineators of social authority, power, and prestige. To begin, medieval Africans typically practiced gerontocracy, or the privileging of older over younger members of a society. Deference to elders was expected, and elder members of a family generally wielded great authority over those junior to them in age. Changes in status from childhood, to marriageable, to parent, and to elder were often marked by explicit rites of passage, which could involve education and, particularly for the earlier transitions, some physical manifestation of the changed status through bodily modifications such as circumcision, scarring, or tattooing. Second, although the degree to which precolonial African societies were patriarchal is a matter of considerable dispute, and undoubtedly there were broad divergences from place to place and also within given societies, it is generally agreed that a hierarchy of sex often privileged men over women, giving males preferential access to social authority and economic resources. An interesting exception existed in hunting and gathering societies, which were and are recognized for a far greater egalitarianism regarding gender than that found in any other type of society. Achievement was a third important indicator of success, and those who acquired renown via trading, hunting, farming, fighting, wrestling, childbearing, religious authority, or wealth benefited in social standing as a result of their prowess. A reputation for insight, wisdom, and common sense, and the ability to speak well, also added to one’s standing. Finally, personal power could be derived through membership in one or more of the many corporate bodies such as age grades, women’s collectives, and secret societies available to many medieval Africans.

**Political Structures**

Both highly centralized forms of political governance and the much more diffuse rule characteristic of what are known as stateless or acephalous (literally,
without a head; in this context, without a governing head) societies existed in medieval Africa. Beginning with the former, among the best-known examples of centralized medieval African states are the great and fabulously wealthy West African Sudanic empires of Ghana and Mali. Recent scholarship indicates that these storied empires followed upon a far older, pre-medieval tradition of urbanism and interregional commerce in Sudanic West Africa attested to by archaeological sites such as the Inland Niger Delta community of Jenné-jeno, which emerged around 200 B.C.E. Political developments here, as elsewhere on the continent, depended in part upon the creation of agricultural surpluses, which were relatively easily achieved in the fertile grasslands of the West African Sudan and reached their apogee in the extremely rich soils of the Inland Niger Delta. The refinement of iron technologies and agricultural innovations such as the ennoblement of crops assisted in the creation of larger harvests too. This generation of surplus wealth made possible occupational specialization, including the emergence of a political class, as some individuals could concentrate on affairs other than subsistence activities.

Ghana, which had emerged by 400 and lasted into the early thirteenth century, encompassed portions of the West African sahel and northern sudanic belt that was located to the sahel’s south. In addition to income derived from agriculture, tribute demanded from conquered neighbors, and trade within West Africa, Ghana gained significant wealth from the trans-Saharan trade that famously exported the gold of sudanic West Africa, mined to Ghana’s south, across the Sahara to the North African coast and Europe beyond, in return for Saharan salt, copper, and dates and a variety of luxury goods imported from North Africa and Europe. Located astride the trade routes that brought gold from its south and salt from its north, Ghana prospered from the taxes and tariffs it imposed on the trade goods passing through its territory, fees merchants paid willingly in return for the safe passage of their immensely valuable caravans of goods through the great security of the empire’s territory. Ghana was ruled by a king, chosen from among the men of the royal family of the Soninke who founded the empire. The king’s power was legitimated in part through his fabulous personal wealth—the king was said to keep for his own pocket all nuggets of gold, leaving only gold dust to others—demonstrated on ceremonial occasions by public appearances bedecked in extravagant gold jewelry and rich gold-colored fabrics. Similar if less lavish forms of ornamentation were extended also to members of his court, who carried ceremonial staffs made of gold. Even the royal dogs and horses were collared and tethered with gold. Ghana flourished for many centuries until gradually declining over the eleventh and twelfth centuries as a result of an eastward shift in trans-Saharan trade routes, the onset of a dry period that negatively affected agriculture and iron smelting, and revolts by tribute-paying vassal states.

A second great medieval West African empire, Mali, emerged in the early thirteenth century out of the political instability that followed Ghana’s eventual collapse. Under the leadership of Sundjata, the still-hallowed first king of Mali whose achievements have been celebrated in a continuously transmitted oral tradition for nearly 800 years, the Malinke clans united to defeat their bitter enemy and conqueror the Soso, who served briefly as the dominant power in sudanic West Africa following Ghana’s decline. In subsequent
decades the Malinke rapidly extended their political hegemony over a massive swathe of West Africa, so that by the mid-thirteenth century the empire stretched from the Atlantic Ocean in the west, past the Niger Bend in the east, into the southern fringes of the Sahara Desert to the north, and the northern fringes of the forest zone to the south. Fortuitously situated as it was, Mali gained its great wealth from a combination of agriculture, which flourished in the Sudan in general and most notably in the Inland Niger Delta that lay within the lands of the empire; fishing in the waters of the Niger; tribute demanded from conquered peoples who had been forcibly incorporated into the empire; regional trade within West Africa, often from ecological zone to ecological zone as people exchanged the products of the forest, sudanic, sahelian, and desert zones for the goods of the other regions; and trans-Saharan trade.

Mali lasted for two centuries, until it crumbled in the mid-fifteenth century as a result of struggles over succession to the position of mansa, or ruler of the empire, as well as revolts by tribute-paying states. Other important medieval West Africa states with centralized governments flourished at Songhai, at Takrur in the Senegal River valley, at Kanem-Bornu, located in the lands surrounding Lake Chad, at Benin and in the Hausa and Yoruba city-states, all located in what is today Nigeria, and in the emerging Akan polities centered in what is today Ghana.

On the other side of the continent the medieval centuries witnessed striking political developments in East and southern Africa, parts of the continent in places interconnected through their common involvement in Indian Ocean trade. The wealthy and sophisticated Swahili culture had emerged by the end of the first millennium C.E. and reached its peak along East Africa’s Indian Ocean coastline during the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries (Table 9). It derived an important piece of the material base for its wealth from its merchants and their critical position as intermediaries in Indian Ocean trade, exporting goods including gold and ivory from the adjacent East African interior and importing goods from Indian Ocean trading partners including Arabs, Persians, South Asians, and Chinese. The Swahili were noted for the opulent coral-stone architecture of the elegant homes their well-to-do merchants constructed in the city-states scattered along the East African coastline from Mogadishu to Mozambique. The city-states remained politically independent of one another, each with its own ruler.

Table 9. Urbanization in Medieval Africa: Population Estimates, Select Cities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Population Estimate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jenné-jeno cluster settlement</td>
<td>Fifth to eleventh centuries</td>
<td>10,000–20,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kilwa</td>
<td>Fourteenth century</td>
<td>12,000–20,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mombasa</td>
<td>Fourteenth century</td>
<td>&gt; 15,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sijilmasa/the Tafilalt Oasis</td>
<td>Fourteenth century</td>
<td>30,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Zimbabwe</td>
<td>Fourteenth century</td>
<td>18,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Meanwhile, the southern African interior to the southwest of the Swahili coast saw the emergence of a series of states on the **Zimbabwe Plateau**. The first of these hilltop polities, Mapungubwe, dated to the eleventh to thirteenth centuries C.E. whereas the largest and best-known, Zimbabwe, flourished from the thirteenth into the fifteenth centuries. These states had economies focused upon cattle rearing and agriculture as well as controlling the flow of ivory and gold to the East African coastal port towns of, respectively, Chibuene and Sofala, from where the goods traveled north to **Kilwa** and other Swahili towns and thence into Indian Ocean commerce. Although knowledge of the politics of Mapungubwe, Zimbabwe, and the other related states found on the Zimbabwe Plateau is limited, they stand out for evidence of social stratification and their construction of massive, finely constructed stone walls and enclosures, many of which still exist today, which presuppose states with the power and resources to mobilize the extensive labor necessary for their construction.

In the northeastern portion of the continent, the medieval **Ethiopian Highlands** witnessed first the continuance of the premedieval state of **Aksum**, noted for its cities, monumental architecture, currency, and highly valued exports including frankincense and myrrh, and subsequently the midtwelfth century emergence of the Zagwe dynasty, which was supplanted in 1270 by the Solomonid dynasty. The shape of these Christian states was affected by the rise and fall of Red Sea trade, which commercially linked the Highlands with the Middle East and the Mediterranean world. This trade flourished in the early medieval centuries and at that time served as an important generator of wealth for Aksum, which partook in this trade through its Red Sea port city of Adulis. Red Sea trade dropped off precipitously in the seventh and eighth centuries as the Persian Gulf gained in ascendancy as a locus for maritime trade. Aksum weakened following the loss of this important source of wealth, and the history of the Ethiopian Highlands is poorly understood until the Zagwe and Solomonid Dynasties appear in the historical record. They thrived by creating feudal states with lords supported by the agricultural output of the peasantry, a form of governance that continued even after Red Sea trade rebounded in the ninth and following centuries, from which time it was dominated by Muslims. In Central Africa the important **Kongo** and **Luba** states emerged around 1400, just before the medieval era drew to a close.

North Africa lay under Roman control at the beginning of the medieval period but experienced near-total Islamicization and in places cultural Arabization following the seventh and eighth century waves of conquest by Muslims from the Arabian Peninsula. **Egypt** then experienced rule by a succession of Islamic **dynasties**, from the Umayyads through the Abbasids, Fatimids, Ayyubids, and Mamluks. West of Egypt the Maghrib, where Arab control and cultural hegemony were more tenuous, saw two successive medieval **Berber** polities, the Almoravid and Almohad empires, in the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries (see Almoravid and Almohad Movements). Medieval North Africa flourished economically due to its role in trans-Saharan trade and experienced significant urbanization, with a definite Islamic architectural influence, in its many trading cities, which formed the northern entrepôt of the numerous trade routes that criss-crossed the Sahara. Literacy in the Arabic language and script came also, and **Cairo** developed into a medieval center for Islamic scholarship and learning renowned throughout the Muslim world due to the reputation of al-Azhar University, established in the late tenth century.
by the Fatimids and regarded as one of the intellectual seats of the Islamic world. Up the Nile from Egypt into the African interior lay the long-lasting Christian states of Nubia, whose existence neatly overlapped with the medieval centuries.

A number of questions faced all societies with centralized and hierarchical governance, though they might be answered differently by different peoples. For example, all states needed to legitimize political authority. As in the case of Ghana discussed above, the personal wealth of the ruler could serve this function; wealth in cattle, which served as a form of currency in parts of southern Africa, often legitimized chiefly rule there. Another common route to acceptance lay in royal clans or lineages, whose members were widely viewed as the legitimate rulers from whose ranks all leaders should be chosen. In other places the institution of divine or sacred kingship, in which the king was believed to be the literal embodiment of the state, granted full and supernaturally sanctioned legitimacy to that leader—it also meant that regicide, or killing the king, could follow the development of any physical frailty on his part, because his ill health was understood to indicate a potentially fatal weakness in the body politic as well.

Beyond legitimization, states needed mechanisms for ensuring compliance with social rules. Consequently medieval centralized governments formalized systems of justice, often in the shape of a series of courts in which to resolve disputes and transgressions of the society’s rules, culminating in the king’s court as the ultimate locus of appeal. In regards to gender, in some of the medieval states, such as the Yoruba city-states, women as well as men could ascend to positions of high-ranking political authority. In others, however, ultimate formal political authority rested solely in male hands. Finally, it is important to note that medieval African states and empires often held rather loose control over their outlying provinces, with the strong hand of government felt most keenly and regularly only at the state or empire’s core.

Medieval Africa’s large states and empires, which possessed formal governmental structures, significant numbers of specialized political and administrative positions, and hierarchies of authority with ultimate political authority vested in a chief or king, have generally attracted the greatest attention in contemporary written histories of medieval Africa, as they did also in literate medieval visitors’ written accounts. Indeed, a much richer body of evidence exists for them, skewing the record further in their direction. What may well have been a majority of medieval Africans, however, lived instead in what are typically referred to as stateless or acephalous societies, communities that chose not to create a centralized government with a ruling class and one individual at the apex of political authority. Instead, stateless societies diffused political authority throughout members of the community, empowering many to be actively involved in corporate, consensus-oriented decision making. In these acephalous societies, when a decision was to be made affecting the well-being and direction of the community as a whole, such as going to war or communally addressing a plague or famine, community members gathered, shared their individual perspectives, and finally decided jointly upon a course of action to be followed by all. Since villages were typically conterminous with one or several lineages, this form of decision making was often lineage based.

Acephalous societies are often referred to as democratic, and in their inclusiveness of many in the political process they were so. As in all democracies,
however, the question arose of who was enfranchised. Some of the social hier-
archies mentioned previously in this essay came into play here. For example,
as hinted at in medieval sources and if postmedieval practices are a guide to
the past, many societies empowered only men to take part in these communal
discussions and deliberations. Others allowed women to voice their opinions,
either individually or through a spokeswoman who alone was to represent all
of the community’s women, but their expressed opinions often counted less in
the subsequent deliberations. And women might be invited to participate only
if the issue at hand was narrowly considered to be of relevance to the women
in the community. Even when one or more women could speak, often they
were not allowed to take part in the ultimate decision making, which followed
the voicing of opinions.

The hierarchy of age also figured prominently in acephalous societies, with
the voices of older men known as elders, often defined as greater than 30 to 40
years of age, typically bearing far greater influence than those of younger males.
Again, patterns varied. In some places all adult men could speak, but only el-
ders made the ultimate decisions, whereas in other communities it was the el-
ders alone who conducted political discussions and made final decisions. Some
societies, most notably in East Africa, created a series of age sets, with all males
born in a certain span of years belonging to one. In some of these societies,
when a given age set was composed of young men they fulfilled the most
physically demanding tasks, serving as warriors protecting the community or
clearing new plots of land for farming, whereas an age set containing elders
monopolized political authority and the control of social resources. And ev-
everywhere, the very old and frail reverted to a lesser status than the elders.

In a final hierarchy, in acephalous societies the voices of those most widely
respected as sage, thoughtful, careful thinkers, and skilled orators, received far
greater attention and thus weight in the decision-making process. In short, in-
sight trumped age, with the result that a particularly insightful younger per-
son’s words received greater consideration than those of an unrespected elder.

Although centralized forms of government are often perceived by those who
live within them as superior ways of organizing societies, in fact acephalous
societies functioned smoothly and with the benefit of broad community input,
albeit through very different mechanisms than existed in state societies. These
societies could reach levels of social complexity, reflected for example in
population, urbanization, and social differentiation, parallel to those of states
with centralized and hierarchical governance. Indeed, acephalous societies often
proved to be more durable and stable than governmentally centralized states
and empires; in short, they were not the simple entities they have so often been
assumed to be.

Medieval African societies gave people identity and place primarily through
their systems of kinship. It was through kin ties that individuals gained their
most fundamental social identities and access to social, economic, and political
resources. Additionally, marriage and parenting formed near-universal adult
experiences. Social hierarchies based on age, sex, achievement, religious au-
thority, wisdom, oratorical skills, political authority, wealth, and membership
in age sets, voluntary organizations, and secret societies further identified an
individual’s standing in the social order: It is clear that well-developed mecha-
nisms of social stratification were hallmarks of medieval African societies. Large
and complex political states and empires with centralized forms of government
existed across the continent, though many—probably a majority—of medieval Africans eschewed such hierarchical political organization in favor of the broadly diffused governance of acephalous societies which vested authority in a range of adult members of the society. The material bases for most medieval African societies included agriculture, herding, metalworking, and other productive activities and, as the examples explored above indicate, involvement in local, regional, long-distance, and sometimes intercontinental networks of trade, which linked African peoples and polities in reciprocal exchanges of surplus goods not only with one another, but with peoples of Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. In sum, significant social complexity reflected in sophisticated systems of kinship, marriage, and social stratification, social institutions such as age grades and voluntary associations, centralized states and corporate governance, urbanization with cities whose populations regularly reached into the tens of thousands and in the case of Cairo a half million or more, and trading networks of varied scope were all hallmarks of medieval African society.

Further Reading

6. SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

This essay is disproportionately weighted toward metallurgy because evidence of this particular medieval African technology has most often survived in the archaeological record, which is a primary source of information for the medieval centuries. Although references to an African “Iron Age” that was fully established by the early centuries of the Common Era sometimes imply that the development of iron technologies ushered in an entirely new stage in African history, in fact the use of nonmetal implements made out of stone and wood, and previous subsistence activities such as foraging and hunting, continued to play an important role in African societies long after the advent of iron. Thus, the ability to smelt iron is best understood as a development, which, though giving Africans access to innovative and highly productive new tools, nonetheless coexisted with the ongoing use of older, still valuable ways of manipulating the environment and supporting human life.

Although medieval Africans practiced systems of medicine and used mathematics, unfortunately information about these activities has rarely been preserved making it impossible to explore these sciences in any depth. More thoroughly documented scientific and technological achievements in medieval
Africa include the manufacturing of cloth, pottery, and salt; the development and large-scale production of currencies; innovations in farming and animal husbandry; new modes of transportation; and architectural accomplishments. Indeed, a complex of society-altering changes dating to the immediately pre-medieval and early medieval centuries in Africa affected the continent profoundly throughout the medieval centuries. These developments included the rapid expansion across Africa of iron working, grain or cereal farming, and cattle herding, and increased networks of local, regional, long-distance, and intercontinental trade based on surpluses of the goods produced as a result of these activities.

**Metallurgy**

The archaeological evidence for metalworking in Africa demonstrates that in addition to very early copper smelting in Upper Nubia dating to around the third millennium B.C.E., copper was also smelted in two West African locations, Azelik and Akjoujt in what are today, respectively, Niger and Mauritania, beginning around the tenth to fifth centuries B.C.E. Along with the early production of copper at these discrete North and West African sites, knowledge of how to smelt iron—turn iron ore into usable metal—appeared in widely dispersed African locations as far back as 1000 B.C.E. and then spread across virtually the entire African continent by around 400 C.E., making the adoption of this technology an accomplishment of the millennium and a half preceding the medieval era, though its steadily intensifying effects were felt throughout the medieval centuries. Copper mining in parts of Africa beyond those identified above, in the Copper Belt located in what are today the Congo and Zambia, began on a small scale in the early medieval period and reached massive extents by the end of this era. In addition to copper and iron, metals worked on the medieval African continent included gold, tin, lead, the copper alloys brass and bronze, and the iron alloy carbon steel. As Childs and Herbert demonstrated, the technology of metal production can best be understood through consideration of its major stages of mining, smelting, and shaping, and the following explorations of these processes draw in part upon their work.

**Mining**

Iron ore is found widely across much of the African continent, copper ore less so as it is located at a few sites in West Africa and in far larger concentrations in southern and Central Africa. Iron and copper ores have been mined in different ways depending on their presentation. Both ores were often deposited superficially, in which case they could be dug out from these surface or near-surface locations easily through either small shallow pits or the large-scale removals of soil known as opencast mining, which could cover many acres of ground. In other places, however, these ores existed in less easily accessible veins that could only be excavated via shafts dug deep into the earth. Ores could also be found in river sands and bogs. Once recovered, these ores were typically broken down into smaller, more manageable pieces, washed, and then smelted. Alluvial or quartz reef deposits of gold are found in numerous places in West Africa including the Bambuk, Bure, and Akan goldfields,
as well as on the Zimbabwe Plateau and in southern Africa. Medieval Africans typically collected alluvial gold by panning the sand and gravel of auriferous streams and rivers, and the soil of auriferous earth, a technique most productively practiced early in the rainy season when the newly disturbed materials of the riverbed and surface soil more easily yielded their grains of gold, and the moisture reflecting the sun could even make these tiny particles visible to the naked eye. Auriferous zones sometimes though far more rarely yielded nuggets of gold in addition to these small flecks. Gold reefs were worked through mining via open trenches or shafts from which the gold-bearing soil or ore was extracted and removed, the ore subsequently processed by pulverization and then panning, and the soil simply panned to separate out the gold. Large pits were sometimes excavated as far down as the water table in West African goldfields as well. Medieval miners became highly skilled at identifying likely underground sites of gold, copper, and iron ores, as each was associated with telltale signs such as particular vegetation and streaks of color in the surface soils that lay above the ores themselves.

**Smelting**

Iron, whose wares most profoundly affected daily life in medieval Africa, almost never exists in a pure state naturally. Instead, it occurs in the form of iron ore, rock that contains iron and other minerals. Iron smelting is the process whereby iron ore is heated to extremely high temperatures so that the iron separates from the other materials, creating iron on the one hand and liquid slag composed of the waste rock and noniron minerals on the other. The liquid slag is drained off, leaving the iron behind. The slag heaps that are the refuse created by this process often lead archaeologists to medieval and pre-medieval African smelting sites, which are very important to understanding the development of ironworking in Africa because the iron implements produced have often rusted away.

Medieval Africans practiced what is known as bloomery smelting, where the temperatures are not raised high enough to actually melt the iron. Instead in this process the iron separates from the now-liquefied slag, creating what is known as a bloom, or mass, of iron. To practice bloomery smelting successfully, iron ore must be heated in a furnace to very high temperatures of 1,100 to 1,300 degrees Celsius. Achieving this temperature requires the introduction of oxygen into the furnace. Smelting also requires the introduction of carbon, typically through a carbon-based fuel source, which causes a chemical reaction that reduces the iron oxide to iron metal by removing oxygen from it. Finally, use of a flux such as lime or old slag, which could help to purify the ore and increase the liquidity of the slag, might be included. In short, smelting is a technically complex process because of the need to achieve a very high temperature, introduce an air flow, provide a source of carbon, and possibly use a flux. Further, the precise needs for these requirements vary depending on the grade of the iron ore itself, which differed widely from source to source of ore in Africa, requiring skilled assessments and adjustments before and during the smelting process to end up with iron rather than an unsuccessful attempt at smelting.

Medieval African peoples devised a variety of ways to achieve the very exacting conditions required for successful bloomery smelting. Iron smelting occurred
in either bowl or shaft furnaces constructed from clay. A steady flow of oxygen-rich air was achieved in shaft furnaces via either the labor-intensive use of bellows, which introduced air flows into furnaces through clay pipes known as tuyeres that were inserted into the furnace wall, or reliance upon a draft that pulled air in at the bottom of the furnace from where it rose as it grew warmer. Charcoal produced from hardwoods, which burned slowly while producing great heat, served as the main fuel and also introduced the carbon necessary to achieve chemical reduction. In fact, the quantities of charcoal required to produce iron in Africa over the past 2,500 or so years have affected the African environment profoundly: In the medieval period as iron production soared, charcoal manufacturing led to significant deforestation in large stretches of what are now grasslands in West Africa, and west of Lake Victoria in Central and East Africa. Doubtless the deforestation also resulted from the greater ease of creating farmland from forest following the production of iron tools.

Although it is very hard, indeed typically impossible, to know medieval African cosmologies because of the paucity of relevant sources, it is possible to conjecture about how they conceptualized and thought of ironworking: Eugenia Herbert has demonstrated a long-standing and widespread understanding of smelting as a generative process analogous to sexual intercourse and childbirth. These beliefs were reflected in constructions of smelting furnaces, which resembled women's bodies; and in the language used in reference to smelting and its production of an iron bloom, which drew analogies between this process and the stages of human reproduction such as intercourse, labor, and delivery. Much of the evidence for this gynecomorphism postdates the medieval period, however, and it is not known how far back in time such beliefs extended.

Today experts disagree about whether Africans invented the technology of iron smelting themselves, or received this knowledge from outside the continent in a diffusion of metalworking technologies. Proponents of the diffusion argument such as Mauny and Tylecote have pointed out that in western Asia, where iron smelting appears to have been first achieved, the Iron Age was preceded by a Copper Age, facilitated by the fact that copper sometimes occurs in pure form that does not require smelting but gives experience in metalworking; its smelting is also far more easily achieved than that of iron. However, most of Africa experienced no Copper Age as an antecedent to its Iron Age, and this absence has led many scholars to deduce that iron smelting must have been introduced to Africa via outside sources that experienced the stages of metalworking that are believed to have been followed in all parts of the world that independently developed ironworking technologies. On the other hand, as proponents of innovation within Africa such as Schmidt/Avery and Trigger asserted, evidence that iron smelting in Africa may be autochthonous is growing with the identification of more and more radiocarbon-dated sites showing the smelting of iron in Africa throughout much of the first millennium B.C. before this knowledge could have diffused from places such as Phoenician or Roman North Africa or Meroë. These early sites of ironworking are widely spread over the continent from West to East Africa, making it unlikely that the technology spread neatly and chronologically south and west from Anatolia in western Asia in the ways that have been theorized. Additionally, African smelting shows striking divergences in technique from western Asian smelting. Although the question of diffusion from outside the continent, local innovation inside the continent, or a combination of the two remains
open and debated, it is no longer routinely assumed that knowledge of how to smelt iron definitively came from outside Africa. The dominant position today is that it is a truly open question unanswerable on the basis of currently available evidence.

**Shaping**

In the case of iron still unacceptably adulterated after smelting, smithing had to begin with extensive hammering to remove impurities prior to the creation of the desired end products. But for the most part smithing or forging iron involves first heating the metal to be shaped until it is malleable, second forming it into desired objects via hammering, and third rapidly cooling the object in water, which strengthens and hardens the metal, a three-step process repeated many times until the final shape is satisfactory. Softer metals such as copper and gold might be subjected to smithing but could also be worked through other techniques such as hammering without heating, granulation, plating with thin sheets of hammered metal, filigree, and drawing or pulling to create wire. Lost-wax casting of various metals, not including iron, was also practiced in parts of medieval West Africa.

Metalwares produced in medieval Africa included farming implements such as hoes, scythes, and axes that not only facilitated actual cultivation but allowed for far greater ease in clearing farmland, no small gain given the prominence on the continent of shifting plot agriculture requiring the constant creation of new farming plots from difficult-to-clear virgin or long-fallow land. Weapons such as arrow and spearheads allowed for greater effectiveness on the battlefield and also in hunting; fishhooks similarly allowed for greater ease in catching this category of game. Metal currencies formed in medieval Africa included coins minted at the island of Kilwa on East Africa’s Swahili coast, coins struck in first Roman and then Islamic North Africa, the Berbers’ famous and intercontinentally circulated golden dinar, and the copper cross-shaped currency developed in Central Africa. Jewelry formed another significant category of medieval worked metal objects, and there is rich evidence of it from all across the continent, north to south and west to east. Jewelry sometimes served as a way of storing wealth, as was the case with the striking golden earrings, which could reach vast size and were the repository for wealth for many women in the medieval West African Sudan. Gold ornamentation also served to symbolize the riches and prestige of the kings of the medieval sudanic empires of Ghana and Mali, who were bedecked in magnificent and lavish gold jewelry on state occasions. Although exceptions to this pattern occurred frequently, more often iron was used to make tools and weapons while other, softer, metals such as gold and copper were used for ornamentation and coinage.

In some parts of Africa the occupation of smith became limited to particular castes, as among the Malinke of medieval West Africa where smithing became a family occupation passed down from father to son, whereas in other places it remained broadly available to any man willing to serve an apprenticeship with a master smith. Smiths might also be the miners and/or smelters of their societies, or these various parts of the metalworking process might be the province of different sets of specialists. In recent centuries smithing, like smelting, has been ubiquitously gendered male, although there is evidence that slave
women sometimes smelted in medieval West Africa; mining, however, could be and was conducted by women, men, and children alike as attested by skeletons of victims of mining accidents found in medieval mine shafts throughout the continent.

**Farming**

Knowledge of agriculture developed in parts of Africa long before the medieval period, as farming was firmly established in parts of the northern half of the continent by around 5000 B.C.E. It then spread across the southern half of Africa by the first centuries C.E. The utilization of iron technology across the continent, which occurred between approximately 1000 B.C.E. and 400 C.E., dovetailed propitiously with the expansion of mixed farming in Central, East, and southern Africa because iron-bladed hoes, axes, scythes, knives, and other tools proved extremely useful in making the demanding work of farming less arduous.

Medieval African farmers consciously chose those farming technologies best suited to their particular environments. For example, in many parts of this often-arid continent close attention had to be paid to ensuring a consistent source of water, which was accomplished by techniques such as constructing irrigation channels, devising ways to raise precious water from sources located below the earth’s surface, and manually watering crops. Similarly, in steeply hilled areas farmers terraced the land to avoid soil erosion and create level ground where crops could be more easily cultivated. And in virtually all of Africa—Ethiopia is the striking exception—medieval farmers chose to practice hoe rather than plow agriculture, in large part because the bite of the tsetse fly, which is endemic in many parts of the continent, transmits the deadly disease trypanosomiasis to cattle making it impossible to rely upon these draft animals to draw heavy plows.

In regards to cultivation, again African agriculturalists paid close attention to the techniques best suited to their environment. In rain forest regions, for example, where soil fertility is quickly exhausted due to the very rapid decomposition of organic material in the heat and humidity, which characterize this tropical climate zone, farmers practiced shifting plot agriculture. This method of farming involves the intensive use of one plot of land until its fertility is exhausted, at which point it is either abandoned permanently or left to lie fallow for the many years needed to reestablish vital nutrients in the soil while the farmer works a different plot. However, more fertile land could be and was worked continuously. Further, farmers who lived in regions conducive to herding cattle and cultivating crops quickly recognized the value of fertilizing their fields with cow manure, whereas farmers who practiced shifting plot agriculture knew the fertilizing properties of the ash that resulted from burning the vegetation cleared off of new plots of farmland. Farmers also made it a point to grow a variety of crops that had their greatest demands for work at different times of the growing season, so as to space out the need for the labor involved in their production and permit more extensive farming.

Farmers also selected the crops best suited to their particular climate. In the forest regions where grain and cereal farming is not easily practiced they turned to vegeculture, cultivating yams, melons, cowpeas, gourds, and fluted pumpkins. They also gathered the output of the oil palm, raffia palm, and kola
nut trees that grow naturally in the forest zone and that farmers intentionally left standing when they cleared all other trees from plots of new farmland. Farmers in the grasslands of the savannah belts and in the Ethiopian Highlands, where cereals and grains flourished, focused upon a variety of these crops, a majority of which were domesticated in Africa because the wheat and barley that probably came to Africa from western Asia could not survive in the tropical and subtropical portions of the continent. Commonly cultivated cereal and grain species included African rice, sorghum, teff, ensete, and pearl and finger millet. Farmers in all parts of the continent planted vegetables too, and where these flourished also cultivated nonfood crops such as cotton and indigo for use in cloth making and dying. Farmers also took up with alacrity useful crops diffused to Africa from Asia such as citrus fruits, coconuts, sugar cane, and what became starchy dietary staples of Asian rice and cocoyams. As the variety of crops enumerated above implies, African farmers recognized the great value of diversified cultivation, so that even if some plantings failed due to crop-specific blights or infestations, others were likely to survive and famine could be avoided.

**Herding**

Like farming, raising cattle became well established in the northern half of Africa by 5000 B.C.E., long before the medieval period, and there is evidence for it dating back to around 2000 B.C.E. in parts of East Africa too. Throughout the continent, animal domestication grew in extent and significance over the course of the medieval centuries (see Domesticated Animals). Domesticated cattle, whether indigenous or imported in origin, became a very important animal in medieval Africa, particularly the savannahs of southern, eastern, and West Africa, utilized for their milk and blood and much less commonly for their meat and hides. Cattle also became a major way of storing wealth in the southern half of the continent. The clearing of forests and brushlands in medieval Africa, which resulted from producing charcoal to fire iron-smelting furnaces and creating new plots of arable land, also decreased the tsetse fly-infested portions of the continent because this insect flourished in forest and more well-watered grassland regions, allowing for more widespread raising of cattle. Analogous to farmers choosing the most productive cultivation methods, herders consciously developed methods of cattle rearing best suited to their environments. In the grasslands of Africa, for example, herders practiced open-range grazing of cattle and devised annual patterns of migration in which they moved their cattle from place to place to take continuous advantage of seasonal changes in the availability of fresh pasturage and sources of water, and to allow their cattle to benefit from the varied nutrients and trace minerals of different pastureland.

In another parallel with farmers, African herders had long recognized the advantages conferred by rearing animals that came to Africa from outside the continent, such as sheep and goats indigenous to Asia; a new and hardy type of cattle, the humped Zebu, from South Asia; and camels from the Arabian Peninsula. Camel raising was first taken up some 3,000 years ago in the Horn of Africa, and much like the later cattle keepers of southern Africa people in the Horn utilized their herds for milk and as a way of storing wealth, as had
the peoples of Arabia from where the camel came. Romans in North Africa utilized camels in the first centuries C.E., and immediately they were adopted by the Berbers of the vast Sahara Desert on the eve of the medieval centuries. Camels revolutionized medieval Berber life, as the Berbers with great skill created a viable desert life in which the camel played key roles as a beast of burden, moving trade goods north and south across the desert, and as a means of transportation in the desert environment, a role for which they were perfectly suited given their ability to travel 10 days between water sources and the way in which the two pads of each foot flatten as camels walk, allowing them to expend less energy in their travels than horses or humans because they remain on the surface of desert sands.

Craft Production and Manufacturing

Large-scale cloth production has a long history in many parts of Africa and can be assumed to have been practiced during the medieval period given its documented existence in the early modern years, though it is not possible to verify the scale of production because the textile industry does not leave much evidence in the archaeological record. Examples of African textiles do, however, appear in medieval artworks such as sculptures, and it is clear that medieval Africa produced significant quantities of cloth made from raffia, bark, and cotton, the last of which was produced in Egypt by the tenth century C.E. and in many other parts of the continent shortly thereafter. Stages of cloth making included cultivating or gathering the fibers that are its basic element, making thread, weaving, decorating cloth by dying, embroidery and stamped designs, among other techniques, and tailoring. Salt-making industries also existed in many parts of the continent, from medieval Saharan mining of rock salt and production of rock crystal from underground reservoirs of brine, to the seaside evaporation of ocean waters to isolate its salt crystals practiced along coastlines in West and East Africa. These salt manufacturers produced far more than required for local consumption to trade the surplus for desired commodities through local, regional, long-distance, and intercontinental commercial networks. Pottery, which is well preserved in the archaeological record, was also widely produced across medieval Africa, often with striking similarities of style over large areas that sometimes exhibited dramatic stylistic changes over very short periods of time. Other crafts mastered by medieval African artisans include wood carving, leatherworking, grass weaving, and the metalworking discussed above.

Architecture and Mathematics

Sophisticated and exquisitely constructed public and private buildings, elaborate and extensive city walls, and massive monuments are all elements of Africa’s medieval architectural traditions. The evidence is skewed toward buildings constructed from stone because other widely used medieval building materials such as mud, clay, thatch, wood, and leaves have not survived. In East Africa, Swahili merchants built lavish and opulent multistory homes from coral stone. Swahili houses attest to attention to ease and comfort, exemplified by bathrooms with pit toilets, systems of indoor plumbing, concern with airflow
and other cooling techniques, and beautiful decorative detail. Medieval monumental architecture, found at sites across the length and breadth of the continent, speaks to desires to showcase the wealth, power, and authority of leaders and states. The massive and awe-inspiring stonewall enclosures constructed at Great Zimbabwe attest to not only the prestige of its rulers, but also the great skills of its stonemasons. Another architectural achievement are the stelae of Aksum, long, thin pillars carved out of single pieces of granite set upright, which reached heights of nearly 110 feet and weighed over 500 tons. Their surfaces were finely carved to represent facades of multistory houses, and the tallest known stelae represented 13 floors; they had to pose huge challenges to quarry, move, shape, and erect. Aksumites also constructed huge, multistory palaces and private residences containing scores of rooms, which exhibited an unusual architecture, built as they were upon large stone bases that increased their majesty and height. The Ethiopian Highlands were also the setting for the very unusual medieval Christian rock-cut churches, hewn from living rock and illustrative of exquisite skills of architectural planning and masonry with their elaborate incorporation of windows, galleries, aisles, basilicas, naves, sanctuaries, domes, pillars, archways and finely worked decorative details, all carved into the bedrock. Islam brought to Africa traditions of mosque architecture, then modified by local aesthetic preferences, building materials, and environmental concerns. A prominent example from the West African savannah is Timbuktu’s Sankoré Mosque, which dates from the early fourteenth century. It illustrates one common form of sudanic mosque architecture with its tapering, pyramid-shaped minaret and thick mud-brick walls with protruding wooden beams, which served as a permanent scaffolding to allow for easy repair of damages to the walls caused by the annual rains.

These medieval African architectural achievements indicate a keen awareness of mathematical and engineering principles, though today it is not known specifically how Africans of this era conceptualized of, articulated, and transmitted this knowledge. But it is certain that these architectural accomplishments could not have occurred without knowledge and understanding of geometry, principles of weight-bearing, systems of precise measurement, and appreciation for the unique characteristics of the arch and barrel-vaulting. Similarly, the wide use of currencies ranging from animals, to cowrie shells imported from the Indian Ocean, Aksumite and Swahili coins, ivory disks, and the copper cross currency of Central Africa, among many other monetary systems, as well as systems of taxation documented for empire of Ghana, among other places, presuppose numeracy (numerical literacy). Likewise, the widespread use of geometrically complex patterns in African games, textiles, architecture, house painting, and other art forms speaks to knowledge of mathematical principles. The evidence Claudia Zaslavsky has marshaled about how Africans have thought mathematically, which reaches as far back as the early modern period, allows for speculative extrapolation back into the medieval period because these traditions certainly drew upon older African mathematical knowledge. For example, Zaslavsky’s deeply fascinating research shows that in different parts of the continent Africans have used bases ranging from 5, the most common, to 10 and 20, and have a long and complex history of denoting numbers through hand gestures as well as spoken number words. Long-ago African peoples involved in large-scale and lucrative trade developed number words into the millions, a necessity when utilizing what eventually became low-value cowry shell currency, and African
traders have long showed great dexterity at making complex mental calculations extremely rapidly. Furthermore, African music and games, which again reach back into the medieval period, have generally depended upon knowledge of highly complex numerical patterns. Finally, the medieval incorporation of significant parts of Africa into the Islamic world led to familiarity with the mathematical knowledge of the Islamic intellectual tradition.

Iron smelting and other metalworking techniques form the most prominent and influential medieval African technologies. This metallurgy influenced life in medieval Africa in profound ways: Metalworking technologies underlay more efficient agriculture, more effective hunting and fighting, new systems of currency, and new forms of bodily adornment; and in the southern half of the continent mutually reinforcing interconnections between iron smelting, cereal and grain agriculture, and cattle herding stimulated new and more complex forms of social organization in the medieval centuries. All of these interrelated activities, which often produced surpluses, also stimulated local and regional trade within the continent, for example with the emergence of southern African trade networks spanning the continent from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean and northern networks linking West and North Africa across the Sahara, as well as external, intercontinental trade routes reaching across the Mediterranean Sea and Indian Ocean. Subsistence activities including foraging, hunting, farming, animal husbandry, and craft production continued to be of importance in the African Iron Age that had been established across the continent by the earliest medieval centuries. African agriculturalists and herders continued to tailor their techniques to the specifics of their local environments while also welcoming new inputs from outside the continent, an indication of their openness to innovation. Achievements in architecture in places as diverse as Great Zimbabwe, the Ethiopian Highlands, the Swahili coast, and the cities of the West African Sudan also stand out, whereas architecture, currencies, artworks, and musical traditions incorporating complex, multilayered polyrhythms all speak to medieval mathematical knowledge.

Further Reading
7. GLOBAL TIES

In sharp contrast to common stereotypes of isolation, Africa held far-reaching ties to other regions of the world during the medieval period. A few of these interconnections resulted from foreigners extending their political dominion over portions of North Africa, and at least one from Africans asserting political control over outsiders. The majority, however, were forged through intercontinental commerce. Religion provided another significant basis for connections between Africa and other parts of the world. In sum, all of these ties led to exchanges of goods, technologies, foodstuffs, domesticated animals, information, and religion between Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and parts of southern and southeastern Asia including what are today India, Indonesia, and China. These intercontinental ties, as well as events internal to Africa, made the medieval centuries ones of vibrancy and innovation. They also illustrate that expansions and migrations of peoples over longer as well as shorter distances are a prominent feature of world history, for medieval Africa as for other places and times.

Global Ties and Conquest, Expansion, and Migration

African connections to other peoples of the Mediterranean have existed for many millennia. North Africa, which forms the southern side of the Mediterranean Basin and whose inhabitants are thus of the Mediterranean themselves, was in close contact with the Greco-Roman world long before the medieval centuries, for example through the ties of trade that existed between Ancient Egypt and Ancient Greece. The Greek historian Herodotus reflected the very high regard in which Greeks held Egyptians in his characterization of them as very civilized and devoutly religious people from whose culture Ancient Greece received many things. Africans also traded extensively with the subsequent Mediterranean power of Ancient Rome that, by colonizing lands along the entire length of the North African coast and well up the Nile into Egypt like Ancient Greece before it, also linked Africa politically to the broader Mediterranean world. The consequent control of North Africa and Egypt by the Byzantine or Eastern Roman Empire, centered in Constantinople in what is today Turkey, continued this involvement into the early medieval centuries. Peoples of the Ethiopian Highlands located further south in the Horn of Africa were also closely involved with the Mediterranean world: The Ethiopian kingdom of Aksum that flourished well into the medieval centuries had close commercial ties through the Red Sea to the Greeks and later Romans, reflected for example in the use of Greek inscriptions on some Aksumite coins and monuments. This trade via the Red Sea also connected people of the East African coast south of the Horn of Africa to the medieval Mediterranean Basin.

Connections to the Middle East also predated the medieval period and were notably strengthened during it. For example, from the first millennium B.C.E. and even earlier Phoenicians spread their maritime empire from their homeland in the Levant throughout much of the Mediterranean world, conducting trade with and creating settlements in North Africa premedievally and channeling the goods of the African interior into the Mediterranean Basin. Their city of Carthage, founded around the ninth century B.C.E. in what is today Tunisia, held a place of
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distinction unmatched in Phoenician affairs and was a mighty power in its day. Another important African–Middle Eastern tie resulted from interactions between the Ethiopian Highlands and the Arabian Peninsula that were facilitated by their proximity to one another, divided as they are only by the relatively narrow (though not always easily traversed) waters of the Red Sea. The Ethiopian Highlands received immigrants from Saba in the southwestern Arabian Peninsula as long ago as the first millennium B.C.E., resulting in a lasting linguistic influence in this region seen for example in the languages of first Ge’ez and subsequently Amharic, both of which descended from the southern Arabian Semitic Sabean. In most cultural aspects, however, the people of the Highlands followed internal dynamics. These Ethiopian–Arabian interactions continued in the medieval years, with the powerful state of Aksum making military incursions into southern Arabia in the sixth century C.E.

Most prominently of all when it comes to medieval African–Middle Eastern interconnections, North Africa became significantly incorporated into the Muslim religious world and the Arab cultural world through the seventh- and eighth-century waves of conquest that followed the movement of Muslim Arabs out of the Arabian Peninsula and across North Africa from Egypt in the east to the Atlantic in the west between 639 and 711 A.D. following the emergence of Islam in the early seventh century. Influences on northern Africa resulting from these incursions included the development of an Arab ethnic identity and an Islamic religious identity though these varied in profundity from place to place in North Africa, and the introduction of shari’a or Islamic law and Arab/Islamic statecraft, Arab artistic and architectural traditions, and the Arabic language, script, and literature. African Muslims themselves then had a profound influence on the Iberian Peninsula of southwestern Europe; the Almoravid Movement of the eleventh to twelfth centuries arose among Berbers from the southwestern Sahara who then conquered what are today southern Spain and Portugal (see Almoravid and Almohad Movements).

Finally, movements of people occasioned by Indian Ocean commerce, which linked the lands of East and northeastern Africa, the Middle East, and South and Southeast Asia, brought premedieval and medieval trading partners from Arabia, Persia, India, Indonesia, and China to the East African coast. Some, mainly Arabs and Persians, intermarried with local residents. This mixing and intermingling resulted in the medieval emergence of the Swahili culture, whose city-states dotted East Africa’s Indian Ocean shoreline from Mogadishu to Mozambique. Another Indian Ocean migration, this one from Southeast Asia and most likely via outrigger canoe, brought Indonesian immigrants to a then-uninhabited Madagascar—the large island separated from southeastern Africa by the Mozambique Channel—through one or more strikingly long ocean voyages early in the first millennium C.E., where they were joined shortly thereafter by East Africans. In consequence the Malagasy language of Madagascar is the westernmost member of the Austronesian language group, spoken also in Southeast Asia as well as in the Pacific Islands of Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia such as Fiji, the Marshall Islands, and Samoa.

**Intercontinental Trade and Global Connections**

As the previous section implies many of medieval Africa’s links with other parts of the world resulted from intercontinental trade, and in fact this was the
most significant cause of connections between Africans and people outside the continent’s borders. This commerce occurred throughout the medieval centuries via the trans-Saharan and Indian Ocean trading networks, two vast systems of exchange that linked Africa and places in the Middle East including Arabia and Persia, in Asia including India, Indonesia, and China, and in Europe, all in highly profitable economic interactions. These ties led to two-way transfers not only of the surplus goods exchanged through these trading networks, but also of a far broader range of information, ideas, and technologies including food crops, domesticated animals, intellectual traditions, and religions.

Over the course of the entire medieval period, through a regularized exchange of their surplus goods trans-Saharan trade served to connect West Africa, which lies to the desert’s south, with both the Sahara itself and North Africa, which is located to the desert’s north. Through the trade routes of the Mediterranean trans-Saharan trade also, however, channeled African exports much farther afield, to Europe and the Middle East. West African gold, ivory, captives, agricultural goods, and animal products such as pelts and ostrich feathers thereby made their way outside of the continent. Indeed, West Africa was the primary supplier of gold to Europe and the Islamic world during these medieval centuries, making possible medieval Europe’s gold-based currencies, a debt later acknowledged in the elephant-shaped mint mark found on the famous Golden Guinea of King Charles II that indicated the African provenance of the coin’s gold. In fact, it is estimated that Africa served as the source of an astounding two-thirds of the gold supply of Europe and the Islamic world at this time, before the discovery of additional and less expensive sources of this precious metal in the Americas in the modern age of exploration that was yet to come. African gold became the fabled subject of European legends, many fantastical in nature. Getting directly to the source of this West African gold and thereby cutting out the Muslim intermediaries in North Africa on whom they were unhappily dependent eventually emerged as a medieval Christian European preoccupation, one not satisfied however until the modern era and its age of maritime exploration.

The second great medieval intercontinental commercial network in which Africa was involved was the Indian Ocean trading system, which created a world of commerce and cultural exchange connecting East and northeastern Africa, Arabia, Persia, South Asia, Indonesia, and the ports of southern China through trade which occurred not only on the Indian Ocean but also via the feeder waterways of the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea, the last of which also involved the Mediterranean world in this exchange. The Swahili of the East African coast, the powerful state of Aksum in the Ethiopian Highlands with its great Red Sea port city of Adulis, and Egyptians all took part in this trade and collectively exported to their Asian, Middle Eastern, and Mediterranean counterparts highly valued commodities including ivory, gold, iron, rock crystal, the aromatics frankincense and myrrh, obsidian, mangrove poles, cotton and linen fabrics, agricultural goods including coffee and spices, animal products including rhinoceros horns, leopard skins, tortoiseshells, and the musk of the civet cat that was used in perfume, and captives who were forced to work as slaves in the Middle East in occupations ranging from hard physical labor draining swamps in what is today southern Iraq to soldiering to concubinage.

The trade goods Africa received in exchange for its exports into Indian Ocean and trans-Saharan trade demonstrate the very long reach into medieval
Africa of this intercontinental trade, as attested to by numerous archaeological finds. For example, though direct East African involvement in Indian Ocean trade occurred only through the Swahili cities that were located right on the coast—on its shoreline, promontories, and offshore islands—goods imported through this trade network have been found far inland. Caches of many thousands of the small glass beads that were one of India’s prominent exports to Africa, and other trade goods such as cowry shells, Persian ceramics, and the fine Chinese porcelain that was another highly prized import, have been unearthed at sites including the ruins of the medieval states of Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe, located on the Zimbabwe plateau in the southeastern African interior, as well as even further west and south of the East African seacoast at locations in what are today Botswana and the South African Transvaal. A parallel body of evidence can be found on the other side of the continent, where Hellenistic or Roman beads dating to just before or after the beginning of the Common Era have been unearthed at Jenné-jeno in the Inland Niger Delta, attesting to the ability of goods from Roman North Africa to make their way, via many intervening trading networks, to the West African Sudan at this early date. Likewise, more than one-hundred thousand imported beads, most likely of either Venetian or Indian provenance, were discovered during the archaeological excavation of the burial site of an obviously wealthy and powerful man at the eighth to tenth centuries site of Igbo-Ukwu in what is today Nigeria (see Igbo). If Venetian in origin, these beads would have come to North Africa from Europe, and then traveled to West Africa via trans-Saharan trade. If Indian, they would have arrived in East Africa from South Asia through Indian Ocean trade and then been carried clear across the continent to West Africa. As well as demonstrating the great reach of intercontinental trade, these finds demonstrate the extensive intra-African trade networks of the medieval centuries that transported imports from other continents, as well as Africa’s own commodities, throughout broad stretches of the continent.

The extent and value of trade between Africa and other parts of the globe, and within the continent’s borders, drew numerous visitors, many of them great travelers of their day who had traversed broad swathes of their known world of Europe, Asia, and Africa. Around 100 C.E., a Greek-speaking mariner from Alexandria penned the Periplus of the Erythraen Sea, the earliest extant written account of the Indian Ocean commercial system that described in significant detail the routes, ports, peoples, and goods of the East African, Ethiopian Highlands, and Egyptian components of Indian Ocean trade. Following the seventh-century spread of Arab culture and Islamic faith many Arabs with birthplaces as varied as Spain, North Africa, Persia, and Baghdad traveled widely in East and West Africa. Some wrote extensive descriptions of their journeys, thus leaving the world first-hand accounts of geography, trade, and medieval African polities and places including Ancient Ghana, Ancient Mali, and the Swahili coast. Prominent among these Arab travelers and chroniclers were Ibn Hawqal, Ibn Khalidun, al-Bakri, al-Biruni, and al-Masudi. A Chinese fleet visited East Africa in the early fifteenth century, whereas the Portuguese first glimpsed the Swahili coast nearly a century later.

In like fashion medieval Africans journeyed outside their continent, very famously in the hajj or religious pilgrimage made in 1324 by Mansa Musa, the great leader of the mighty and fabulously wealthy West African empire of Ancient Mali that then controlled the flow of gold into trans-Saharan trade.
No doubt motivated by a desire for secular glory as well as by deep piety, he took with him a very large entourage including thousands of servants, assistants, and dignitaries and also many thousands of pounds of gold. En route from his home in the western Sudan to Mecca in the Arabian Peninsula, a journey of many thousands of miles that included the arduous and dangerous Saharan crossing, he stopped at Cairo in North Africa where he put so much gold into local circulation that he depressed the price of this precious metal. This act captured the attention of Europeans, who for the first time learned of the specific empire that exported the West African gold to which they so eagerly sought unmediated access. This knowledge then began to appear on European maps such as the famous Catalan Atlas of 1375, which portrayed the king of Mali sitting on his throne, holding aloft in one hand an orb of gold, and approached by several camel-riding Berbers, the individuals responsible for bringing the gold Europe so fervently desired across the treacherous Sahara to the Mediterranean world. Another African, Ibn Battuta, a Berber born in Morocco in 1304, proved to be one of the great world travelers of his day. A partial listing of his travels includes visits to what are today Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Yemen in the Middle East; China, India, and Indonesia in Asia; the Byzantine Empire’s Constantinople; and the Balkans, southern Russia, and Spain in Europe. He also journeyed to Ancient Mali in West Africa and the Swahili coast in East Africa. His wonderfully detailed and very positive descriptions of East Africa—he characterized the Swahili cities as places of wealth, beauty, hospitality, and sophistication—are all the more meaningful given his broad basis for comparison.

Ties of Religion

The three great monotheistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam were no strangers to the medieval African continent. Judaism has had a long presence in North African cities, Saharan oases, and the Ethiopian Highlands, dating most anciently in North Africa to Biblical times. Like the Christian presence in medieval Africa, these Jewish populations often resulted from linkages created by trade. These could lead to intercontinental ties through what were often ongoing interactions between the branch of a Jewish or Christian trading family which had relocated to Africa, and the branches of the family that had remained at home or settled elsewhere. However, persecution played a role in some Jewish migrations: A significant new Jewish influx into North Africa followed the Roman destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 C.E. Judaism continued as a minority religious presence in all of the above-named regions throughout the medieval centuries, with new inflows of people occurring from time to time. For example, self-identification as Jews by the contemporary Lemba of southern Africa, an identity supported by their oral traditions and recent genetic analysis, admits for the probability that another movement of Jews to Africa, this one from what is today Yemen in the southern Arabian Peninsula, occurred around 1000. In addition to asserting Jewish origins, Lemba oral traditions indicate that they originally came from a village named “Senna” and that a flood precipitated their departure. The failure of a dam in Senna in Yemen in the appropriate timeframe is documented, as is the correspondence between the genetic signatures of Lemba men and the cohanim, or
Jewish priests. Sporadic medieval Spanish persecutions of Jews, as well as the medieval Reconquista that at its conclusion expelled Spain’s Jewish population, similarly increased Jewish communities in North African cities and Saharan oases, particularly toward the end of the medieval period. Harassment occurred in Africa as well as outside it: The community of medieval Jews in the Ethiopian Highlands eventually found itself alienated from the Christian Solomonid dynasty that came to power in 1270 and relegated Ethiopian Jews to a lower social status, actively persecuting them periodically too. It was the descendents of this Beta Israel community (or Falasha as they are often called, though that term is considered pejorative today) who were airlifted to the modern state of Israel in Operation Moses during 1984 and 1985.

Christianity traveled the relatively short distance from its homeland in the eastern Mediterranean to North Africa in the first or second century C.E., so its presence on the continent is almost as old as the religion itself. Initially established in Egypt, the new faith flourished in cities such as Alexandria before becoming widely established throughout rural as well as urban portions of Egypt during the first millennium of the Common Era. From Egypt Christianity moved west along the North African coast, where it was taken up by many among the Maghrib’s Berber population by 400 C.E. Quite quickly Christianity was also embraced in the Ethiopian Highlands, first by King Ezana of Aksum who converted in the fourth century after contact with Christians merchants who traveled down the Red Sea and were soon succeeded by Syrian monks seeking more converts. Christianity in Nubia followed shortly thereafter, from the middle of the first millennium C.E.

Much as Christianity moved very quickly from its place of birth to Africa, Islam spread across all of North Africa immediately after its founding in the Arabian Peninsula in the early seventh century. From there Islam spread south, carried by merchants of trans-Saharan trade accompanying camel caravans into the desert and the grasslands beyond. The Berbers of the Sahara converted first, from the ninth and tenth centuries, with Islam reaching the West African sahel and Sudan during the tenth to twelfth centuries. Islam also moved from the Arabian Peninsula to East Africa, here too progressing along well-established trade routes. Although signs of Islamic identity can be discerned in the archaeological record of East African coastal communities as early as the eighth century, the new religion was not broadly embraced there until the eleventh. Finally, Islam also spread from Arabia across the Red Sea to the Horn of Africa, and from there traveled further west to Nubia along the Middle Nile. Nubians also received Islam from Egyptian scholars and merchants who traveled south up the Nile to Nubia’s more interior location.

Islam and Christianity champion pilgrimage, though with greatly differing degrees of obligation: Although a Christian pilgrimage to Jerusalem remains a matter of individual choice, Islam enjoins all Muslims who can afford it and are physically able to accomplish what is for many in the far-flung regions of Islam a long and arduous journey to travel at least once in their lives to Mecca in the Arabian Peninsula. Many African Christians and Muslims made these journeys, with the result that these pilgrimages created continuous linkages between Africans and their coreligionists from other parts of the world. In the case of the Muslim hajj, this could have effects far beyond connecting African Muslims to the larger Islamic world. For example, the Almoravid Movement, which swept across portions of West and North Africa and then conquered
the southern Iberian Peninsula, followed the eleventh century *hajj* taken by Yahya bin Ibrahim, a Berber from the southwestern Sahara. This experience inspired him to seek to introduce a more rigorous and puritanical version of Sunni Islam among his people, an effort eventually resulting in the far more broadly reaching outcomes of the Almoravid Movement. Others, such as Mansa Musa whose *hajj* brought knowledge of Ancient Mali to Europe, returned from Mecca determined to create top-notch centers of Islamic scholarship at home. Mansa Musa’s vision came to eventual fruition with the emergence of the Malian city of Timbuktu as a world-renowned center of Islamic scholarship and learning. All of the new, flowering centers of Islamic scholarship, such as al-Azhar University in Cairo that was regarded as one of the intellectual seats of the Islamic world, created additional and very potent sources of intercontinental communication, drawing scholars as they did from around the Muslim world and giving medieval Africans educated in these institutions access to the full range of knowledge of the Muslim intellectual tradition, as well as adding new strands to it. Turning to Christianity, in addition to pilgrimages the Crusades created linkages when Christian Nubians met with European crusaders in Constantinople in 1204 and attacked Islamic rule in Egypt in support of their European coreligionists. Some believe this history is reflected in the statue of St. Maurice erected in the Cathedral of Magdeburg in Germany in the thirteenth century, shortly after the Sixth Crusade. In this depiction St. Maurice appears as a Nubian crusader dressed in chain mail, in the analysis of the historian Basil Davidson a testament to the African contribution to this episode of Christian history.

Religion, art, and intercontinental influences coincided time and again in medieval Africa. For example, the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela in the Ethiopian Highlands that were sculpted from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, according to tradition in an attempt to create a “New Jerusalem” following Saladin’s capture of Jerusalem in 1187, were clearly inspired by that city’s centrality to the Christian faith. The artistic traditions of medieval Nubian and Ethiopian Christianity drew in part from Byzantine conventions, for example in their privileging of frontal poses and very large eyes, whereas the artwork of many Muslim parts of Africa quickly came to incorporate the calligraphy so central to Islamic artistry. Arab influences on mosque architecture could also be seen across medieval Africa. Yet it is also the case that indigenizing of these imported traditions was common, indeed the norm. For example, mosque architecture in late medieval sudanic West Africa was hugely influenced by local architectural conventions, which varied from place to place across this vast region and led to a fascinating range of mosque styles. Likewise, Ethiopian ecclesiastical art utilized regionally dominant color palettes in preference to those of the Byzantines, and the Nubians, who loved well their equine steeds, were wont to replace the three wise men’s camels with horses in their Nativity scenes.

Although the three great monotheistic traditions of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism are the most prominent examples of intercontinental linkages created through religion, other faiths made their way to medieval Africa with other travelers of that time. For example, visitors and immigrants practicing Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and Manichaeanism came to medieval Africa from time to time too, though these traditions made no significant inroads into the African communities to which they came.
Transfers of Ideas and Technologies

The movements of people and patterns of trade discussed above also resulted in transfers of information, many of which can be broadly thought of as forms of technology. New foodstuffs made their way to Africa in the medieval and even premedieval centuries, some of which revolutionized food production on the continent. From Asia came citrus fruits, coconuts, sugar cane, Asian rice, cocoyam, plantains, and bananas. The last two flourished in many parts of Africa, including its rainforests that form an inhospitable climate for growing cereals and grains, adding vital new sources of starch to the African diet, becoming staples of the food supply, and underlying modest increases in the medieval rate of population growth. Western Asia may have contributed domesticated wheat and barley, though these had a limited impact on the continent because they could be grown only outside the tropical and subtropical regions, which dominate in Africa. In a reverse flow, African crops disseminated to Asia included sorghum, cowpeas, and the kapok and baobab trees. Intercontinental exchanges of foodstuffs continued in the modern era with the creation of an Atlantic world and its Columbian Exchange, which brought foods cultivated in Africa such as okra, bananas, and citrus fruit, as well as the guinea fowl, to the Americas, whereas the latter introduced foods including corn, cassava, and tomatoes to the African continent.

Animals domesticated by Africans include the guinea fowl and, most likely, the domestic cat beloved by Ancient Egyptians as well as many millions of people throughout the world today. The African Wild Ass, subsequent to its domestication by Africans, became the probable ancestor of the domestic donkey, which has since disseminated very widely around the globe from its African point of origin. Many domesticated animals also came to Africa from elsewhere, some medievally and some earlier. India contributed the humped zebu cow, widely raised in Africa to the present, whereas from other parts of Asia came sheep, goats, and the chicken. The Arabian Peninsula contributed the camel, which was taken up many millennia ago by people in the Horn of Africa with their longstanding ties to Arabia. In keeping with Arabian practices and also much like later, medieval cattle keepers of eastern and southern Africa, people in the Horn eschewed killing their camels for meat, preferring to use their herds for milk and as a way of storing wealth. The peoples of North Africa and the Sahara gained access to the camel only at a significantly later date: Romans first brought the camel to North Africa in the early centuries of the Common Era that was then quickly taken up by Berbers. This development revolutionized Berber life by allowing them to practice nomadic pastoralism in the Sahara. This evolution in turn changed life radically for so many others on and off the continent, because it was a necessary precursor to the expansion of trans-Saharan trade, which depended upon utilizing the animal as a beast of burden in the camel caravans that moved trade goods north and south across the desert.

Although less fundamentally revolutionary than the transfers of domesticated plants and animals just discussed, the interactions of peoples that resulted from the medieval interconnections between Africa and other parts of the globe led to many other shared ideas and customs. These included the introduction to Africa of new systems of coinage, which joined indigenous currencies such as gold dust in the West African Sudan and the copper cross currency...
of Central Africa. For example, the currency of Aksum seems to have been derived from that of the Byzantines. In a reverse flow, the gold coins known as dinars produced by the Berber Almoravids in North Africa and Spain, but most copiously at the oasis town of Sijilmasa in the northern Sahara, had a very wide range and were in demand in the Middle East, and in Europe before that continent began its own widespread minting of gold coins. Large caches of Almoravid dinars have been found at archaeological sites as far away from Sijilmasa as France and Jordan. Traditions of hospitality could also result from intercontinental interactions: The use of betel leaves and areca nuts to welcome visitors, which occurred at times on the medieval East African coast, is a clear illustration of this region’s ties to South Asia, from where this tradition came. In turn, West Africans exported to parts of the Muslim world their rainforests’ caffeinated kola nut, which acts as a mild stimulant and is offered to visitors by many peoples in the West African forest and Sudan.

It is clear that deeply rooted, continuous, and highly meaningful interactions connected Africans and peoples in Europe, the Middle East, and South and Southeast Asia throughout the medieval centuries. Typically stimulated by intercontinental trade through trans-Saharan and Indian Ocean commercial networks that served to redistribute the surplus goods of all of these world regions, these interconnections led to transfers not only of commodities but also of religions, food crops, domesticated animals, and a host of shared ideas and ways between Africans and Arabians, Persians, South Asians, Indonesians, the people of southern Chinese ports, and Europeans. These interactions enriched the lives of all of these peoples materially, spiritually, technologically, intellectually, and culturally. For Africa, they added new and vibrant strands to the many developments internal to the medieval continent, while creating avenues for medieval Africans to contribute to these other parts of the world their own ideas, cosmologies, technologies, and commodities.

Further Reading
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**Abdallah ibn Yasin (d. 1059)**

The spiritual leader of the eleventh-century Almoravid Movement, the Muslim scholar Abdallah ibn Yasin was recruited in 1039 to 1040 by the Sanhaja Berber chief Yahya ibn Ibrahim to come from North Africa to the western Sahara to instruct his people, a subset of the Sanhaja Berber known as the Juddala, in a more fully orthodox practice of Islam (see Almoravid and Almohad Movements).

Abdallah, whose Berber mother came from the southern Sahara herself, rose to this challenge that took him to the far fringes of the Muslim world where an only partial, and unorthodox to boot, embrace of Islam was the norm. However, after arriving he angered the Juddala with his very strict and rigid dictates, and they rose up in rebellion against his teachings. Consequently for several years Abdallah made a retreat, or hijra—an Islamic practice emulating the Prophet Muhammad’s own hijra of 622 when he withdrew from Mecca to Medina—from which he returned with the support of the Lamtuna Sanhaja. With this the Almoravid Movement accelerated, and by the late eleventh century had through military conquest created a vast, Berber-controlled empire stretching from Andalusia in southern Spain across the Mediterranean and all the way through the Sahara to its southern edge. Abdallah died in 1059 in the fighting that attended the Almoravid Movement’s conquests.

**Further Reading**


**Abu Bakr ibn ‘Umar (d. 1087)**

A member of the ruling family of the Lamtuna, a subset of the Sanhaja Berber of the western Sahara who were the earliest supporters and subsequent leaders of the eleventh-century Almoravid Movement, after his brother’s death Abu Bakr ibn ‘Umar played a key role as a military and political leader of this Movement that promulgated adherence to a more austere and orthodox Islam in the western Sahara and created a vast, Berber-led empire stretching from the southern Sahara all the way north across the Mediterranean into southern
Spain (see Almoravid and Almohad Movements). Following the emergence of the Almoravids in the mideleventh century, Abu Bakr quickly rose to the fore as one of the Movement’s military leaders.

After the Almoravids conquered important settlements in the Sahara that were central to trans-Saharan trade in the western desert and thus a source of great wealth, they moved further north and under Abu Bakr’s leadership conquered Morocco. After doing battle in North Africa, Abu Bakr returned south to the desert where he successfully put down other Berber challenges to the Lamtuna ascendancy. After serving as the political leader of the Almoravids following the death in 1059 of the Movement’s founder and spiritual leader, Abdallah ibn Yasin, Abu Bakr died in 1087 as the empire reached its greatest territorial and political strength. He was succeeded as ruler by his cousin, Yusuf ibn Tashfin, who had extended Almoravid control throughout much of the Maghrib and even into Muslim Spain shortly before Abu Bakr’s death.

Further Reading

African Traditional Religions

African traditional religions vary from ethnicity to ethnicity so subsuming them under one label is somewhat problematic, but because of commonalities between them generalizations can be made. African traditional religions are polytheistic, with a belief in multiple gods and goddesses, and spirits who can inhabit a wide range of natural features such as rocks, individual trees, sacred groves, caves, hills, mountains, lakes, and rivers. Often these religions contain a creator god, who is recognized as the supreme deity, as well as gods or goddesses of the earth, sky, waters, heavens, and weather.

Ancestral spirits play a prominent role in these traditions too and stem from beliefs about the afterlife: After death, a person who has lived a virtuous life becomes an ancestral spirit and continues to observe and influence the lives of its descendents still living upon the earth. The descendents do not worship ancestral spirits but are expected to remember them and honor them, for example, by making offerings of food and drink and invoking their names and memories of them on certain occasions such as the naming of a new child. A wide range of forms of religious leadership exist, with specialists serving as diviners, seers, spirit mediums, healers, prophets, oracles, and priestesses or priests attached to any one of the host of divinities. Religious observances include prayer, sacrifice, and offerings.

African tradition religions also embody a belief in the ability of deities and spirits as well as some people to wield unseen or special powers, through which they can affect the lives of others for good or ill, depending on whether the person harnessing this mysterious power is a benevolent or malevolent individual. A variety of protective mechanisms such as charms, amulets, and medicines, which can shield or guard against these special powers, can be made by religious specialists. In the medieval period (and to the present) most African converts to Islam and Christianity were unwilling to entirely abandon their former beliefs and instead practiced religious syncretism, blending
elements of African religious traditions, most notably beliefs in ancestral and other spirits, the protective forces of amulets and medicines, and special powers, with their new faiths.

Further Reading

Agriculture
In some parts of the continent Africans have farmed for thousands of years, dating to many millennia before the medieval period began, whereas in other places farming was adopted only on the eve of the medieval centuries. In the Western Desert of Egypt fixed agriculture dates as far back as 7000 B.C.E. and possibly far earlier, whereas by 5000 B.C.E. it was practiced in the Nile River Valley and what is today the Sahara, which was then a well-watered and fertile place. People were farming in the Ethiopian Highlands and in the forest zone of West Africa by 3000 B.C.E., if not very considerably earlier.

By the opening centuries of the Common Era farming had spread throughout the southern half of the continent from these areas of early cultivating and was practiced in virtually all of Africa. The embrace of ironworking, which moved across Africa between around 1000 B.C.E. and 400 C.E., led to an increase in the productivity, and thus the allure of farming by contributing far more efficient tools such as iron hoes, scythes, and knives. In keeping with the scholarship on the origins in Africa of animal domestication and ironworking, controversy and lack of consensus exist over whether farming was independently developed by Africans or transmitted to them by peoples from western Asia (see Domesticated Animals). Indeed both possibilities, indigenous innovation and diffusion from outside, may have occurred. However farming came to exist in Africa, it is indisputably the case that the majority of crops grown by early African farmers were African domesticates—types of plants indigenous to Africa that African cultivators transformed from their natural, wild incarnations into crops modified through seed selection for desired traits.

In the vast grassland regions of Africa the most important crops included the cereal grasses sorghum and pearl millet. In the well-watered Inland Niger Delta, which lay in the grasslands of West Africa, African rice flourished, and eventually its cultivation spread to the lands lying to the interior of the western African coastline from today’s Senegal to Liberia. In the densely vegetated and heavily watered climate of the rainforests lying along the equator, whose challenging environment did not allow farmers to cultivate grains, the earliest crop to be grown was the yam, eventually followed by melons, fluted pumpkins, gourds, and cowpeas. The output of the naturally occurring oil palm, raffia, and kola nut forest trees were exploited as well, and these highly valued trees were left standing when land was cleared for farming. The Ethiopian Highlands, whose elevation creates unique microclimates, saw the domestication of teff and noog, crops cultivated nowhere else on the continent (or in the world), as well as coffee, qat, and finger millet.

Moving beyond African domesticates, even the arid Sahara supported agriculture at its medieval oases, whose sources of water were harnessed via systems
of irrigation to raise crops including date palms, grapes, and a variety of other fruits. Dates, in significant demand in the lands to the desert’s south, were traded for the cereals and grains of the West African savannah that were equally desired by the desert peoples, an exchange that helped drive medieval trade between the Sahara and sub-Saharan West Africa. Other crops cultivated in medieval Africa whose origins lay outside the continent included wheat and barley from western Asia, which because of their need for a more temperate climate could be grown only in portions of North Africa, the Ethiopian Highlands, and the Nile River Valley, and a large number of Asian foodstuffs including citrus fruits, coconuts, sugar cane, Asian rice, cocoyams, and possibly plantains and bananas. The last flourished in rainforest environments and revolutionized forest agriculture because bananas require less labor to grow and process than yams and are simultaneously nutritionally superior. Across the continent, medieval African farmers also grew vegetables and chose to cultivate a diversified range of crops to minimize the risks of the periodic crop failure that is inherent in farming, and to increase the size of their harvests by taking advantage of the fact that different crops required the highest inputs of labor at different points in the growing season. They also identified and cultivated crops that would add to their diets sources of nutritionally necessary fat, important given limited medieval access to dietary fat acquired from animals.

In the forests people turned to the oil palm tree and in the West African savannah shea nuts filled this requirement, while Ethiopians utilized noog. Farming methods varied depending on the local environment: In the tropical rainforests where soil had low fertility, people practiced shifting plot agriculture, clearing land, using it for several years until the soil’s fertility was exhausted, and then moving on to a new or long-fallow plot. With the exception of Ethiopian Highland farmers, African agriculturalists practiced hoe rather than plow agriculture: The trypanosomiasis or sleeping sickness that proved fatal to horses and cattle made it impossible to use plows pulled by draft animals in many portions of the continent. Irrigation and terracing created additional arable land in more arid or very hilly locations, whereas those parts of Africa possessing reliable sources of water and a more level topography could be cultivated continuously even without such labor-intensive improvements. In addition to furnishing new ways to provide food for people’s daily diets, the development of farming in Africa had profound social ramifications. Farming required people to make the switch to sedentism rather than continuing the life of constant movement characteristic of foragers practicing hunting and gathering, and the combination of sedentary life and agriculture in turn promoted higher rates of population growth and population density. The creation of surpluses, common with agricultural production especially in tandem with herding, as well as the need to organize access to the resources of land and labor made increasingly valuable by farming, resulted in growing social complexity, with the emergence, in parts of medieval Africa, of heightened class distinctions and increased numbers of societies choosing centralized forms of government and forming larger states or empires. Simultaneously, however, large numbers of medieval African farming peoples continued to prefer and very successfully practice “stateless” forms of political organization, characterized by political authority broadly diffused across the members of their societies.

Finally, it is important to recognize that medieval African cultivators typically engaged in multiple productive activities rather than practicing only
farming. Many raised domesticated animals, most commonly cattle, sheep, goats, donkeys, and fowl. Many also continued to practice at least episodically the earlier subsistence activity of foraging, or collecting naturally occurring edible plants and hunting wild game. Trading surplus goods in local, regional, and long-distance trading networks was another common activity for medieval African farmers, though mutually beneficial systems of local exchange bound together farmers and herders, and farmers and foragers, in many parts of the continent.

Further Reading

Akan

The Akan-speaking peoples of West Africa originated on the savannah–forest fringe just south of the Black Volta in what is today the modern state of Ghana. Their history has been shaped in part by their proximity to the Akan goldfield, which lay in the forest region to their south. Although their early history is still imperfectly understood, from the first half of the second millennium C.E. the Akan were trading gold and kola nuts as well as other commodities north to Jenné-jeno in the Inland Niger Delta, from where these commodities entered trans-Saharan trade. As a result of this burgeoning trade the market town of Begho, with an Akan quarter, was founded on the forest–savannah border in the very early centuries of the second millennium. This development was followed around 1400 by the appearance of the early Akan state of Bono.

Akan gold became increasingly important as the older West African goldfields at Bambuk and Bure became less productive in the late medieval period, which led the itinerant Dyula traders of the savannah region to seek larger quantities of Akan gold from the fourteenth century. Shortly thereafter, in the fifteenth century, the Akan moved south into the rainforests of what are today Ghana. Their ability to live and farm in the challenging tropical forest environment was facilitated by their trade with a new party who avidly sought their gold, the Portuguese who arrived on the Atlantic coastline even further to their south in the 1470s. The Akan agreed to redirect the export of a significant portion of their gold to the Portuguese in return for guns, cloth, and enslaved Africans the Portuguese purchased from the polities of Kongo and sometimes Benin. The Akan used this slave population, as well as slaves they procured in northern markets in exchange for gold, to do the backbreaking work of creating clearings in the forest where farming could take place, and also some of the more dangerous forms of gold mining.

The Akan benefited from new and highly productive food crops introduced through the Atlantic exchange, such as corn and cassava, which together transformed forest agriculture and accelerated population growth. Clearly possessing a highly stratified society, postmedievally the Akan continued to create states in the forest and in the coastal region to the forest’s south, the most powerful and best known of which was Asante. The Akan provide yet another medieval example of the indigenous development of significant networks of
regional and long-distance trade exchanging the goods of varied ecological zones, which then intersected with external markets, in this case trans-Saharan and Atlantic, that provided additional opportunities for economic and social growth and complexity.

Further Reading

Aksum

Aksum emerged in the northern half of the Ethiopian Highlands in the first century C.E. and flourished for centuries until it entered its long decline in the seventh century. It was a sizeable African empire of its day, stretching from the former Meroë on the Nile in the west to the Red Sea in the east, which it sometimes leapfrogged to conquer southwestern Arabian polities. It also reached from as far as the current Eritrea in the north to beyond Lake Tana and the Blue Nile in the south. The material base for Aksum’s success lay in Red Sea trade, which provided connections to highly lucrative Mediterranean and Indian Ocean commerce. Aksum gained additional wealth from herding and agriculture, activities of long standing in this region, and also taxed the trade passing through Adulis as well as demanding tribute such as cattle from conquered peoples. With its prosperity Aksum became a place of great sophistication and material achievement. Urban centers flourished, including the capital city of Aksum and the Red Sea port of Adulis through which the empire’s international trade flowed. Literacy had come to the Highlands from South Arabia before Aksum’s emergence, and a tradition of writing in the local Highland language of Ge’ez continued throughout the empire’s reign. Aksum also minted its own coins, and early inscriptions in Greek and South Arabian Sabaean as well as Ge’ez stand today as testament to the international nature of this long-ago state. Another illustration of interconnections with people far as well as near can be found in the adoption of Christianity by the fourth-century King Ezana after its introduction by Christians from either Egypt or the Levant, who were in turn followed by sixth-century Syrian monks seeking converts, events that led to the flowering of Christianity in this region and the emergence of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Elements of Judaism were introduced very early in the Common Era too, apparently before Christianity came to Ethiopia.

Aksum is also renowned for its monumental architecture, most particularly its massive and striking stelae—tall, intricately carved stone monuments—which still draw tourists to Ethiopia today. Less well known are its rock-hewn churches, which presaged those of the Zagwe dynasty (see Dynasties). When Red Sea trade declined following the seventh-century redirection of shipping to the Persian Gulf so did Aksum, though a simultaneous change in climate, which negatively affected agriculture appears to have harmed the state too. The period between the onset of its decline and the twelfth-century emergence of the next major Ethiopian state, the Zagwe dynasty, remains imperfectly understood
in Africanist scholarship today, though it is clear that feudalism replaced international commerce in these centuries and the locus of Aksum’s power shifted south. See also Document 2.

Further Reading

**Al-Bakri (d. 1094)**

Al-Bakri, a Muslim of Arab background, was born at an unknown date and lived his entire life in Spain until his death in 1094. Although he never left Spain, by speaking with and utilizing the reports of those who had traveled to sub-Saharan West Africa he was able to author a critically important work on medieval West African history, variously translated as The Book of Highways and Kingdoms or The Book of Routes and Realms, which he wrote in 1068. It stands out as one of the earliest efforts to write a synthetic history of the western Sudan and addresses, among other things, the polities of Ghana and Takrur, the important Saharan oases of Sijilmasa and Awdaghust, the Almoravid Movement, and regional and long-distance trade involving West Africa and the Sahara (see Almoravid and Almohad Movements).

Al-Bakri’s description of Ghana provides one of the earliest written accounts of that empire and sheds interesting light on its court, its military, indigenous religious traditions, the relationship between the people of Ghana and the Muslims who visited it largely as a result of trans-Saharan trade, the state’s taxation of trade and control of gold, and other significant matters (see African Traditional Religions).

Further Reading

**Almoravid and Almohad Movements**

The Almoravid and Almohad Movements were Muslim social movements of the eleventh through thirteenth centuries arising, respectively, in the western Sahara and North African Maghrib that sought religious and sociopolitical reform. In both cases achieving rapid political control over large swathes of territory, they proved ephemeral and each fell quite rapidly after initial spectacular success. These movements arose among different clans of the Berbers, the inhabitants of the Maghrib and Sahara at the time of the Arab incursions of the seventh and early eighth centuries. Although many North African Berbers embraced Islam in the initial centuries of Arab contact, the new faith only more gradually made inroads among the nomadic Berbers in the vast Sahara Desert to the south, who began taking up select elements of Islam in the ninth and tenth centuries while practicing a religious syncretism also inclusive of many elements of their previous religion (see African Traditional Religions).
This syncretism, and the lax practice of Islam which was part of it, came to be viewed as unacceptable by Yahya ibn Ibrahim, an eleventh-century chief of the Sanhaja Berber who lived in the southwestern Sahara. He sought to introduce greater Islamic religious orthodoxy to his people in what quickly mushroomed into a far broader set of events known collectively as the Almoravid Movement. Yahya ibn Ibrahim’s impetus toward religious reform followed his 1035–36 hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca required at least once in a lifetime of all pious Muslims able to undertake the journey. Inspired by the experiences and knowledge he gained during his pilgrimage and associated travels, Yahya ibn Ibrahim stopped at Qayrawan in North Africa on his way home from Mecca, seeking an Islamic scholar willing to leave the more cosmopolitan North African coast to instruct the desert Sanhaja in the finer points of Islam. The Berber scholar Abdallah ibn Yasin agreed to take on this task, moved to the western Sahara, and began preaching a very rigid Islam based upon the Malikite legal school and emphasizing strict adherence to shari’a (e.g., Islamic law). Faced with dissent due to his harsh and unyielding dictates, Abdallah ibn Yasin withdrew for several years only to return and this time gain widespread support among the Lamtuna branch of the Sanhaja in the 1040s.

As the strength of his movement grew, the Almoravids, as his followers were now known, turned to military actions and by midcentury conquered important Saharan settlements including Sijilmasa on the northern desert fringe and Audaghast in the south, which led to a lucrative Almoravid control of trans-Saharan trade in the western Sahara. Even further to the south, under the leadership of the Lamtuna chief Abu Bakr ibn ‘Umar, the Almoravids extended their territory from the Sahara into the West African savannah below, influencing the mighty empire of Ghana, whose rulers converted to Islam at this time. On the other end of their expanding empire, by the mid-1080s the Almoravids also controlled the North African Maghrib from Morocco’s Atlantic coast to Algiers, from where they leaped the Mediterranean to seize Muslim Spain. The creation of this large empire, however, provided one reason for its very rapid downfall, because controlling this vast territory stretching from southern Spain right through the Sahara proved impossible. The rigid, legalistic Islam the movement imposed was widely resented too. And thus by 1150 the Almoravids were supplanted by the rising Almohad Movement led by sedentary Masmuda Berbers from the Atlas Mountains, which at its peak controlled the entire Maghrib as well as southern Spain.

The Almohads preached a far more tolerant form of Islam with a particular emphasis upon not legalism but more approachable Sufi mysticism. Also overstretched territorially, a mere century later the Almohad empire in its turn fell to various powers including Christians in the Spanish Reconquista and nomadic Berbers from south of the Maghrib, resulting in the end of Almohad rule by the midthirteenth century.

Further Reading
Askiya Muhammad (c. 1442–1538)

Askiya Muhammad (r. 1493–1528) founded the Askiya dynasty of Songhai, the largest-ever West African empire, after seizing power in 1493 from the son and successor to the great Sonni Ali (r. 1464–1492) who had transformed Songhai from a state to an empire in the 1460s. Askiya Muhammad further expanded the already-large empire, using a sizeable and greatly feared cavalry to enforce Songhai overrule over a huge swathe of West Africa.

He extended Songhai control far north into the Sahara to Taghaza, which was a critically important source of desert salt, and far south into the savannah well beyond Jenné-jeno, which gave Songhai control of the all-important export routes for gold. With authority over these two highly valuable commodities, which drove trade between the Sahara and West Africa, Songhai was perfectly situated to benefit from the profits generated by this trans-Saharan trade, which expanded at this time, and its taxation. Askiya Muhammad also stands out for his administrative innovations. He took firmer central control over many provinces of the empire by appointing individuals from his inner circle as their governors rather than allowing internal governance by local rulers as had been the norm.

A deeply pious Muslim, Askiya Muhammad is also noted for mending relationships between the empire and the Muslim scholars of Timbuktu and Walata, which had become frayed in the time of Sonni Ali. In fact, because of his religiosity and sensitivity to their interests and concerns, these scholars eagerly supported his successful challenge to Sonni Ali’s son and successor. In what he labeled a jihad, Askiya Muhammad further persecuted the Mossi, who had previously been pushed back by Sonni Ali, using the novel and explicitly religious justification that they were infidels. He also made the hajj, or religious pilgrimage to Mecca, shortly after ascending to power, and during it persuaded the caliph of Egypt to name him caliph, or commander of the faithful, of all Muslims in the western Sudan.

It was also under the rule and patronage of the Askiyas that Timbuktu rose to its greatest prominence as a center of Islamic scholarship. The Askiya dynasty’s alignment with the Muslim notables of its empire solved one problem, but caused another—when Morocco sent an invading force to conquer Songhai in 1591, the lack of internal cohesion, which resulted in part from the disjunction between the Islamized ruling elite and the non-Muslim commoners, contributed to the difficulty of successfully repelling the invasion.

Further Reading


Bantu Expansions

A key case study when considering the movements and migrations of peoples, cultures, and languages that were hallmarks of medieval Africa is found in the Bantu expansions. One question that has long occupied historians of
Africa’s more distant past is how virtually the entire southern half of the continent came to speak Bantu languages during the period from approximately 3000 B.C.E. to the early centuries of the Common Era. Previous generations of scholars envisioned literal migrations of conquering Bantu peoples, sweeping southward and in an easterly and then southern direction from their ancestral homeland where Nigeria and Cameroon nowadays meet.

More recently, this perspective has been replaced with the theory that though there was an early movement of Bantu peoples from their homeland south into the equatorial rainforests of what is today the Congo basin in Central Africa that began some 5,000 years ago, the dominance of Bantu languages throughout virtually all of central, eastern, and southern Africa is best attributed to the further slow, steady spread of Bantu languages, rather than of Bantu people engaged in conquest, through ever-enlarging zones of intercultural contact. Thus the earlier understanding of “Bantu migrations” of human beings has been replaced with the idea of “Bantu expansions” that were certainly linguistic and cultural in nature but did not involve a wholesale displacement of earlier central, eastern, and southern African populations engulfed by waves of Bantu immigrants.

Still a matter of considerable dispute is whether these Bantu expansions are also responsible for the appearance, in most of central, southern, and eastern Africa by the early centuries of the Common Era, of a broad range of linked phenomena that included ironworking technologies and agricultural innovations. Whatever their genesis, the spread of these trends across the entire southern half of Africa by about 300 C.E., as the medieval era was about to unfold, led to increased populations, sedentism, and heightened social complexity characterized by far more marked social hierarchies, urbanization, and centralized political authority.

Further Reading


Benin

The state of Benin was established by Edo-speaking peoples early in the second millennium C.E. in the tropical forests of what is today southwestern Nigeria, in the lands to the west of the lower Niger River. It expanded into an empire in the midfifteenth century under the leadership of its oba or King Ewuare, and at its greatest extent wielded authority over what is today most of Nigeria to the south and west of the confluence of the Niger and Benue rivers. At its height it incorporated some of the Yoruba city-states and the western Igbo into its territory.

Benin history asserts that its founder, Oranmiyan, descended from Oduduwa, the founding ancestor of the Yoruba, though linguistically it appears an unlikely connection. The claim does, however, indicate the desirability of asserting a connection to the Yoruba who have played such a prominent role in this part of the West African tropical forest zone. Benin City, the empire’s capital, is noteworthy for its massive earthen walls that were constructed by first excavating a ditch, from which was then erected a huge earthen bank. Including
the depth of the ditch, the tallest of these earthworks reached some 50 feet in height. In addition to the walls surrounding Benin City, earthworks were also constructed around other Benin towns with the result that in a region of approximately 2,500 square miles, an astonishing total of just under 10,000 linear miles of earthen walls were built. It has been estimated that their construction required 150 million hours of labor, a statistic bearing striking testament to the power of the state to command and control human and financial resources. Some have conjectured that these massive earthworks protected valuable farm-land from outsiders, an argument that has its roots in the fact that clearing tropical forest land for agriculture requires a staggering investment of human labor given the many tons of vegetation per acre that must be removed before farming can commence.

The oldest of these earthworks have been dated to the late first millennium, though a majority were probably constructed closer to the middle of the second millennium. Like the Yoruba with whom they claim a close connection and share significant elements of their culture, Benin is renowned for its tradition of brass sculptures created through lost-wax casting. This method involves making the original sculpture in wax, encasing that wax in clay, and then pouring into this clay mold molten metal, which melts and replaces the wax. When the clay mold is broken away, a brass sculpture remains. The Benin royals patronized the arts, and one specialty of its court sculptors was producing brass plaques depicting significant events in Benin history, which were then mounted on the palace walls. Sadly, when the British sacked Benin City in 1897, many of these Benin Bronzes as they are known, though brass was the usual medium of composition, became part of the loot of conquest. To the present, a number of them remain in the collection of the British Museum in London.
Berbers

The Berbers are the original inhabitants of the North African Maghrib whose precise origins have been lost to history. In antiquity they were known as Libyans and Numidians among other names; they called themselves the Imazighen. Premeditively, as conditions grew increasingly arid, some Berbers moved south into the Sahara’s northern fringes and then deep into the Sahara proper, making them a people of the desert as well as the Maghrib. This process accelerated in the first centuries C.E. with the introduction into North Africa and then the Sahara of the camel, which revolutionized life and movement in the desert.

Medieval Berbers living in the Maghrib were generally sedentary and practiced herding and agriculture, whereas those in the Sahara lived a largely nomadic existence and raised camels, controlled the movement of trade goods across the Sahara by camel caravan, produced dates and cereals with the assistance of servile labor at oases where they constructed underground irrigation channels, and at times raided one another and the settled communities of the desert fringe in the north and south, though they also developed mutually beneficial cooperative relationships with these more sedentary neighbors and sometimes even settled among them.

Socially, the Berber were divided into a large number of subgroups, prominent among them the Sanhaja of the western Sahara, the Tuareg of the central Sahara, and the Masmuda of the Atlas Mountains; these subgroups were then divided again into smaller lineage-based clans. Outsiders have often been struck by Saharan Berber men’s practice of veiling their faces below the eyes, and the indigo-colored cloth used for this purpose by the Tuareg has led some to call them the “Blue Men” though this is a problematically exoticizing label. Early medieval Berbers of the North African Maghrib adopted Christianity in large numbers by 400 C.E., with a particular affinity for Donatism, while a much smaller proportion embraced Judaism. The medieval history of the Berbers was then deeply affected by the seventh- and eighth-century Arab conquest of North Africa, and the subsequent eleventh-century large-scale immigration into North Africa’s Maghrib of the Banu Hilal and Banu Sulaym, nomadic pastoralists from Arabia, events which led to the near-total Islamicization of the Berbers of first North Africa and subsequently the Sahara, though in an assertion of independence early Berber Muslims typically embraced the unorthodox and egalitarian Kharjite branch of the faith.

Berbers often resisted cultural Arabization, however, retaining much of their own culture and language (though of necessity Berber men in particular often learned Arabic too), relocating further south away from Arabs at times, and asserting their political independence whenever possible. For example, Berbers created two notable medieval empires of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries through their Almoravid and Almohad Movements, whose territory stretched from the North African Maghrib across the Mediterranean to include al-Andalus or Muslim Spain and, in the case of the Almoravids, south right through the Sahara to the desert edge below.
Cairo

Founded as their capital city by the Fatimids in 969 after they gained control of Egypt, Cairo quickly became one of the world’s preeminent cities. The Fatimids situated Cairo at the base of the vast Nile Delta, near the older settlement of al-Fustat, which had been founded by the first Arabs to invade Egypt as a garrison safely inland, where it would be free from the predations of the Byzantine Empire’s formidable navy. In the economic renaissance of Egypt, which attended Fatimid rule, Cairo became a cosmopolitan center of commerce attracting merchants from Europe, the Middle East, and Asia as well as portions of Africa ranging from the Horn and East Africa to the West African sudanic belt, the Sahara, and the Maghrib.

The Fatimids devoted a portion of their substantial resources to the creation of Cairene architectural treasures including twin palaces located on either side of one of the city’s main avenues, and the al-Azhar and al-Hakim mosques. The Fatimids also established Al-Azhar University, still operating today, which quickly ascended to the pinnacle of medieval Islamic scholarship and drew Muslim scholars from far and wide, including Ibn Khaldun, one of the most prominent intellectuals of the fourteenth century. Constructed as protective fortifications, Fatimid Cairo’s walls and eight gates, two on each side of the city, still stand out for their beauty and design. The succeeding Ayyubid dynasty added to Cairo’s rich architectural legacy with its expansion of the city walls and construction of the Citadel overlooking the city from the east. The Mamluk dynasty that followed likewise served as a patron of architecture, underwriting the construction of dozens of mosques of great beauty, which are noted for their innovative construction and uses of minarets (see Dynasties).

Cairo’s overall fortunes were in decline by the late medieval centuries as Europe’s ascendancy began and diverted highly profitable trade away from the city. Cairo also suffered catastrophic population loss in the Black Death, which struck North Africa savagely in the fourteenth century, and it lost many people more in the recurrences of plague, which occurred with tragic regularity right into the nineteenth century (see Disease). Cairo has endured through these challenges, however, and as a vibrant metropolis today is among the world’s twenty most populous cities, with over 17 million residents.

Further Reading
Christianity

Although many Christians today erroneously consider it a “Western” religion, Christianity quickly spread from its home in the eastern Mediterranean south to North Africa where the great and cosmopolitan city of Alexandria emerged as one of the most important centers of early Christianity. Christianity was initially embraced in the first century C.E. by Jews in Alexandria, rapidly spreading from there to Alexandrian Greeks and then throughout all of Egypt over the next two to three centuries. Christianity also moved from Egypt west along the North African Maghrib, where it was adopted by many of this region’s Berbers by 400. In the fourth century, Christianity was adopted by King Ezana of Aksum in the Ethiopian Highlands, and after its embrace by ruling elites it gradually spread into the general population under the influence of proselytizing Syrian missionaries of the fifth century.

Nubians along the Middle Nile were the next to convert, which they did at the hands of Egyptian traders and Byzantine missionaries in the fifth and sixth centuries, and Christianity flourished there for almost 1,000 years (see Nubia). Christianity did not move beyond these regions of Africa until the European missionary activities of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As an early home to Christianity and with Alexandria one of its leading centers, Christian scholars from the region such as Augustine, Cyprian, Origen, and Tertullian contributed profoundly to early Christian thinking. The centrality of North Africa to early Christianity also meant that the region was deeply involved in many of the doctrinal disputes, which helped to shape the emerging faith, including the debates over Gnosticism, Arianism, Donatism, and Monophysitism. Some of the beliefs the Roman Church labeled heretical, such as Donatism and Monophysitism, found ready homes in North Africa, in the first instance among the Berbers of the Maghrib and in the second instance in the Coptic, Ethiopian, and Nubian Churches.

Finally, the early presence of Christians in North Africa meant that martyrdom following persecutions by pre-Christian Roman emperors affected the emerging faith. For example, many Berber Christians supported Donatism, which rejected accepting back into Christianity any who had even reluctantly renounced it in the face of Roman persecution. This history of persecution is also related to a key aspect of Egyptian Christianity, monasticism, which arose in the third century in part as a way to escape tortures and killings by withdrawal into the desert. This North African element of early Christianity influenced the religion globally, with an eventual embrace of monasticism throughout the Christian world. Additionally, African ecclesiastical arts add a rich strand to the world’s corpus of Christian art. Although sadly much of it has been lost to time in the ruins of former churches and monasteries that did not survive the Muslim incursions, its contributions range from the stunning murals of the Nubian Cathedral of Faras and many Egyptian churches and monasteries, which drew upon Byzantine as well as Nubian and Coptic conventions, to the triptychs, monasteries, and rock-hewn churches of Ethiopia.

In conclusion, though these early African churches profoundly influenced the course and history of Christianity not all of them have survived to the present. In the Maghrib, Berber Christianity did not live through the Muslim incursions of the seventh and eighth centuries except in isolated pockets, which were then targeted at a later date by the Almohads (see Almoravid and
Almohad Movements). Nubian Christianity lasted for nearly a millennium, only to be pushed completely aside by the late fifteenth century as a result of in-migrations of Muslims who came to numerically overwhelm the Christian populations. The Coptic and Ethiopian Orthodox churches have survived to the present, though the Coptic Church includes only 10 percent or so of Egyptians today, whereas the Ethiopian Church has maintained its dominance in its historical area of prominence. See also Ethiopian Christianity.

Further Reading

Coptic Church

Christianity was adopted by some residents of Egypt in the new religion’s first century. It was embraced initially by members of the significant Jewish population of cosmopolitan, urbane, multiethnic Alexandria, from where it spread over the next several centuries throughout culturally Egyptian populations, and village and rural areas. Christianity in Egypt developed into the Coptic Church. One notable aspect of Coptic Christianity is its strong and early emphasis upon monasticism with its life of poverty, prayer, and a rejection of worldly pleasures, a practice adopted by Egyptian Christians in significant numbers from the third century. They also formulated the two strands of monasticism, anchorite and cenobite, and from Copt’s monasticism eventually spread afar to all of Christendom.

Coptic monks who retreated from society to a life of contemplation and spirituality became known as the Desert Fathers, though in fact many women chose this path too. It is thought that one motive for retreat into monasticism might have been its resonance with earlier ascetic practices of the indigenous Egyptian religion, whereas another was the escape it offered from the severe Roman persecutions faced periodically by early Christians. Indeed, the savage persecutions, tortures, and killings that reached their apogee during the reign of Diocletian, who became Crucifixion of Christ with Saint John. Coptic icon, Byzantine influence, 14th century. The Art Archive/Church of Saint Barbara, Cairo/Gianni Dagli Orti.
Roman Emperor in 284 C.E., are also reflected in the fact that in the Coptic calendar, year one is year 284 of the Gregorian calendar in commemoration of how Copts to this day remember the year of Diocletian’s accession as the “Year of the Martyrs.” Another striking feature of the Coptic Church is its embrace of Monophysitism, the belief that Christ had only one nature, divine, rather than the divine and human natures asserted by the Roman Church. The schism that resulted from this early medieval doctrinal controversy places the Coptic Church in the Oriental Orthodox branch of Christianity, which also includes the Armenian, Ethiopian, Indian, and Syrian Churches.

So successful was the Coptic Church in Egypt that it is estimated that some 90 percent of the population had embraced Christianity by the fifth century. Following the seventh-century Muslim invasion and conquest of Egypt, however, Coptic Christianity faced new challenges. Although Copts initially welcomed these newcomers as a positive alternative to overrule by the Byzantines with whom they were involved in such bitter doctrinal disputes, and though Muslims in Egypt initially had a formal policy of accepting the legitimacy of other religions, they simultaneously imposed onerous poll and property taxes on non-Muslims. And though Muslim governments of Egypt relied heavily upon Coptic administrators initially, from the eighth century on the treatment of Copts generally worsened, though with occasional periods of relief and greater acceptance, until eventually Copts were forbidden to hold administrative positions as well as facing many other expressions of marginalization. In short, over time a number of factors led many Copts to choose conversion to Islam, and by the eighth to tenth centuries it is estimated that only 20 percent of Egyptians remained Christian, with a further reduction to around 10 percent by the fourteenth century. Approximately 10 percent of Egyptians remain Copts today. See also Ethiopian Christianity.

Further Reading

Currency
Many forms of currency crafted from a wide variety of media existed in medieval Africa. One type familiar to the contemporary world, coins, were first minted at Aksum, a state in the Ethiopian Highlands involved in long-distance trade, which began striking coins made of bronze, silver, and gold just premedievally, in the third century C.E., and continued their production into the seventh century. As well as facilitating the state’s extensive commercial transactions, today these coins serve as a valuable source of information about Aksum because inscriptions identify over twenty rulers and illustrations demonstrate Aksum’s early embrace of Christianity with the fourth-century change from pre-Christian religious symbols including a crescent and disk to the Christian cross. Gold coins named dinars were minted in large quantities for centuries at Sijilmasa, an important city in trans-Saharan trade located in the northwestern Sahara, as well as in North African locations including Fez and Marrakesh and in Muslim Spain.
Dinars played an immensely important role medievally not only in Africa but also in Europe and the Middle East, where caches of them have been recovered in modern archaeological digs. Almoravid dinars were of the highest repute due to their purity and exceptional craft (see Almoravid and Almohad Movements). Dinars made in all of these locations were struck from gold imported from the vast auriferous deposits of West Africa, as were a majority of the explosion of late medieval European gold coins that couldn’t have been created without West Africa’s precious metal. The Swahili of the East African coast were the third medieval African people to strike coins, collections of which dating from the tenth through fourteenth centuries have been found at Pemba, Kilwa, and other Swahili sites. At least one of the Kilwa coins made its way far into the interior to Great Zimbabwe, an important Swahili trading partner, where it was recovered in an archaeological dig (Zimbabwe Plateau). These examples speak to the production and circulation of African coins—and medieval Africans used coinage imported from intercontinental trading partners too—but far more medieval Africans utilized noncoin currencies. These alternatives ranged from cattle in East and southern Africa; to cowry shells imported from the East African coast in West and Central Africa; to cloth, and crosses fashioned from copper, in Central Africa; and salt, ivory disks, beads, gold dust, and copper, brass, and iron bars and implements in a wide variety of other locations. All of these forms of currency—which are actually ways of representing value, storing wealth, indicating social prestige, and mediating exchange—testify to the economic and social complexities of medieval Africa.

Further Reading

Disease
Diseases endemic to parts of the African continent have affected Africans in ways ranging from patterns of land settlement to the practicability of various subsistence and occupational activities. Diseases that have had particularly large impacts on Africans include the following. Malaria, which is caused by a parasite transmitted by the female Anopheles mosquito, exists in most tropical portions of Africa in the particularly virulent Plasmodium falciparum strain and was a major killer of people, particularly children, medievally as it is today. Other strains of malaria are chronic, life-long conditions, so that the fevers and extreme lassitude, which are among malaria’s effects, exact a high and repeated cost in sickness and inability to work. Sleeping sickness or trypanosomiasis, caused by a parasite transmitted by the tsetse fly, leads to neurological disorders and often death in people and some animals such as cattle, horses, and dogs. It limits cattle and horses to those drier parts of the continent where the tsetse fly cannot live and causes widespread illness among the people who live in the more humid areas where the fly and sleeping sickness flourish. It may have existed only in West Africa medievally, spreading elsewhere in the continent in succeeding centuries.

River blindness or onchocerciasis, transmitted by the black fly, is another devastating disease; as its common name implies, it is found in river bottoms that
are home to the black fly and causes skin disorders and sometimes blindness in those who contract it (see Rivers). Schistosomiasis or bilharzia, contracted through contact with water containing the disease-causing parasites, has debilitating effects including moderate to severe bladder, bowel, and kidney diseases. Guinea worm disease or dracunculiasis, caused by an intestinal parasite found in parts of the continent, is spread by drinking water contaminated with its larvae. After growing to lengths as great as 3 feet, the worms burrow slowly out of the host’s body over a period of weeks or months, typically emerging from the lower extremities and causing months of pain and physical incapacitation as well as the risk of secondary infections and permanent joint damage. Other diseases with profound effects upon medieval Africans include many parasitic diseases such as leishmaniasis, transmitted by sand flies, a variety of viral diseases including Lassa fever and yellow fever, and a host of diarrheal illnesses.

Plague carried by rats’ fleas made its way to medieval Africa too, with devastating outbreaks leading to widespread death and famine in Egypt and the North African Maghrib in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; it occurred regularly in medieval East Africa too. In addition to causing high rates of mortality, disproportionately though not solely infant and childhood mortality, disease caused a significant reduction in medieval people’s productivity due to the many physical disabilities it induced. The effects on animals of some of these illnesses likewise limited productivity, for example by removing from swathes of the continent animal dung as a crop fertilizer and the use of draft animals in agriculture, transportation, and warfare. Further, people often chose not to live in areas associated with high levels of river blindness or malaria, with the effect that some fertile and potentially highly productive lands became essentially off limits to human populations.

The geographic range of some diseases varied considerably over the medieval centuries due to climate change and human activities that led to expansions and contractions of the lands in which these diseases flourished. For example, the drying of West Africa during the late medieval twelfth through fifteenth centuries was associated with a southern shift of the tsetse fly zone, while the growth of farming in the early medieval centuries was associated with a rise in rates of malaria. Annual changes in climate and annual cycles of human activities also affected medieval disease patterns, for instance with peaks of malaria in grasslands during the rainy seasons that created the pools of standing water needed for reproduction of the mosquitoes responsible for its spread, and lower rates of the disease during dry seasons.

Further Reading

Domesticated Animals
Extensive utilization of domesticated animals has a deep history in Africa far predating the medieval centuries. Africans were certainly raising cattle as long ago as 5000 B.C.E. in the central portion of what is today the arid Sahara,
which was then a green and well-watered place, and in North Africa and the Nile River Valley. Cattle have also been raised in parts of East Africa since around 2000 B.C.E. or slightly later. It is probable, though not substantiated to everyone’s satisfaction, that Africans were also raising cattle as early as 7000 B.C.E. in the Western Desert of *Egypt*. It is still an open question whether Africans domesticated their own wild cattle independently, as growing numbers of scholars believe, as well as raising cows first domesticated in Asia that were then introduced to northeastern Africa, but they have indisputably herded domesticated cattle for 7,000 years if not considerably longer.

The spread of cattle throughout most of eastern and southern Africa has been a more recent development, concluding only in the first few centuries of the Common Era right before the medieval period began. In concert with the early Common Era embrace in these parts of Africa of ironworking technologies, these near-simultaneous developments ushered in a new way of life in medieval eastern and southern Africa characterized by intensified farming and herding that benefited from the utilization of far more efficient iron tools. Camels, critically important to herders in the driest parts of the continent given their ability to flourish in desert environments, were initially introduced to the Horn of Africa from Arabia around 3,000 years ago and from there spread south to what is today northern Kenya and north to Egypt and then, in the earliest centuries of the Common Era, from North Africa into the Sahara, where their use by the Berbers revolutionized desert life and trans-Saharan trade.

Although Africans from the Horn rarely used their camels as beasts of burden, Africans of the Sahara relied upon the camel to transport goods in and across the desert in caravans that could contain literally thousands of camels, with profound ramifications not only for Africa, but also for the peoples of the continents with whom Africans traded. Sheep and goats, which came from western Asia to northeastern Africa, where they were widely raised by 3000 B.C.E., are additional important domesticated animals, which were used across the continent by the time the medieval era began. The fat-tailed sheep was valued for its wool and the thick, viscous oil contained in its tail, which could weigh up to 12 pounds and provided an important medieval source of fat for the human diet. Chickens, first domesticated in Asia, made their way to Egypt and East Africa via the Indian Ocean by the beginning of the Common Era and spread across the continent over the next 1,000 years, where typically they were raised by women and valued for their eggs and, less frequently, their meat. Guinea fowl are a known African domesticate also raised by medieval Africans.

Horses, which were familiar to Ancient Egyptians over 3,000 years ago, were utilized extensively only in very select portions of the continent medievally, mainly North Africa and to a much more limited degree the West African sahel and northern savannah, due to their extreme susceptibility to trypanosomiasis. The far tougher donkey, very commonly used in the northern but not southern half of medieval Africa as a beast of burden and for human transportation, is very likely an African domesticate dating to around 4000 B.C. and derived from the African Wild Ass. Dogs, cats, and pigs rounded out the list of medieval African domesticates.

A number of important factors affected livestock rearing in medieval Africa. First, because cattle, camels, donkeys, and horses are all susceptible to the often-fatal trypanosomiasis or sleeping sickness transmitted by the tsetse fly, for the most part they could not be utilized in the portions of the continent where
this insect thrived, with the result that much of West and Central Africa as well as a significant chunk of the East African interior and a smaller stretch of its coastline were essentially off-limits to these breeds of livestock (see Disease). The most prominent exception lay in the N’Dama breed of cattle, which has significant resistance to trypanosomiasis and therefore could survive in the forests and savannahs of West Africa where it was raised. It is also important to note that human activities had profound effects on the medieval African environment and increased the portions of the continent inhospitable to the tsetse fly, which requires brush and moisture: clearing land for farming, and harvesting trees to make the charcoal used to smelt iron, increased the proportion of the continent composed of tsetse-free grasslands that could be used to raise cattle. Second, herders of camel and cattle in medieval Africa usually practiced transhumance, movement of the herds from place to place, often in an annual cycle driven by the alternating rainy and dry seasons, to gain access to successively fresh grazing grounds and water sources and avoid overgrazing in any one location. Third, though the meat of cattle and camels was eaten at times, medieval Africans far more commonly consumed the milk and in some cases the blood of these animals, thereby preserving their herds. Fourth, certain domesticated animals served as very important ways of holding, increasing (through natural reproduction), and circulating stored wealth for some medieval Africans: Camels were used for this purpose in the Horn and the Sahara, whereas cattle filled this role in significant portions of eastern and southern Africa. Finally, it must be kept in mind that the term pastoralism, which is often used generically in reference to herding in Africa, actually refers to a way of life in which the majority of a people’s food supply comes from their domesticated animals.

In reality, most livestock in medieval Africa was raised by people practicing a mixed economy involving farming and animal husbandry, as well as other activities such as craft production, trading, and foraging. Research has shown that even those medieval Africans who did focus their productive activities near-exclusively upon herding, and whose cultural ethos stressed the centrality of these animals to their social identity—in short, true pastoralists—typically lived in mutually beneficial symbiosis with settled agriculturalists. The pastoralists sold or traded milk, meat, and soil-enriching manure from their herds for grains, grazing rights, and crafts produced by their sedentary neighbors. In sum, medieval Africans raised a broad range of domesticated animals, which they utilized as sources of food, sources of transportation, and methods of storing, increasing, and circulating wealth.

Further Reading

Dynasties
North Africa was ruled by a number of Islamic dynasties over all but the earliest of the medieval centuries. Some of these controlled Egypt and the Maghrib, whereas others ruled only a portion of North Africa. The most significant of
these dynasties are mentioned here, though many others of lesser renown have been omitted. Shortly after the emergence of Islam in the early seventh century, and following the Arab conquest of Egypt in 639 to 641 by early believers, the first Muslim dynasty, the Umayyads (661–750), extended the Arab presence all the way across North Africa to the Atlantic, though they did not effect meaningful control of the Maghrib as they did Egypt. Ruling as the still-new religion was being shaped in fundamental ways, they are important for establishing the precedent that conversion to Islam must be voluntary to be meaningful, and thus, contrary to much popular opinion, forced conversion was neither their practice nor that of succeeding Muslim dynasties. Rather, a process of gradual assimilation led to conversion.

The Umayyad’s successors, the Abbasids (750–1258), ruling from their capital in Baghdad, controlled North African lands from Egypt to Tunisia until near the end of the first millennium. Their Shi’ite rivals, the Fatimids (909–1171), emerged as a Syrian-originated, Berber-supported challenge from Tunisia, from where the Fatimids drove east to Egypt that they took from the Abbasids in 969, in that year also founding their capital at Cairo. Their control of the Maghrib, however, faded away with their move east. Their two-centuries-long reign over Egypt was noted for its religious tolerance and for the prosperity, which followed the successful Fatimid reorienting of trade from the more distant Persian Gulf to the Red Sea which abuts Egypt.

The Fatimids were supplanted by the Ayyubids (1169–1250), founded by the legendary Kurdish general Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi (Saladin in the West), who the Fatimid rulers perhaps unwisely called on for assistance when Egypt was threatened by European Crusaders. Salah al-Din successfully repulsed that threat but then took over Egypt himself. In their turn, the Ayyubid dynasty’s army of Mamluk slave soldiers of Turkish, Kurdish, and Circassian origin took power into their own hands in their eponymous Mamluk dynasty (1250–1517), which maintained power in Egypt until the Ottomans supplanted them as the Middle Ages drew to a close. Additional Islamic Maghrib polities included the Almoravid and Almohad dynasties of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, whereas important dynasties ruling Morocco alone included the Idrisids in the eighth to tenth centuries, the Marinids in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, and the Sa’didids at the end of the medieval period. Most of the empires mentioned above controlled land far beyond the borders of Africa, so their overrule helped to incorporate medieval North Africa into the broader Muslim world.

Moving beyond North Africa, powerful Christian dynasties spread their rule from the medieval Ethiopian Highlands. Aksum, which emerged very early in the Common Era and was a large and dominant empire for centuries, was succeeded by the short-lived Zagwe dynasty, which came to power in the eleventh century when the Cushitic Agaw who were its rulers took control from the fading Aksumites. Zagwe’s successor, the Solomonid dynasty led by the Amhara, seized power from the last Zagwe king in 1270 and then ruled Ethiopia in one form or another until the overthrow of Haile Selassie in 1974. The Solomonid leaders legitimated their authority by claiming descent from King Solomon of Jerusalem and the Queen of Sheba, an assertion best understood allegorically rather than literally. This legitimizing story of the Solomids, recorded in the Kebra Negast or Glory of Kings, tells how the Ethiopian Queen Sheba, hearing of Solomon’s wisdom, traveled to Jerusalem to learn from him.
She returned to Ethiopia carrying his child, and their son, Menelik, in his turn eventually journeyed to Jerusalem to meet his father. It is said that either Menelik or one of his party stole the Ark of the Covenant and brought it back to Ethiopia, where the Ethiopian Church claims to be in possession of it to this day.

With these events Ethiopians believe that Ethiopia became the New Zion, Ethiopians God’s chosen people, and the Solominids Ethiopia’s anointed rulers. One important aspect of the Zagwe and Solomonid dynasties is their identity as Christian empires with state sponsorship of religion, accompanied by their use of conversion to assimilate conquered peoples. Many other important polities of medieval Africa that are not typically labeled dynasties could also be considered in this entry, because in them power passed from member to member of a ruling family—a common practice given the existence in many African societies of royal families through which succession occurred. See also Christianity and Judaism.

Further Reading


Ecological Zones

A simplified map of Africa’s ecological zones reveals a general mirroring of environments with movement north and south from the equator, which cuts through the middle of the continent. Along the equator itself, in Africa as in many other parts of the world, tropical rainforests predominate. Moving north and south, the next zone encountered is the Sudan or savannah. Further movement north and south leads to the sahel or semidesert, and movement north and south yet again to desert. Finally, along portions of the northern and southern extremities of the continent lie temperate Mediterranean climate zones. Temperate highlands, where the climate is affected by altitude, are found in the Ethiopian Highlands and on South Africa’s highveld. Although Africa is often stereotyped as mostly “jungle,” in fact the dominant landscapes are Sudan and desert, with rainforest occupying less than 10 percent of the continent’s landmass.

Africa’s rainforests are characterized by very high annual rainfall ranging from 55 to over 300 inches per year, and extremely lush and dense vegetation. The rainforests of Africa have posed a challenge, though not an insurmountable one, to people seeking to live in this environment given the difficulty of clearing land for cultivation or herding. Over the medieval centuries people living in them practiced foraging and, in places, farming of select crops well suited to the rainforest environment such as yams and oil palms. The well-watered Sudan, which spreads over large swathes of Africa, has formed a relatively hospitable environment for human habitation, and the agriculture and herding activities that had expanded across the entire continent by the early medieval centuries have flourished in these grassland and woodland savannahs. The sudanic pattern of alternating rainy and dry seasons does present certain challenges for these activities even in this relatively welcoming climate.
zone, in comparison to parts of the globe in which rainfall is spread more evenly across the year, but these challenges were met successfully by medieval populations. The semidesert or *sahele*—the word is Arabic for shore, in this case the shore of a figurative ocean of sand—receives significantly less rainfall than the Sudan, well under 20 inches per year on average, making this a steppeland region in which agriculture is practiced but with less than optimal outcomes, and in which hardier goats and sheep are raised more successfully than cattle (see *Domesticated Animals*).

Africa’s deserts include the mighty *Sahara* (desert in Arabic), the world’s largest at approximately the size of the 48 contiguous states of the United States. It extends over 1,000 miles north to south, reaching from just below North Africa’s coastal plain to around the latitude of West Africa’s Niger Bend. It also stretches a vast 2,000 miles west to east, from the Atlantic to the Red Sea. Africa’s other desert, the much smaller Namib, lies in the southwestern part of the continent where it runs right along the Atlantic shore. This coastal desert gains incrementally in rainfall with movement east and simultaneously up with the rise of the Great Escarpment to the interior plateau. The Kalahari to the Namib’s east, which is sometimes referred to as a desert, is more properly identified as steppeland like the sahel abutting the Sahara. Africa’s northern desert, the Sahara, has served as a barrier to and conduit for travel, trade, and communication: It constituted an impenetrable barrier between North and sub-Saharan Africa from the time it emerged as an impassable desert in the first millennium B.C.E. until the introduction of the camel reopened it to human passage in the first centuries C.E.

The portions of Africa constituting any of these climate types have shifted over the medieval centuries, with the Sahara and its accompanying sahelian zone, for example, expanding and contracting over time. Likewise, the sudanic regions have shifted with fluctuations in patterns of rainfall as well as climate changes introduced by medieval human activities such as logging, charcoal production, farming, and herding. See also *Rivers*.

**Further Reading**


**Education**

Medieval African societies that embraced *Christianity* and *Islam* also took up and typically in significant ways indigenized these religions’ traditions of literacy and formal education. Centers of learning were generally associated with monasteries or mosques.

Normal education occurred in Christian monasteries. This began in the desert monasteries of Egypt premedievally, in the earliest centuries of Christianity, whereas education in the monasteries of Ethiopia, though dating from middle of the first millennium C.E., reached its apogee from the twelfth century on in the time of the Zagwe and Solomonid dynasties.
In Muslim Africa, formal education ranged at the introductory level from Qur’anic schools in which children learned the Qur’an—the Muslim Holy Book—through rote memorization and recitation, to renowned medieval universities that produced and attracted some of the most highly regarded scholars of the medieval world. These universities offered instruction in subjects ranging from theology and textual exegesis to law, medicine, mathematics, geography, astronomy, history, literature, poetry, grammar, logic, and rhetoric. The most noted of these medieval African centers of Islamic scholarship were Al-Qayrawiyyin in Fez, Al-Azhar in Cairo, Az-Zaytun in Tunis, and Sankoré in Timbuktu. Al-Qayrawiyyin and Al-Azhar, founded in the ninth and tenth centuries, respectively, are generally recognized as the oldest continuously operating universities in the world. Because Islamic scholars often moved from institution to institution across the Islamic world, through these highly regarded universities Africa constituted a vital part of the medieval Islamic intellectual tradition.

In addition to these seats of learning and scholarship, in the medieval centuries private libraries with extensive collections of valuable and rare holdings were established by a number of wealthy West African Muslim families of a scholarly bent; some of them can still be found intact in West African locations today including Chinguetti in contemporary Mauritania and Timbuktu. Beyond the medieval systems of formal education situated in monasteries and mosques, though documentation does not exist for medieval African societies practicing oral rather than written traditions, it is a near-certainty that in them knowledge was also routinely disseminated to adults-in-the-making through many avenues, including rites of passage marking the transition to adulthood. These rites typically have involved educating adolescents about a given society’s values—its beliefs regarding social norms and expectations, duties and responsibilities, right behavior, gender roles, and marriage/childrearing.

Practical knowledge about particular crafts and occupations such as healing or spiritual leadership would have been passed on through formal apprenticeships too. The widely held expectation that children would have a productive role in society, helping in daily life activities such as farming, herding, child care, cooking, trading, and the like, also meant that education in these arenas occurred routinely as children matured. The transmission of political history and cultural knowledge through oral traditions, and of religious teachings and cosmological beliefs through religious practices, existed as additional widely practiced forms of education during the medieval centuries.

Further Reading

Egypt

Medieval Egypt was deeply cosmopolitan, reflective of its location in the southeastern corner of the Mediterranean, which gave it ready connections to
peoples of Europe and the Middle East as well as the African interior. Red Sea trade further linked Egypt to the Horn of Africa and the continent’s eastern shoreline, and also to Asians drawn into these interconnected commercial networks through Indian Ocean trade. This worldliness was reflected, among other things, in the religious diversity of medieval Egypt, which had moved just premedievally from practicing the still-extant religious traditions of Pharaonic Egypt to a widespread adoption of Christianity brought from the Levant and then, after the arrival of Muslim Arabs in the seventh century, to a gradual embrace of Islam.

Egypt’s numerous medieval visitors, many of whom stayed permanently as a result of the opportunities offered, adhered to a wide variety of additional religious traditions, and this led, for example, to significant Jewish populations in Alexandria and other cities (see Judaism). Politically, medieval Egypt moved from Byzantine overrule to governance by a succession of Islamic dynasties of various Middle Eastern and African provenances from the seventh century on, some headquartered in the great city of Cairo which was founded in 969. Economically, Egypt flourished during most of the medieval centuries due in part to the extraordinarily profitable trade of great geographic reach, which flowed through its lands. Agricultural production in the rich farmlands of the vast Nile Valley added to its wealth (see Agriculture). Tensions did exist in medieval Egypt between cities and rural areas, for its rulers tended to exploit the countryside’s farmers mercilessly. In the last centuries of the medieval era Egypt faced twin challenges—it was devastated by the fourteenth-century Black Death that killed an estimated 25 percent to 35 percent of the population and recurred regularly thereafter, and it also faced profound economic decline as Europe’s star rose and the merchants of that ascending continent siphoned trade away from the formerly mighty Egypt (see Disease). See also Document 3.

Further Reading

Ethiopian Christianity

Inevitably, the medieval trade that flowed from the Mediterranean through the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean and linked people from all of these regions resulted in the exchange of ideas as well as goods. Thus it is not surprising that shortly after its emergence Christianity made its way to the Ethiopian Highlands. Ezana, a fourth-century king of the Ethiopian Highland state of Aksum, adopted Christianity after being introduced to it by Christians from Egypt or the Levant. Influenced by Coptic beliefs, the Ethiopian Church, also known as the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, embraced what outsiders call Monophysitism and Ethiopian Christians label non-Chalcedonianism, a doctrine that asserts that Christ had only one nature, divine, rather than divine and human natures, which set it as well as other Oriental Orthodox Churches (Armenian, Coptic, Indian, and Syrian) at odds with the Roman Church that labeled this belief heretical. The Coptic Church from which it sprang also appointed the Ethiopian Church’s bishops, a right it retained through the midtwentieth century.
Another important element of Ethiopian Christianity is monasticism, introduced in the fifth century by monks from Syria known as the Nine Saints. They came to proselytize and helped to spread the new faith widely, far beyond Aksum’s ruling elite. They also sparked translating the Bible into Ge’ez, spoken in the Northern Highlands medievally. Although no longer a living language, Ge’ez remains the Ethiopian Church’s liturgical language. Another important aspect of Ethiopian Christianity, and one that also stemmed from the circulation of people and ideas discussed above, is Judaism’s early influence upon it, seen in practices such as a Saturday Sabbath, circumcision of boys on the eighth day following birth, Old Testament food proscriptions, Hebrew loan-words for explicitly religious concepts, and the like.

The new religion gradually came to be embraced by more and more Ethiopians, a process hastened early on by the Syrian monks and throughout the medieval period by the polities of Aksum and its successor states, the Zagwe and Solomonid dynasties of the eleventh and subsequent centuries, which all used Christianity as one legitimization of their secular authority. Aksumite leaders put the cross on their coins; the rulers of Zagwe sponsored the creation of elaborate rock-hewn churches at Lalibela to create a “New Jerusalem” following Saladin’s conquest of Jerusalem in 1187; and the Solomonid rulers claimed descent from King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, asserted that Ethiopians were God’s chosen people who had in their possession the Ark of the Covenant, and declared Ethiopia the new Zion. The Zagwe and Solomonid dynasties used conversion to Christianity to assimilate conquered peoples into their empires, sponsoring monasteries in new locations as Ethiopian political control spread and using their monks as proselytizers.

As the Church grew it accepted a variety of pre-Christian practices important to converts such as using amulets as protective charms, in the religious syncretism that has been a common feature of the spread in Africa of Islam as well as Christianity. The relative isolation of Ethiopian Christianity meant it developed following an internal logic and trajectory, so that it is in many ways distinct from the forms of Christianity practiced elsewhere, with for example a very strong emphasis upon frequent fasting. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church remains central to Ethiopian society and identity down to the present, though in the contemporary state of Ethiopia, whose southern half embraced Islam rather than Christianity medievally, members of the Ethiopian Church and Muslims constitute roughly equal percentages of the population. See also Dynasties and Document 6.
Ethiopian Highlands

Ethiopia, located in the Horn of Africa, has a medieval history in some ways distinctive from and in other ways very much in keeping with dominant strands of medieval African history. A portion of the region, the Ethiopian Highlands, stands out for its rugged terrain and the altitude, which gives its higher elevations a temperate climate, located though it is within the tropics. As early agriculturalists, Ethiopians domesticated a number of crops suited to Highland cultivation, which are grown nowhere else, and alone in tropical Africa embraced the use of the plow. Ethiopia’s early history is partially entwined with that of South Arabia, from which it is separated only by the narrow Red Sea. Migrations from Arabia by the first millennium B.C.E. brought to Ethiopia the Sabaean language and its consonant-based system of writing, preserved in inscriptions on coins and stone monuments, although this was soon modified by Ethiopians who refined its script and wrote in the local language of Ge'ez. Furthermore, the significant Jewish influence that came to Ethiopia early in the early Common Era and has affected elements of Ethiopian culture and identity ever since was most likely introduced from South Arabian Jewish communities (see Judaism).

Political interconnections also existed, and in the sixth century C.E. Aksumites briefly ruled a portion of South Arabia. Turning to the medieval Ethiopian economy, in addition to agriculture and herding Ethiopia was enriched in many medieval centuries from involvement in Red Sea trading networks, and through them commerce with the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean worlds. The city of Adulis, located on the Red Sea, played a critical role as the port through which were funneled many Ethiopian exports including gold, ivory, captives, rhinoceros horns, civet musk, and the aromatics frankincense and myrrh. Ethiopia was home to the medieval polities of Aksum and, after a period of retrenchment in the last centuries of the first millennium due to a decline in Red Sea trade, the Zagwe and Solomonid dynasties. Stunning ecclesiastical architecture that reached its apogee in the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela are among the artistic achievements of the Zagwe dynasty, though these structures are rooted in a far older Ethiopian tradition of sculpture that was previously expressed in the stelae, church, and domestic architecture of Aksum. Finally, Christianity held a prominent position in medieval Ethiopia. In the fourth century King Ezana of Aksum embraced Christianity, and though Muslim and Beta Israel populations also existed in medieval Ethiopia the Ethiopian Orthodox Church has played a fundamental role in Ethiopian society, politics, and identity ever since. See also Ethiopian Christianity and Document 6.
Food

Although foraging—collecting naturally occurring edible plant materials and hunting wild game—was still practiced at least episodically by many medieval Africans, Africa is frequently described as a continent of cultivators, and this was true for the medieval period as it remains today. Foodstuffs farmed on the continent medievally varied considerably depending on the local climate and ecology. In the rainforest zones of West and Central Africa yams and oil palm were early primary crops, the former serving as a main starchy source of carbohydrates while the latter added needed fat to the diet. Another crop eventually grown in the forest zone was the very prolific banana, which requires far more modest labor inputs than yam production and proved to be an extremely important carbohydrate source in this region where the high humidity and rainfall makes it difficult if not impossible to cultivate grains.

Africa’s savannahs were the continent’s primary site of cereal production, dominantly sorghum and millet. In the more well-watered parts of the savannah such as the lands surrounding the Inland Niger Delta farmers also produced African rice (*Oryza glaberrima*). Other savannah crops included groundnuts, the grain fonio, and melons. Finally, in the varied climates of Ethiopia with its mix of highlands and lowlands farmers produced some unique crops including teff and finger millet, both grains; noog, which produces a seed very high in oil; and enset, also known as false banana, whose pith is consumed. In addition to these specifically Ethiopian domesticates, imported cereals such as wheat and barley, cultivable in Africa only in Ethiopia and portions of the Nile River Valley, were farmed too. Farmers in all parts of the continent grew a variety of fruits and vegetables. In addition to crops domesticated in Africa, which includes most of those listed above, in the medieval period Africans cultivated Asian crops, which had made their way across the Indian Ocean in conjunction with its maritime trade, such as citrus fruits, mangos, and Asian rice (*Oryza sativa*).

These intercontinental contributions continued in the Atlantic Age, when many crops from the Americas such as maize, potatoes, tomatoes, and hot peppers came to play critical roles in the agriculture and cuisine of Africa. For farming in most of Africa seasonality was a meaningful reality, because the pattern on much of the continent of alternating rainy and dry seasons meant that cultivated food, plentiful following the harvest, was typically in very short supply by the time the next year’s rainy season commenced. A greater reliance on foraging was often a necessity during particularly extensive dry seasons. Beyond agriculture, medieval Africans gained animal protein from hunting wild game including birds, antelope, elephants, monkeys, and a variety of rodents; fishing, and preserving through smoking or salting portions of the catch not immediately consumed; collecting forest snails, a large species of land snail, and some insects including locusts; and raising domesticated animals including goats, sheep, fowl, cattle, and camels, though not all of these species could be raised in all parts of the continent.

Africans also produced a variety of alcoholic beverages including beer brewed by fermenting grains, palm wine made by tapping and fermenting the sap of certain varieties of palm trees, and mead made from fermented honey. Finally, medieval Africans produced consumables that are sometimes considered broadly medicinal rather than strictly foodstuffs. Included in this category are the mild stimulants coffee and qat, both grown in the Ethiopian Highlands, and
kola, which was harvested from naturally occurring kola trees in West African rainforests. A variety of herbal medicines were also part of medieval Africans’ utilization of the continent’s flora. See also Agriculture, Ecological Zones, Hunting and Gathering, and Regions.

Further Reading

Ghana

Ghana, one of the great medieval empires of West Africa, emerged in the sahel along the Sahara’s southern edge and at its height encompassed lands stretching from the Senegal River in the west to the Niger River in the east, to the important oasis town of Awdaghust in the north and well into the savannah in the south, territory that today lies in Mali and Mauritania. The origins of Ghana, or Wagadu as it was known by its own people, Ghana being the title of their kings and the name appended to the empire by medieval authors writing in Arabic, are not clearly understood. It appeared some time around the fourth century C.E., arising out of an already-established West African tradition of social complexity involving urbanism, ironworking, social stratification, and long-distance trade across ecological zones, a pattern demonstrated for example at Jenné-jeno in the Inland Niger Delta from around 250 B.C.E.

It is probable that people living along the desert edge also recognized the benefits of joining together to fend off raids made by the nomadic desert dwellers to their north, who periodically swept down upon sedentary villagers. Whatever the specifics of its rise, clearly Ghana predated the flowering of trans-Saharan trade and the arrival in this part of Africa of Islam, factors that earlier generations of Africanist historians erroneously believed to be responsible for its emergence. Ghana did, however, gain an additional and critically important source of wealth when trans-Saharan trade flourished. Its location on the border of the Sahara and sahel, as well as its position in between the source of West African gold—at this time Bambuk, located between the upper Senegal and Falémé rivers—and the Saharan rock salt for which that gold was exchanged, allowed it to profit hugely by taxing the trade that passed through its lands on the only trans-Saharan trade route through which West Africa then exported its gold.

Ruled by the Soninke, one of a number of West African Mande languagespeaking peoples, the empire held loose control over the other peoples of its realm who were allowed a high degree of autonomy in exchange for payments of tribute and recognition of Soninke sovereignty. To further ensure compliance, the Soninke also required the rulers of those they conquered to leave sons at the royal court, which glittered with public displays of the gold that underlay its prosperity. Ghana’s military, which included a cavalry very difficult for those without horses to combat, could muster up two-hundred thousand fighters according to the historian al-Bakri. Ghana’s capital city of Kumbi Saleh had a separate quarter for the Muslims who came from the Sahara and North Africa to trade, a number of whom were also hired by Ghana’s kings to
serve as interpreters, ministers, diviners, makers of protective amulets, and the like, and the empire exhibited a very high level of tolerance for this religious diversity. Ghana flourished until the Berber-led Almoravid Movement, which began in the eleventh century, successfully challenged its control of the southern end of trans-Saharan trade (see Almoravid and Almohad Movements). The Almoravids wrested Awdaghust from Ghana and that, coupled with a subsequent shift east beyond Ghana’s lands of trans-Saharan trade routes, as well as the onset of a drier climate less conducive to agriculture and herding, resulted in Ghana’s slow decline and eventual disappearance by the thirteenth century. See also Document 4.

Further Reading

Gold
Gold played a critical role in medieval Africa in part as a very valuable export highly desired by the continent’s trading partners. Trans-Saharan trade, which linked West and North Africa before extending to Europe and the Middle East; Indian Ocean trade, which connected East Africa with Arabia, India, Indonesia, and southern Chinese ports; and Red Sea trade connecting the Horn of Africa and Egypt with Arabia, the Mediterranean world and India were all wide-ranging commercial networks in which gold played a prominent role. It has been estimated that fully two-thirds of the gold circulating in Europe medievally came from African deposits, and that Africa supplied more gold to the late medieval international economy than any other parts of the world.

The main sources of this African gold were the Bambuk and Bure goldfields of West Africa that fed trans-Saharan trade, the former located between the upper Senegal and Falémé rivers and the latter along the Upper Niger, and deposits in the southern African interior that fed Indian Ocean trade and were located northwest of Great Zimbabwe between the Limpopo and Zambezi rivers on the Zimbabwe Plateau. The Akan goldfields of the West African forest zone began to be intensively exploited only as the medieval centuries were drawing to a close, when the Bambuk and Bure goldfields were nearing exhaustion. (Much more recently, since their discovery in the late nineteenth century, the vast gold reefs of South Africa have been intensively mined too.)

In addition to meeting a seemingly insatiable external demand for gold, which enriched many African polities, medieval Africans themselves made use of the metal for a variety of purposes. Due to a paucity of sources of salt in the savannah, West Africans traded their gold for much-needed salt from the Sahara which they used to satisfy their nutritional needs for this essential mineral and as a medicine for their animals; they also used it to cure hides and preserve meat. Rulers of the great sudanic empires Ghana and Mali utilized it for display purposes justifying their authority, on ceremonial appearances draping their bodies in gold ornamentation ranging from bracelets, rings, and necklaces to gold-encrusted sandals and headwear. Members of their retinues carried ceremonial objects of solid or plated gold, and even royal animals such
as horses and dogs shared in the display with gold leashes, collars, tethers, and the like. Gold nuggets were the exclusive property of the king of Ghana, whereas gold dust served as currency, which could be possessed by anyone.

Gold and gold-plated objects have also been uncovered from archaeological excavations of the medieval polities of Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe, located, respectively, in the Limpopo Valley and on the Zimbabwe Plateau. Women of the medieval West African Sudan often held their personal wealth in the form of gold jewelry, such as nose-rings and earrings of stylized design. Goldsmiths made their living working the precious metal, whereas others benefited from collecting it in unmodified form through mining or panning auriferous soil.

Further Reading

Hausa

Hausa-speaking peoples emerged in the grasslands of what are today northern Nigeria and southern Niger, in the region to the west of Lake Chad and well to the north of the confluence of the Niger and Benue rivers. This placed them between the medieval West African states of first Mali and then Songhai to their west, and Bornu to their east, and some have postulated that they acted as a buffer between these powerful empires (see Kanem-Bornu). At times the Hausa fell loosely under the orbit of Songhai. Hausa origins remain murky and not clearly understood though it is known that ironworking populations of unknown identity existed in this region in the first millennium C.E.

A distinctly Hausa culture was apparent by the eleventh century. In the fifteenth century, the Hausa developed a series of independent city-states, each based on a walled capital city ruled by a Muslim sarki or king. Among the most prominent of these cities were Kano, Katsina, Gobir, and Zazzau (Zaria). An overarching state encompassing all of the Hausa polities never developed, and instead the city-states existed as rivals, engaging repeatedly in warfare fueled by their cavalries. The Hausa had a mixed economy in which agriculture, large-scale craft production, and trade all played significant roles. Their location in the grasslands allowed for extensive farming of crops including millet, groundnuts, and beans as well as numerous vegetables. A significant cloth industry developed at Kano, whereas other cities emphasized metalworking, leatherworking, and glassmaking.

The Hausa also played a prominent role in long distance trade within West Africa, where they did business with Songhai, Bornu, the Akan, and points beyond through a network of specialist traders who created stranger’s quarters from which to conduct their trade in numerous locations outside of Hausaland. To facilitate their many commercial transactions, these traders also developed a shell currency using cowries from the East African coastline first imported to North Africa by Arab merchants and then sent south across the Sahara to Hausaland. The Hausa also traded across the Sahara to North Africa, and in regards to trans-Saharan trade they benefited from the general
shift east to the central Sudan of West African–Saharan commerce that occurred in the sixteenth century. Imports included the horses, which fed their warfare and facilitated their large-scale enslavement of peoples lying to their south, some of whom they retained as agricultural workers and others of whom they sold north into trans-Saharan trade.

Islam came to Hausaland no later than the fourteenth century, though in keeping with the experiences of other West African states the urban elites were the first to convert, with a mass embrace of Islam occurring only with the early-nineteenth-century Fulani jihad. At the conclusion of the medieval period the Hausa city-states were reaching their apogee, which lasted from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries.

Further Reading

Hunting and Gathering

Following the emergence of fixed agriculture, Africa became what is often referred to as a continent of farmers. At an earlier stage of human society, however, before the ascendancy of herding and farming, people gained sustenance through hunting and gathering. This practice of hunting wild animals and gathering naturally occurring sources of plant and insect food, also known as foraging, continued to play a vital if steadily decreasing role in the lives of Africans over the course of the medieval centuries. Many medieval Africans practiced foraging episodically as a useful and practical supplement to other methods of subsistence, whereas ever smaller numbers maintained hunting and gathering as their primary mode of sustenance.

Foraging people typically organized themselves into small bands of 12 to no more than 50 to 100 individuals who worked cooperatively and practiced egalitarian, corporate decision making while eschewing political leadership vested in select individuals. Highly mobile to take advantage of food and water sources in varied locations, foragers owned few material possessions and limited their childbearing so they could travel lightly. Although the relative material poverty of foragers often appeared unappealing to sedentary peoples who owned many more possessions, in fact the nomadic foragers had the great benefit of extensive leisure time and a more varied, reliable, and probably nutritious diet than that consumed by numerous farming and herding peoples. Studies of modern foragers show that they typically spend fewer than 20 hours weekly collecting food and devote their considerable free time to extensive socializing and producing works of art—the prolific and beautiful rock art of Africa is largely the creation of foragers—and it is believed that this abundant leisure time was true of foragers in the past also, who actually lived on less marginal land than they do today. In an additional benefit, hunting and gathering societies appear to have practiced near equality of women and men. Foragers had a gendered division of labor in which men mainly hunted wild game and women mostly gathered. Using spears or bows and arrows often tipped with poison to slowly kill large game, snares and nets for small prey and birds, and hooks for fish, men hunted...
a wide range of animals including ostrich, zebra, buffalo, rhinoceros, giraffe, hippopotamus, wildebeest and quagga.

Women collected wild fruits, vegetables, berries, nuts, seeds, grains, eggs, insects, grubs, and honey and unearthed tubers with digging sticks. On average far more than half, most likely around three-fourths, of the food consumed by foragers came from gathering, making women's contributions highly significant. After farming spread across Africa, a process essentially complete by the early medieval years, foragers often lived in symbiotic and mutually beneficial relationships with their settled neighbors, trading items such as honey and meat for agricultural products and metal wares. This transformation did have the negative effect of slowly pushing foragers off the more fertile land desired by cultivators, and exposing them to the broader range of serious diseases that took root in farming communities as part of the agricultural transition to sedentism. Foragers also had a typically short life span and ran significant risk of accidental injury and early onset of certain illnesses such as arthritis. Given the substantial social and nutritional benefits of foraging, though, it is perhaps not surprising that small populations of Africans continue to practice hunting and gathering to the present in the Congo basin and the Kalahari, resisting all pressures to adopt a settled life. See also Ecological Zones and Regions.

Further Reading

Ibn Battuta (1304–1368/1377)

Ibn Battuta, the most celebrated of medieval Muslim travelers, traversed virtually all of the Muslim world of his day in epic journeys that totaled over 70,000 miles in length. Born to Berber parents in Tangier in today’s Morocco, as a young man of 21 who had studied Muslim theology and jurisprudence Ibn Battuta left his home in North Africa to make the hajj, or religious pilgrimage, to Mecca in the Arabian Peninsula, a journey which he extended into a 24-year odyssey to Yemen, Oman, East Africa, Central Asia’s steppes, the Indian subcontinent, Ceylon, Sumatra, the Maldives, Constantinople, Anatolia, Baghdad, Persia, the Balkans, the Caucasus, Spain, and possibly China too—he claimed to have traveled to the last of these, but all do not find his account of China convincing. In a second, much shorter journey, which lasted from 1352 to 1354 Ibn Battuta traveled from Morocco south across the Sahara to Mali in West Africa.

As Dunn’s Foreword to Hamdun and King’s translation of Ibn Battuta’s writings points out, his journeys provide evidence for what the modern world might see as surprisingly frequent intercontinental travel across the medieval Muslim world in an example of “globalization” many centuries old— Ibn Battuta was constantly coming across old friends in even obscure places, served as a diplomat linking far-flung parts of the Muslim world, and at times made a living pedaling his skills as a jurist in diverse Muslim communities widely separated from one another geographically yet unified by the bonds of religion and the common language of Arabic. In addition, Ibn Battuta also left the world extremely important renderings of the fourteenth-century East African
coast and West African Sudan; he wrote up his memoirs in his book titled the *Rihla*, or Journey, which was edited by the scholar Ibn Juzayy.

Although Ibn Battuta’s descriptions of the places he visited have at times been critiqued for their limited scope—they tend to emphasize trade, political elites, and, because he was a gourmand, food—they also paint vivid portraits of these worlds in the entertaining words of an individual who clearly delighted in his travels and travails, giving us vital and illuminating tidbits of information that can be found nowhere else. See also Islam and Documents 8 and 9.

**Further Reading**


**Igbo**

The Igbo were among the most prominent medieval inhabitants of what is today southeastern Nigeria. Most of the Igbo have lived in the lands to the east of the Niger Delta, which is formed as this mighty river nears the Atlantic, though much smaller numbers of Igbo have also resided to the Delta’s west. Although the western Igbo possessed hierarchical governmental structures, the eastern Igbo are a people who with very few exceptions eschewed the formation of centralized political structures in favor of a decentralized system of governance in which responsibility for decision making was spread horizontally across many members of their small, village communities. Many medieval Africans across the continent practiced this decentralized form of government, creating what are often referred to today as a stateless or acephalous societies, of which an additional prominent example can be found in the city of Jenné-jeno.

Although past generations of scholars typically saw this decentralized method of political organization as inferior to centralized political authority, increasingly today it is recognized as a highly stable and sophisticated option that often created societies more durable and long-lasting than hierarchically organized states and empires, as well as one that allowed for the emergence of complex social identities and organizations and the accumulation of significant wealth. In regards to their economic base, the Igbo raised domesticated animals and farmed in their lands that lay behind the Delta. They also engaged in trade north in return for the products of the savannah and Sahara, and south with peoples of the Delta and coast who could offer salt and fish in exchange for the kola nuts, meat, and agricultural goods of the Igbo.

Perhaps the best-known medieval Igbo location is the ninth-century burial site of an obviously prominent and wealthy man found at the village of Igbo-Ukwu. Its excavation has provided evidence of connection to intercontinental trading networks, because the grave contained over one-hundred thousand glass beads thought to have been imported from outside of Africa. The excavation has also revealed that, in common with the Yoruba and people of Benin who lived nearby, the Igbo had a medieval tradition of producing cast metal sculptures of extremely high artistry and technical virtuosity because a variety of cast bronze artworks including basins, pots, and bowls with a rich profusion of delicately worked details were unearthed from this single gravesite.
Islam

Islam, which means submission (to God) in Arabic, came to the African continent very soon after the religion emerged in the Arabian Peninsula early in the seventh century C.E. when the Prophet Muhammad received from the Angel Gabriel God’s revelations, which form the Muslim holy book, the Qur’an. By the early eighth century, Muslim Arabs conquered the North African coast from Egypt to Morocco to a depth into the African interior of up to 200 miles, and a substantial though far from universal Islamization followed within several centuries.

From North Africa Islam more slowly moved south, first to the Berbers of the Sahara and then into the sahel and northern savannah belts of West Africa. Traders were often the first to convert, recognizing the value of sharing religious ties with their trading partners. In West Africa the next to convert were often political rulers, who typically combined the practice of Islam with indigenous religious observances in recognition of the religious identities and expectations of their mainly non-Muslim subjects—few sub-Saharan commoners embraced Islam medievally. Meanwhile Islam also traveled from its Arabian homeland to the Horn of Africa and the East African seaboard in the first centuries of the faith, again in conjunction with commerce. Although Islam moved very gradually into the Horn’s interior medievally, in East Africa it remained solely a coastal phenomenon. In the medieval centuries heterodox forms of Islam often flourished in the Maghrib, which became the new home of immigrants from outside the continent who practiced forms of the religion, such as the Shi’ite and Kharijite sects, unwelcome in the parts of the Muslim world where mainstream Sunni Islam prevailed.

Berbers who embraced Islam but resented overrule by cultural outsiders were also drawn at times to these heterodox sects, as a means of protest and because these forms typically tolerated the common practice which attended the spread of Islam in Africa of retaining elements of pre-Islamic religious traditions. Sufism, an Islamic mysticism, which stresses a more personal spirituality, also found a ready home on the continent, first among North Africans and postmedievally among West Africans. Whatever form was embraced, Islam provided the great benefit of connecting Islamized parts of Africa to the global Islamic world of the medieval centuries, a process facilitated by the fact that the hajj, or religious pilgrimage to the sacred city of Mecca on the Arabian Peninsula’s Red Sea coast, is one of the Five Pillars of the faith, incumbent upon all Muslims able to fulfill the journey. In another momentous development, Islam also brought to Islamized portions of medieval Africa the Arabic script, and literacy in

Further Reading
Arabic and those African languages whose speakers began writing their vernaculars using this script.

Further Reading

Jenné-jeno

Jenné-jeno, located in the richly fertile lands of the Inland Niger Delta in today’s Mali, is a striking example of early West African urbanization. Jenné-jeno emerged premedievally, around 200 B.C.E., was at its peak from the ninth into the eleventh centuries, and then slowly declined before being entirely abandoned by the early fifteenth century. It is the best researched and therefore best understood example of a type of urbanization that appeared in West Africa at this time and was characterized by what the archaeologists Susan and Roderick McIntosh, Jenné-jeno’s principal investigators, have labeled the Urban Complex or clustered city.

These Urban Complexes contain one or more primary settlements closely surrounded by a cluster of smaller, physically distinct urban satellites, all of which together form a single city. These urban conglomerations, found at numerous West African locations within and beyond the Inland Niger Delta, were characterized by marked occupational specialization, with the producers of particular craft and subsistence items such as iron wares, copperwares, pottery, and individual foodstuffs living in the separate satellite settlements located in close proximity to the primary settlement(s). The original settlement at Jenné-jeno, for example, had no fewer than 69 of these satellites, all located within 2½ miles of the urban core. In toto they are estimated to have had a population of over ten thousand people at their peak, individuals who exchanged their various products with one another in a system of local exchange. In addition to this trade, Jenné-jeno was also part of a far-reaching system of commerce stretching across West Africa, which involved the exchange of goods specific to the region’s various ecological zones.

Evidence for this exchange lies, for example, in the iron smelting and working that existed at Jenné-jeno from its inception, though the closest iron ore was located over 30 miles distant, and in the copper working that occurred at Jenné-jeno as early as the fifth century C.E., although the sources of copper ore were some 200 miles away. Because Jenné-jeno lay on the Niger River that gave it relatively easy access to the sahel and Sahara to the north and the forests to the south, and was in a location that also provided ready connections to land routes leading east and west within the Sudan, it was ideally situated to be a major locus of exchange for the goods of all of these areas. In addition to shedding light on the nature of early West African urbanism and long distance trade, Jenné-jeno is significant as an important example of their emergence even in the absence of the hierarchical social structures and centralized governance that Western academics have long assumed are their necessary prerequisites.
The extensive archaeological excavations conducted at Jenné-jeno over the past 30 years have revealed no sign of social or political hierarchies such as monumental architecture, or distinct caches of valuable objects that are the status-conferring possessions of an elite, and the McIntoshes postulated that it possessed a heterarchical structure in which the city’s many discrete social groups were not ranked hierarchically but instead shared power horizontally. Thus, Jenné-jeno did not require centralized political authority to achieve any of its developments and, in conjunction with examples of heterarchical social organization and urbanization from other continents, provides a basis for challenging long-held beliefs about the preconditions necessary for cities and long-distance trade to emerge. Jenné-jeno refutes another long-held belief too: that urbanization, long distance trade, and social complexity in West Africa appeared only after the onset of trans-Saharan trade, which brought with it Arab and Islamic external influences long asserted to be necessary stimuli to these West African developments. Instead, Jenné-Jeno demonstrates entirely indigenous West African processes of early urbanization and social complexity, which predated by many centuries trans-Saharan trade and the influence of these outsiders. In fact, the McIntoshes argued persuasively that trans-Saharan trade could eventually flourish as it did in part because of the deeply rooted sub-Saharan trading networks that could now be used to channel the goods of West Africa to more northern markets.

Jenné-jeno declined over the course of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, most likely in response to a drying climate, the growing importance of Islam, and changes in commercial patterns. As it faded Jenné-jeno was eclipsed by the new city of Jenné, which lay fewer than 2 miles to its northwest and moved into its ascendancy as the medieval period drew to a close.

Further Reading

Judaism
Jews have lived in North Africa since Biblical times, some drawn, like so many individuals and conquerors over the millennia, by the economic opportunities created by the region’s involvement in the commerce of the Mediterranean world and its far-reaching trading networks. Other Jews arrived in North Africa after fleeing persecution, for example at the hands of Romans in the first century C.E. and Spaniards during the medieval Reconquista. Although most of these individuals resided in Jewish communities located in innumerable cities and towns across North Africa from Egypt to Morocco, some medieval Jews moved further into the continent due to their involvement in trans-Saharan trade, taking up residence in Saharan oases such as Sijilmasa and Tuat; they also worked in these communities as goldsmiths.

Often relations between Jews and the dominantly Muslim medieval populations of North Africa and the Sahara were entirely cordial and amicable. At other
times, however, they were not; the Almohad Empire was notably intolerant of its Jewish population, and in the 1490s the Muslim scholar Muhammad al-Maghili led a movement to expel the Jews from Tamanrit in Tuat (see Almoravid and Almohad Movements). Jews in medieval Spain played a key role in the creation of the earliest European maps depicting the lands lying beyond North Africa, no doubt receiving information from friends and relatives living in those regions in this era when European knowledge of these lands was infinitesimal. The famous Catalan Atlas of 1375 was the work of the Sephardic Jew Abraham Cresques of Majorca. In addition to these North African and Saharan Jewish communities, the Beta Israel of Ethiopia, formerly called the Falasha though that term is recognized as a pejorative today, formed what has in recent centuries come to be thought of as another medieval African Jewish community. Their origins are the topic of considerable and politicized dispute today; what is indisputable is the evidence that from the beginning of the common era Judaism, most likely introduced from South Arabia, influenced key elements of Ethiopian culture—for example, medieval Ethiopians celebrated their Christian Sabbath on Saturday; followed dietary laws similar to those prescribed by Jewish law; circumcised male infants on the eighth day after birth; incorporated numerous Hebrew loan-words into their language, and much, much more—and that in the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries a segment of the Ethiopian population who came to be known as the Beta Israel embraced an overtly “Israelite” identity as an act of resistance to the imperialist and Christian Solomonid dynasty of Ethiopia that was encroaching upon their territory and marginalizing them economically and socially.

Postmedievally, a sizeable Jewish community has developed in South Africa in the modern era, while in the second half of the 1900s the many vibrant Jewish communities that had for so many centuries and even millennia existed in North Africa, Ethiopia, and Saharan oases largely vanished as a result of out-migration to other parts of the world, casualties of twentieth century politics. See also Document 10.

Further Reading

Kanem-Bornu

The state of Kanem, located in the central West African Sudan to the north and east of Lake Chad, had emerged by the tenth century C.E. if not considerably earlier, founded by Zagawna pastoralists and from the eleventh century led by the mais or kings of its Saifawa dynasty from their capital at Njimi. Kanem derived much of its wealth from trans-Saharan trade, and the caravan route from its lands through the Fezzan to Tripoli constituted the shortest and most easily traversed of all of the trade routes crisscrossing the Sahara.

Because Kanem lay well to the east of West African sources of gold, unlike the medieval states of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai, this most precious of metals
was not the basis for its trans-Saharan trade. Instead, slaves were Kanem’s main export, in return for which they received highly valued horses from North Africa. The horses, used in cavalries, gave Kanem a decisive military edge over the peoples living to their south who Kanem raided and enslaved in a continuous and bloody cycle of violence. Kanem also exported ostrich feathers and ivory, as well as taxing agriculture and collecting tribute. In the late fourteenth to early fifteenth centuries, as a result of challenges to Saifawa leadership by the Bulala and others, and also perhaps a drying climate, the rulers of Kanem moved to Bornu in the lands, which lay to the south and west of Lake Chad.

Bornu had long been tributary to Kanem; now, from the new Saifawa capital of Gazargamo, it became the seat of power to which Kanem was made subordinate. Among the most prominent of Kanem and Bornu’s rulers were Mai Dunama Dibalami who ruled in the first half of the thirteenth century and Mai Idris Aloma who reigned from the 1560s until the end of the sixteenth century. In addition to expanding Kanem, which rose to new heights under his rule, Dunama Dibalami’s fame rests on the overt challenge he laid down to local religious practices. Although Kanem emerged as a non-Islamic state, by the later eleventh century its rulers had adopted the new religion. As in most medieval West African polities, Muslim rulers had also to accommodate the beliefs of their non-Muslim subjects, leaving them to walk a constant tightrope between the religious expectations of followers of the two faiths. Dunama Dibalami responded in part by breaking open a sacred religious object from the local religious tradition said to safeguard the dynasty so long as it remained intact, which by infuriating traditionalists furthered the stresses which resulted 250 years later in the Saifawa dynasty’s move to Bornu.

Mai Idris Aloma is noted for his military expansion of the empire, facilitated by its fearsome cavalry, whose military leaders emerged as an elite when they were rewarded for their efforts with gifts of large estates. Trans-Saharan trade flourished during Idris Aloma’s rule as well. He also gave strong support to Islam: New mosques opened, conversion accelerated, and Islamic scholarship in Bornu flourished for centuries to come. Recognizing their power, he also began importing guns from North Africa along with Turks to train his troops in their use. He strengthened diplomatic relationships with important trading partners and coreligionists in Tripoli and far-away Turkey. Bornu, which reached its greatest strength in the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries, continued to be ruled by the Saifawa into the nineteenth century though by then its territory was much shrunken.

Further Reading

Kilwa

In the fourteenth century Kilwa, an island located just off the coast of present-day Tanzania, was the wealthiest and most renowned of the Swahili cities, a prominence it achieved due to its ability to gain a near-monopoly over the export of gold from the East African coast. The gold traded by the Swahili was
mined far away in the southeastern African interior, on the **Zimbabwe Plateau** located between the Zambezi and Limpopo **rivers**. It was then funneled to the Swahili by the state of Zimbabwe via Sofala, a coastal port town, which lay south of the Swahili coast and due east of Zimbabwe in today’s Mozambique. By controlling the coast around Sofala, Kilwa managed to export the lion’s share of the gold.

Because of its reputation and wealth Kilwa attracted a steady stream of medieval visitors. In 1331, it was visited by **Ibn Battuta**, a North African from Tangiers, who famously wrote of its coral stone house-lined streets, gardens, and orchards of fruit trees, “Kilwa is one of the most beautiful and well-constructed towns in the world. The whole of it is elegantly built” (Freeman-Grenville, p. 31). Archaeological excavations at Kilwa also reveal the presence of monumental architecture constructed in the coral stone and lime mortar style of the Swahili cities. The Great Mosque, largest of all mosques along the Swahili coast, had magnificent vaulted ceilings. The massive Husuni Kubwa palace complex, which contained over one hundred rooms, stands out for its octagonal bathing pool as well as its terraces, courtyards, and vaulted and domed roofs.

In the 1300s and perhaps earlier Kilwa minted its own coins, at least one of which has been found as far afield as the ruins of Zimbabwe. Kilwa went into a decline in the 1400s following a reduction in the flow of gold exported by Zimbabwe, which was facing crises of its own at this time mostly likely due to environmental degradations resulting from overgrazing and extensive timber harvesting. Kilwa’s dénouement came when it was defeated in 1505 by the Portuguese, who attacked Swahili city after city in the early 1500s. Though today it lies in ruins, in its time it was a pearl of East Africa, drawing visitors from afar dazzled by its wealth, beauty, and sophistication.

**Further Reading**

**Kongo**

The Kongo kingdom emerged in the late fourteenth century in the lands immediately south of the Malebo Pool, a widening of the Congo River located some 200 miles inland from the Atlantic coast that represents the end of the easily traversed portion of the Congo that is then marked by rapids and waterfalls as it drops to the sea. Kongo’s material base resided in the development of significant trading networks traversing the lands of the forest–savannah fringe, which lay on the southern border of the massive tropical forests of western equatorial Africa.

Important commodities in this system of commerce included salt from the Atlantic shoreline, copper, and raffia cloth of very high quality, which along with other products including ivory and iron were traded between environmental zones in the pattern of ecologically driven exchange found in commercial networks all across medieval Africa. The Kongo kingdom rose rapidly to
prominence as a notably large and powerful state exerting very strong centralized control over a range of conquered peoples from its capital of Mbanza Kongo. At its peak the state dominated regional trade utilizing a seashell currency, demanded tribute from its vassal states, and contained over a half million people in some 60,000 square miles of territory located in what are today southwestern Zaire and northern Angola, in the lands south of the Congo River that range from the Kwango River in the east to the Atlantic coastline in the west.

At the end of the medieval period the Kongo kingdom developed a complex relationship with the Portuguese, who came to this stretch of Africa’s Atlantic coastline in the early 1480s, and Kongo become a prominent supplier of slaves to the Portuguese in return for a range of imports. Members of the Kongo royal family including the king converted to Catholicism, though in a tug-of-war reminiscent of the arrival of Islam in West Africa not all citizens supported their leaders’ embrace of the new religion. Disagreements with the Portuguese over the increasingly worrisome scope of the burgeoning slave trade proved one distraction, as did the recurring question of succession given the absence of clear-cut rules for choosing new kings, and in the midsixteenth century the state was attacked and defeated by warriors from the east known as the Jaga.

With assistance from the Portuguese, the Kongo kingdom regained its independence and continued to flourish economically. In the seventeenth century, however, new rivals in commerce greatly reduced Kongo’s regional dominance of trade, and the once-mighty kingdom faded away by the early 1700s.

Further Reading

Luba

In the late medieval years, a Luba kingdom arose in the savannah lands in and around the Upemba Depression, a swampy valley dotted with lakes that is located along the upper Lualaba River in the region of Lake Kisale in what is today the southern Congo. The Luba kingdom’s emergence was preceded by a series of developments in this area that commenced in the early medieval centuries and included extensive and accomplished metalworking utilizing copper and iron, expanded agriculture benefiting from the use of iron tools, skillful exploitation of the natural fauna of the area through hunting and fishing, utilization of local salt deposits, and involvement in regional trade.

Evidence of these developments, which positioned the region’s inhabitants for the emergence of a large state, comes mainly from archaeological digs conducted at gravesites located in the Upemba Depression, most prominently Sanga. These sites reveal increasing social and economic differentiation over the course of the centuries culminating in the emergence of the first Luba kingdom in the fourteenth century. It possessed a monarchical form of government with kings chosen from among the members of the royal family, who legitimized their rule in part through their royal bloodlines. Women played important roles in the Luba state, for example, as royal spirit mediums, ambassadors, and keepers of royal secrets.
Postmedievally, in the eighteenth century, the Luba expanded their authority into a much larger Luba empire. The Luba are noted for their artistic traditions including pottery; beautifully worked wooden objects including bowstands, headrests, and stools; and metalworking, which produced large quantities of finely worked tools and jewelry, as well as the copper crosses used as a form of currency in this region.

Further Reading

Mali

Mali, which emerged around 1235, became an immensely large and powerful West African empire that at its height stretched from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to beyond the Niger Bend in the east, and from the important southern Saharan town of Walata in the north to the forest fringes in the south. Within its expansive borders lay a range of ecological zones, including desert, sahel, savannah, and forest, and the empire made full use of the products of each of these environments as one basis for its wealth. A brisk trade between regions existed, exchanging goods such as kola nuts and forest snails from the forest, grains and cereals from the savannah, goats and sheep from the sahel, and salt from the desert. The agriculture, which flourished in the savannah, was taxed by the state as one important source of revenue.

Because Mali controlled the Bure goldfields, which lay along the upper Niger, which was also the homeland of the Malinke who founded and ruled this empire, they profited immensely from growing North African and European demand for gold. Mali also taxed trans-Saharan trade, which flowed through the kingdom following a shift east in the trade routes that coincided with Mali’s rise. Reflecting solid governmental control, the North African traveler Ibn Battuta, who visited in 1352 to 1353, wrote of the great security of Mali, through which traders and their valuable goods passed utterly un molested. Its wealth was reflected in significant urbanization: Important towns and cities included Timbuktu, Gao, Walata, and Niani, the first of which accelerated down its path toward becoming a very important center of Islamic scholarship in the time of the renowned Malian ruler Mansa Musa.

Mali emerged in the Sudan out of the political uncertainty that followed the fading away of Ghana, which had ruled over a sahel-based empire until declining gradually over the eleventh and twelfth centuries. For a short time in the early thirteenth century the Soso (alternately, Sosso or Susu), a people who had been conquered and forcibly incorporated into Ghana’s empire, filled the power vacuum in the region under the leadership of Sumanguru. At this time the Malinke, who were organized into a number of small, politically independent village-based entities called kafus, fell under onerous Soso overrule. The Malinke threw off Soso domination under the leadership of the brilliant Sundjata, whose exploits were chronicled by the bards or griots of Mali who have
passed this oral tradition down to the present day through memory and public recitation. Following Sundjata’s triumph over Sumanguru in the Battle of Kirina in 1235, the Malinke expanded their authority over more and more people and became the supremely dominant West African power of the day, ruling from their capital at Niani on the Sankarani River. Like Ghana before it, Mali allowed those it conquered substantial internal autonomy in exchange for payments of tribute and recognition of Malian suzerainty.

In addition to its political achievements, Mali stands out for the shift in the locus of power from the sahel to the Sudan that occurred in its time, due to a combination of the drier climate that affected West Africa from the twelfth through fifteenth centuries and drew people to the better watered south, and the exploitation of the Bure and Akan goldfields that lay further south than the Bambuk goldfield mined in the days of Ghana. The empire also drew much of West Africa into one vast trading network, and it was during its rule that the group of trader specialists known as the Dyula (or Juula) emerged and traveled far and wide throughout the empire and beyond, drawing even the distant Akan goldfields of the forest zone into this system of commerce. In regards to social stratification, Mali had a system of hereditary castes for select occupations including smiths and bards, whose members were of low status but whose powers were simultaneously feared. Mali is also notable for its kings’ adoption of Islam, which became of increasing importance with the growth of the trans-Saharan trade, which connected Mali to Muslim merchants in the Sahara, North Africa, and the Middle East. In a pattern found among many other medieval West African polities, Mali’s kings simultaneously continued their adherence to the indigenous religious traditions that remained the faith of most of their people, and which they were expected still to practice. Mansa Musa became the most widely known ruler of Mali as a result of his hajj or religious pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324 to 1325.

Mali’s strength waxed and waned over the centuries of its existence depending upon the skill of its current ruler. The empire began a final, irreversible decline in the late 1300s due to a series of ineffectual rulers and struggles over succession. Seeing weakness at the center, conquered states who had no doubt always resented their lost independence began breaking away and refusing to pay tribute, further weakening Mali. Attacks from the Mossi who lay to the south of the Niger Bend and the Tuareg who swept down from the desert in the north, even seizing the fabled city of Timbuktu in 1433, left the empire vulnerable to the rising power of the Songhai who lay to their east, and a weakened Mali faded gradually away over the next 150 or so years, preserved though its memory is to the present in the immortal words of its bards. See also Documents 7 and 9.

Further Reading

Mansa Musa (d. 1337)

Mansa Musa, who ruled the West African empire of Mali from 1312 until his death in 1337, is best known for the hajj, or religious pilgrimage to Mecca,
he undertook in 1324 to 1325. Although no doubt he was motivated by piety and a desire to fulfill the fifth Pillar of Islam, which enjoins all Muslims who can to travel to the holy city of Mecca that lies along the Red Sea in the Arabian Peninsula, the manner in which he journeyed also brought worldwide attention to his personal power and wealth, and that of his empire. From the Malian capital of Niani, located on the Sankarani River that flows into the upper Niger River, Mansa Musa made the long, arduous, and dangerous desert crossing, taking with him an extensive retinue said to include one hundred camels each carrying 300 pounds of gold, over ten-thousand Malian soldiers and functionaries, his senior wife, and more than five-hundred slaves. Stopping in Cairo after successfully navigating the Sahara, Mansa Musa spent widely and gave munificent gifts of gold so lavishly that it was said that the price of gold there remained depressed for years following his visit. This drew the attention of Europe to his empire, and following his hajj Mali began appearing on European maps of the African interior.

On his return home Mansa Musa brought to Mali the Andalusian architect and poet Abu Ishaq Ibrahim al-Sahili, who designed and built mosques and other structures in Gao, Niani, and Timbuktu. Mansa Musa also patronized Islamic literature and scholarship, sending students to North Africa and enticing scholars from afar to teach in Timbuktu, so that under his reign the city started down its path, fully realized in succeeding centuries, of becoming an important center of Islamic learning. Mansa Musa is also known for leading Mali, which had lost control over a number of vassal states since its early days of glory, to its greatest strength and triumph. Using a military whose cavalry
gave it tremendous advantages over its enemies, he restored the empire’s control over outlying districts and enlarged the empire to its greatest-ever territorial extent. He also established diplomatic relations with an important trading partner in North Africa, the Marinids of Morocco, as well as creating less formal ties with Egypt. Although his reputation outside of Mali—and European interest in Mali’s gold—were sealed as a result of the publicity generated by his hajj, within the empire some criticized him for spending solavishly from the royal treasury, and following his reign Mali gradually declined until it had ceased to exist even in its later, attenuated form by around 1600. See also Islam and Document 7.

Further Reading

Nubia

Inhabiting a narrow stretch of land straddling the Middle Nile—the portion of the river spanning the first to sixth cataracts or rapids, which stretches from just south of Aswan almost to Khartoum—Nubia was home to three medieval Christian kingdoms. Although the Middle Nile runs mainly through inhospitable desert, because of systems of irrigation and regular deposits of fertile soil during annual river flooding the lands right along the river’s edge provided an environment in which Nubians farmed, raised animals, and engaged in a system of long-distance trade that moved goods of the African interior north to Egypt and points beyond. These activities provided the material base for the early medieval emergence of the Nubian polities Nobatia (or Nobadia), Makuria, and Alwa (or Alodia), which lay from north to south along the Middle Nile. Their capital cities were, respectively, Faras, Old Dongola, and Soba.

These kingdoms adopted Christianity very rapidly in the sixth century as a result of the proselytizing activities of missionaries from the competing Byzantine and Coptic churches, and Nubian Christianity demonstrated the effects of both sources of influence. Their ecclesiastical art included clearly Byzantine components while also containing stylistic elements very definitively their own. Yet they also embraced Coptic Monophysitism in preference to Byzantine Church Monophysitism, and their bishops were appointed by the Egyptian Coptic Church throughout the almost millennium-long history of Nubian Christianity. The Nubians were noteworthy for very successfully repelling Arab Muslim invaders who swooped south immediately after conquering Egypt but proved no match for the formidable Nubian archers who defeated them in 641 and 652, with the result that Nubian Christianity survived even as the Christians of Egypt and the Maghrib were converting to Islam. Indeed, so compelling were the Nubian victories that the Arabs entered into a treaty, which recognized their sovereignty in return for the provision of 360 slaves annually. A vital north–south trade beneficial to Nubia and Egypt then flourished for centuries.

The Muslim presence to their north did mean that Nubian Christianity developed in isolation from the rest of the Christian world from this point on.
Religion aside, medieval Nubia was a place of considerable prosperity. The written accounts of medieval visitors and archaeological excavations reveal urbanization; comfortable homes; over one hundred churches and monasteries; imported luxury goods; a literature written in Greek, Coptic, and Nubian; and architectural wonders like Faras Cathedral with its stunning wall murals depicting Nubian bishops and royalty; and Biblical figures and scenes. In addition to its ecclesiastical art, medieval Nubia produced wheel-thrown and beautifully decorated pottery, which is generally considered to be among the finest ever made on the continent. Christian Nubia began crumbling in the later thirteenth century but lasted until the fifteenth, when Christianity disappeared altogether even from the southernmost Alwa, not as a result of conquest but rather due to the steady accrual of Arab and Egyptian Muslim immigrants who, slowly yet inexorably, numerically overwhelmed the local population and assimilated them to their faith, a process that culminated in the emergence of new, Muslim political orders. Sadly, significant portions of medieval Nubia have been submerged under the waters of Lake Nasser, formed in the 1960s when modern Egypt’s Aswan Dam was constructed near the Nile’s first cataract, making further archaeological explorations of most of Nobatia impossible. See also Document 3.

Further Reading

Oral Traditions

Oral traditions are the way in which oral cultures have kept their histories and other forms of socially valued knowledge alive through the memorization and performance of oral texts. With the spread of systems of writing, over almost all of Africa in recent centuries, oral traditions have come to coexist with traditions of literacy. For much of Africa across the medieval centuries, however, oral traditions served as the dominant method through which information was passed down through the generations. In societies with oral traditions, various types of knowledge were kept and disseminated to new generations through this technique including political histories; legitimizations of ruling families; knowledge of migrations; epics focused upon a particular cultural hero; stories of origins; genealogies of royal families, social elites, and commoners; and social commentaries and norms.

Some African cultures, more frequently states with centralized political authority, placed the keeping of oral traditions in the hands of a specialist class. A prominent medieval example of this practice is found in the well-known griots of certain West African societies including the empire of Mali. In societies that utilized these highly trained specialists, the practitioners of oral traditions often held a complex and contradictory place in society, recognized and feared for the power implicit in the knowledge they held and wielded, yet also stigmatized as a socially marginalized group whose members formed a hereditary occupational caste. In other African societies, however, frequently those that spread political authority broadly throughout their populations rather than concentrating it in the hands of political elites, knowing and reciting an
oral tradition could be done by anyone with the requisite talent and expertise. Skills necessary to the successful practice of oral traditions included strong capacities for memorization and the many possible elements of performance: rhetoric and oratory, singing, musical composition, poetic expression, dance, and nonverbal communication were all talents that might be drawn upon while imparting an oral tradition to an audience.

In regards to the reliability of these sources of information about the African past, though core elements of a number of oral traditions have been verified through other sources of information such as archaeology, historical linguistics, art history, and written accounts, and though oral traditions are also very beneficial for the insight they provide into social mœrs and mentalités, they are simultaneously notorious for chronological inaccuracies and biases toward the rulers of the states whose histories some of them chronicle. Thus historians of Africa analyze oral traditions critically rather than taking them at face value and utilize them in conjunction with other sources of evidence. Oral traditions are only one element of the oral cultures that dominated medieval Africa, other components of which included a deeply held appreciation for the facile use in speech of proverbs, riddles, and puns, and for skilled storytelling, abilities which indicated the speaker’s verbal agility and prowess. See also Education.

Further Reading

Regions
The huge continent of Africa, at its greatest extents nearly 5,000 miles in length and width and in area more than three times the size of the United States at almost 11.7 million square miles, is often divided by Africanists into a number of smaller regions: North, West, Central, East, and southern Africa. The regional divisions are not made identically by all scholars, but a typical demarcation places the contemporary nations of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Western Sahara in North Africa; Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Senegal, the Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Cote d’Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Togo, Benin, and Nigeria in West Africa; Cameroon, Sao Tome e Principe, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, the Congo Republic, the Central African Republic, Chad, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo in Central Africa; Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Kenya, and Tanzania in East Africa; and Angola, Namibia, Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, and South Africa in southern Africa.

Reflecting divisions between its north and south of religion, ethnicity, and history, some would put the Sudan in North Africa whereas others would include it in East Africa. And though Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea and Djibouti are sometimes considered separately from any of the regions given their location in the Horn of Africa, they too are sometimes placed with East Africa. It is important to note that West Africa does not refer to the entire western portion of the continent, but rather that part of it excepting North Africa that extends far west into the Atlantic and runs east until reaching modern-day Cameroon, where the western African coastline makes a right-angle turn and begins
running south. Other important subregions include the Horn of Africa, that roughly triangular portion of the continent that juts into the Indian Ocean and is separated from the southern Arabian Peninsula, with which it has a distinctly intertwined history, by the narrow Red Sea; the Ethiopian Highlands, a mountainous region within the Horn whose elevation separates it spatially and environmentally as well as in terms of trajectories of human society from the plains below; the Maghrib, which simply means “west” in Arabic and was originally used by Arabs in Egypt to refer to the portion of North Africa stretching along the Mediterranean to their west encompassing the modern states of Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco (sometimes Libya is included in this designation too); and the Rift Valley, a huge fault line that ruptures the earth’s surface and stretches many thousands of miles from the southern African interior north through the Great Lakes region of East Africa and the Ethiopian Highlands before continuing as the bed of the Red Sea and eventually, beyond Africa’s borders, the Middle East’s Jordan River.

**Further Reading**


**Rivers**

Rivers have played critically important roles in the history of the African continent. Their floodplains and valleys have formed some of the continent’s richest farmland, whereas fishing their waters has exponentially increased Africans’ sources of often-scarce animal protein. These waterways have also served as key conduits for transportation and the transmission of knowledge and ideas as well as people and trade goods. Some of the characteristics common to many of Africa’s rivers stem from the geography of the continent. Plate tectonics and its theory of continental drift proposes that all of the earth’s continents formerly existed as one supercontinent known as Pangaea, at the heart of which lay what became the African continent.

When the other continents and landmasses split off from it some 100 million and more years ago, Africa’s location at the center of the former supercontinent explains one key feature of the Africa’s geography: the steep drop-offs known in places as the Great Escarpment that characterize many of its edges and continue in the abrupt and rapid drops in the ocean depths surrounding the continent, which lack any shallow continental shelf. These sharp drop-offs that occur as the continent’s more elevated interior plateaus give way to the surrounding sea level oceans below lead to the existence along many of Africa’s rivers of their characteristic waterfalls and cataracts, which allow these waterways to descend from the higher elevations of Africa’s interior through the Great Escarpment to the seas. These features also mean that Africa’s great rivers cannot be navigated uninterruptedly along their entire lengths due to the impediments imposed by waterfalls and rapids (Table 10).
The most important and majestic African rivers include the Niger, Nile, Congo and Zambezi, found, respectively, in West, northeastern, Central, and southern Africa. West Africa’s Niger, which has its headwaters in the Guinea Highlands fewer than 200 miles from the Atlantic coast and at almost 2,600 miles in length is Africa’s third longest river, initially runs northeast to what is today the southern Sahara before turning sharply to the southeast and making its way to the Atlantic Ocean at the Gulf of Guinea, forming a vast swamp delta in current-day Nigeria as it nears the sea. The northernmost point on the Niger, known as the Niger Bend, is within 10 miles of the famed city of Timbuktu, which in the medieval centuries served a critical role in trans-Saharan trade as the place where commodities moving north and south between the savannah and desert regions were switched from the desert transportation of camel caravans to movement by boat along the broad and mainly gentle stretches of the western half of the Niger as it cut through the savannah belt.

Another critical feature of the Niger is the Inland Niger Delta, formed from the annual overflowing of the river’s banks as the runoff caused by the rainy season reaches the portion of the river located in what is today Mali. The silt deposited by this annual flooding results in extraordinarily fertile land in this large interior delta, where grains and other crops are produced in abundance. The rapids so characteristic of Africa’s rivers are found at Kolikoro on the river’s southwestern stretch, whereas to the southeast of the Niger Bend rapids exist near the city of Gao and at Boussa. Important tributaries of the Niger include the Benue, Sankarani, and Bani rivers. The Nile, the best known of Africa’s great rivers and the world’s longest at almost 4,200 miles in length, has its origins far south in the region of East Africa’s Lake Victoria, from where flows the White Nile that is one of the two major tributaries of this mighty waterway that continues its way through desert to the Mediterranean, with its mighty triangular delta reaching north from its apex at Cairo to stretch along nearly 200 miles of Egypt’s Mediterranean coast. Notable features along the Nile include the sudd, or massive swamps, which lie along the White Nile far south of Khartoum, and the six cataracts or rapids between Khartoum and Aswan, all of which interrupt the river’s smooth flow.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>River</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Approximate Length in Miles</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nile</td>
<td>Northeastern Africa</td>
<td>4,200</td>
<td>World’s longest river; Nile River Valley home to many great civilizations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congo</td>
<td>Central Africa</td>
<td>2,720</td>
<td>Second longest river in Africa; flow second in volume only to South America’s Amazon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niger</td>
<td>West Africa</td>
<td>2,600</td>
<td>Third longest river in Africa; site of very fertile Inland Niger Delta.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zambezi</td>
<td>Southern Africa</td>
<td>1,700</td>
<td>Fourth longest river in Africa; site of Victoria Falls, among the largest waterfalls in the world.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and thus also progress along the Nile by boat. Of profound importance as a source of life-giving water and arable land in portions of its river valley and delta that historically were enriched annually by new deposits of silt, the Nile has been the seat of great civilizations including Ancient Egypt, Kush, and Meroë.

The Congo, known between 1971 and 1997 as the Zaire River, is the second longest river in Africa at over 2,700 miles. The river has its origins in the Lualaba River in what is today the southeastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Chambeshi River that originates in today’s Zambia, and then crosses the equator twice as it arcs through Central Africa. Flowing through well-watered rainforests and with multiple tributaries, which have different rainy seasons, the Congo is noted for its consistent and high-volume flow that is second only to that of South America’s Amazon. Possessing numerous cataracts and waterfalls along its lower reaches, the Congo empties into the Atlantic through its massive and navigable estuary. The Zambezi, which along with the Limpopo and Orange rivers drains southern Africa, is notable for its world-famous Victoria Falls, among the largest waterfalls in the world. As with the Niger and Nile, the Zambezi is marked by floodplains and swamps and creates a sizeable delta as it empties into the Indian Ocean in contemporary Mozambique.

Further Reading

Sijilmasa

Sijilmasa, a walled medieval city located at the expansive Tafilalt oasis in the northwestern Sahara in today’s Morocco, was founded in the middle of the eighth century shortly after Arabs moved into North Africa. Among its founders were Berbers who had embraced Kharjite Islam and sought freedom from mainstream Muslim Arab overrule by moving from North Africa into the desert fringe and creating what became the very important city of Sijilmasa. They also achieved spectacular economic success: A cosmopolitan city of thirty-thousand people at its height that was home to Berbers, Arabs, and Jews from North Africa, the Sahara, and Muslim Spain, Sijilmasa derived its significant wealth from its critical role in trans-Saharan trade. It was the northern entrepôt for the desert crossing from where camel caravans began the long and arduous journey south, a place where goods traded between North and West Africa, including the fabulous quantities of gold exported by the wealthy and powerful medieval sudanic empire of Ghana, changed hands as they moved in and out of the desert.

Archaeological excavations have revealed the wealth of Sijilmasa’s upper class, indicated by large houses, finely worked jewelry, architectural ornamentation, and luxury goods; these are also attested to in the accounts of medieval visitors to the city. In addition to profits generated by trans-Saharan trade, due to its location and ingenious cistern-based irrigation Sijilmasa produced a rich bounty of oasis crops including dates, grains, fruits, and vegetables; some of its grapes were converted to wine. Sijilmasa was ruled at various points in its long and rich history by Berber and Arab polities, including the eleventh- to thirteenth-century Almoravid and Almohad Berber empires. The Almoravids
established mints in Sijilmasa and struck large quantities of finely worked dinars, golden coins that gained wide circulation throughout North Africa, Europe, and the Middle East as what many have called that day’s coin of the realm. Sijilmasa fell into decline in the late medieval years due to shifts in trans-Saharan trade routes and political unrest, and today this once-vibrant city exists only as ruins in the desert sand. See also Document 5.

Further Reading

**Songhai**

Songhai (or Songhay) existed from at least the ninth century as a small state, controlled by Songhai-speaking people and centered on the city of Gao that is located along the stretch of the Niger that runs southeast from the Niger Bend. In keeping with many other medieval West African states, Songhai derived its wealth from a combination of locally based fishing and agriculture and involvement in trans-Saharan trade, in its case facilitated by its experienced Sorko fishermen who also moved goods along the Niger with ease. Gao, like Ghana’s Kumbi Saleh and Mali’s Timbuktu, functioned as an important point near the desert–sahel edge where the goods of the Sahara and North Africa were exchanged for the products of West Africa.

In the late tenth century Songhai’s rulers embraced Islam, the first royals in sub-Saharan West Africa known to have done so. As was true of most medieval West African polities whose leaders adopted the new religion, the bulk of the people continued to practice their previous religious traditions. When Mali was in its prime Gao was forced to accept Mali suzerainty. With Mali’s precipitous decline in the fifteenth century, however, Songhai regained its full independence and emerged as the dominant West African empire of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and the largest of the entire medieval period. Under the leadership of Sonni Ali (r. 1464–1492) of the Sonni dynasty Songhai transformed itself from a state to an empire. In 1468, Sonni Ali took Timbuktu from the Berbers who had wrested it from a fading Mali in 1433. Expanding control further southwest along the Niger, he conquered Jenné in 1473.

Under the ruler Askiya Muhammad (r. 1493–1528), who seized power from Sonni Ali’s successor and founded the Askiya dynasty, Songhai reached its greatest heights. The empire stretched all the way from the Senegal River in the west to Agades far beyond the Niger in the east, cementing its control of virtually the entire West African end of trans-Saharan trade. Songhai also reached deep into the Sahara, controlling salt-producing Taghaza located far into the desert’s northwest, as well as dipping south well into the grasslands beyond Jenné-jeno, which gave it control of West Africa’s gold routes. Its achievements did not last long, however. In the late sixteenth century, Songhai faced the twin problems of ineffectual rulers and succession disputes so common in West African polities with their flexible rules of succession, which culminated in civil war.

These internal woes coincided with formidable external pressures. First, a change in the manner of exporting West Africa’s most valuable commodity, gold, followed the fifteenth-century arrival along the West African coastline of the Portuguese, who created an alternative demand for the precious metal to the
south of the goldfields, redirecting some 50 percent of its export away from trans-Saharan channels to Atlantic shipping routes with a predictably negative effect on Songhai’s economy. Then came the daring Moroccan invasion of 1591, in which the Sultan Ahmad al-Mansur sent a crack unit of his army south across the Sahara to wrest from Songhai control of the salt mines at Taghaza and the gold trade of West Africa. His soldiers succeeded militarily, defeating the Songhai at the town of Tondibi outside Gao and gaining control, tenuous though it proved, of the lands along the Niger Bend including the important cities of Gao and Timbuktu. The combination of these challenges proved too much for the already weakened Songhai Empire to withstand, and it splintered into a number of smaller states, bringing to a close the era of large West African empires while ushering in the postmedieval rise of smaller sudanic and sahelian states and the heyday of more southerly kingdoms.

Further Reading

Sonni Ali (d. 1492)

Sonni Ali (r. 1464–1492), the next-to-last leader of Songhai’s Sonni dynasty, is renowned for transforming Songhai from a state into a mighty West African empire expanding outward from its home in the lands lying just southeast of the Niger Bend. Under his leadership, using a formidable cavalry as well as the skills of the Sorko fishermen who readily turned their boating aptitude to military exploits and their fishing boats to war canoes, Songhai captured the critically important city of Timbuktu in 1468 and Jenné-jeno in 1473, neutralizing the threats posed by the Tuareg of the Sahara and the Mossi who lived south of the Niger Bend and cementing Songhai’s ascendancy over a rapidly waning Mali.

Although highly successfully militarily, Sonni Ali made bitter enemies of many of the influential Muslim scholars and merchants of Timbuktu and other urban areas, who deeply resented the rough treatment some Muslims received during the conquest of Timbuktu and campaigns against the Tuareg, and viewed him as an upstart of questionably sincere Muslim identity who thereby lacked legitimacy to rule. Many of these scholars moved from Timbuktu to Walata to avoid what they saw as Sonni Ali’s persecution, and in their histories he is scathingly denounced. In fact, in keeping with the longstanding practice of the rulers of many medieval West African states, to retain legitimacy Sonni Ali practiced elements of Islam and older, local religious traditions to please not only the economically important Muslim merchants, but also the religious expectations of the overwhelmingly non-Muslim commoners he led, and he had little choice but to do so if he wished to retain the support of the masses. This reality, however, was not persuasive to the scholars of Timbuktu. Sonni Ali is said to have drowned in the Niger in 1492. See also Islam.

Further Reading
Sundjata (c. 1205–c. 1255)

The founder of the great medieval empire of Mali, Sundjata (alternately Sundiata) was a son of Nare Maghan, chief of the Keita clan of the Malinke, one of the Mande-speaking peoples of West Africa, and his second wife Sogolon. His life history and exploits, chronicled in the Epic of Sundjata, have been passed down through the centuries by the griots, or oral historians, of Mali, and consequently the events surrounding the emergence of Mali are still well known today. According to these bards, Sundjata, born around 1205, was a backward child, subject to ridicule, who didn’t walk for years. But because it had been foretold that he would succeed his father, the ambitious first wife of Nare Maghan harried Sundjata, his mother Sogolon, and his full siblings into exile after the king’s death so that her own son, Sundjata’s half brother Danskanar Tuma, could inherit the kingship.

In exile, Sundjata grew to maturity, great wisdom, and military prowess. He returned, united the disparate Malinke clans into a single Malinke nation, and, thus fortified, in a series of epic and supernaturally charged encounters with their chief Sumanguru that culminated in the Battle of Kirina in 1235, vanquished the Soso (also Sosso or Susu) who had defeated the Malinke some years earlier and subjected them to very heavy payments of tribute. The depiction in the griots’ oral tradition of the battle between Sundjata and Sumanguru is often understood today as an allegorical representation of the clash between Islam and indigenous religious beliefs, which was in fact occurring in West Africa around the time of Sundjata’s life (see African Traditional Religions). Both of the protagonists display the magical powers that are central to indigenous religious traditions, yet Sundjata also embodies the “good” Muslim ruler battling the dark powers of Sumanguru, the “evil,” non-Muslim, sorcerer king.

Given the need for Mali’s rulers to appeal to Islamized urbanites and the overwhelmingly non-Muslim rural dwellers of their empire, it is not surprising that Sundjata, the culture hero of the Malinke, embodies both traditions. It is unlikely that Sundjata himself ever adopted Islam, but kings of Mali succeeding him certainly did, and this is foreshadowed by the Epic of Sundjata. After triumphing over the Soso, Sundjata led a series of successful battles against a wide range of peoples of West Africa, defeating them and demanding annual tribute and recognition of Malinke overrule, resulting in the creation of the vast and mighty empire of Mali. He also founded the Malian capital of Niani on the Sankarani River, a tributary of the upper Niger. Sundjata ruled his empire for some twenty years, dying around 1255 A.D.

Further Reading


Swahili

The Swahili, who were in their heyday from approximately 1200 to 1500, arose along the east coast of Africa during the final centuries of the first millennium C.E. and created a string of wealthy towns and cities on the 1,000-mile-long stretch of coastline lying between Mogadishu in the north and northern Mozambique in the south. Their bustling municipalities studded with multistory houses built of coral stone, the larger with populations of up fifteen-thousand people, had harbors filled with visiting dhows from ports around the Indian Ocean as well as the Swahili sewn boats known as mtepe. Easily visible from the sea because they were located right along the coastline and on offshore islands such as Kilwa, Pemba, Pate, Lamu, Zanzibar, and the more distant Comoros, these Swahili cities astounded the Portuguese who, in 1498, encountered the East African seaboard after rounding the Cape of Good Hope.

Since then the Swahili have often been portrayed as deriving their wealth solely from their role as intermediaries in Indian Ocean commerce, trading the goods of the African interior such as gold, which they received from Zimbabwe to their southwest to merchants from across the sea. This activity certainly produced an important component of their wealth, as the Swahili exported not only gold but ivory, slaves, rhinoceros horn, leopard skins, tortoiseshell, rock crystal, cloves, mangrove poles, and other commodities to markets in Arabia, Persia, India, Indonesia, China, and the Mediterranean world in return for silks, cottons, and foodstuffs, Chinese porcelain, pottery from the lands around the Persian Gulf, glass beads, and other goods in the vast Indian Ocean trading system that linked East Africa with these far-flung parts of the globe. But in reality the Swahili had a multifaceted economy in which agriculture, fishing, raising domesticated animals, maritime trade north and south along the coastline as well as land-based trade west into the interior through which were exchanged goods of the different East African ecological zones, and productive activities such as cloth making, iron- and copper-working, bead-making, masonry, woodworking, and boat-building also played prominent roles.

Their cities did indeed contain the architecturally impressive and innovative coral-stone houses for which they are renowned, which provided wealthy Swahili merchants and their families a high degree of material comfort given these buildings’ indoor toilets, running water, rooftop terraces, and attention to aesthetically pleasing detail including beautifully carved wooden doors and lintels, decorative plasterwork, and niches in the interior walls of their rooms that allowed for the display of imported Chinese porcelain and copies of the Qur’an. However, archaeological research also indicates that the wood, mud, and thatch homes housing those of lesser wealth and social standing constituted the majority of buildings. In terms of ethnicity, though the Swahili were for centuries erroneously misidentified by outsiders as members of an Arab culture imported from overseas and appended to the very edge of the African continent, today it is recognized that their origins lie predominantly in the African populations of Bantu speakers who peopled the East African coast from early in the Common Era, though immigrants from Arabia did come, settle, and intermarry, most notably contributing to Swahili culture their religion of Islam and its traditions of literacy and scholarship, while lesser numbers of immigrants from Indonesia, Persia, and India added additional elements to the emerging culture (see Bantu Expansions).
The predominantly African origins of the Swahili are reflected not only in this history of settlement but also in their language: The grammar or basic framework of Swahili is Bantu, as is the majority of its vocabulary. The mainly Arab (and secondarily Persian and Hindi) loan-words incorporated into the Swahili language, which so struck early European visitors to the Swahili coastline, are for the most part modern accretions dating from the eighteenth century on, many hundreds of years after the emergence of Swahili culture. Never unified into one Swahili state, the various Swahili cities operated as politically independent units, generally under the rule of a head of state variously referred to as king or sultan (and occasionally queen), though in at least one instance a Swahili city lay under the collective governance of a group of prominent trading families.

Sometimes a more powerful city such as Kilwa would exert some control over neighboring towns or shorelines, but this typically proved a temporary state of affairs. The lack of political unity, in concert with the limited military experience of the Swahili who most often competed with one another through trade rather than fighting, contributed to their vulnerability to the heavily armed Portuguese who arrived as the medieval era drew to a close and, backed by the authority of their ship-mounted cannons which they did not hesitate to use in naval bombardments of the Swahili cities, exerted their power over this coastline in the early years of the sixteenth century.

The Swahili cities were already in a decline when the Portuguese arrived, due to a variety of factors including a downturn in the flow of gold from the interior. The Portuguese overrule of sections of the coast was followed by an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Omani imperialism, with the result that the Swahili never again existed as independent polities though their culture continues to the present. See also Documents 8 and 11.

Further Reading

Takrur

Takrur, one of the earliest West African states to appear in the historical record, was given brief mention in the writings of North African Arabs from the eleventh century. How long it had existed prior to that time is unknown, but certainly it was a part of the tradition of West African state formation that dates back to around the beginning of the Common Era and resulted from the surplus wealth generated by a combination of agriculture, ironworking, herding, fishing, and regional as well as long-distance trade. From its location along the middle and lower Senegal River Takrur was involved in trans-Saharan commerce, exporting gold from the Bambuk goldfields as well as slaves and cotton cloth north along a westerly Saharan trade route that ran from Takrur through Sijilmasa to Morocco.

Takrur is most often mentioned for its very early embrace of Islam; its king War Jabi, who ruled until 1040 to 1041, adopted the religion during his reign.
In striking contrast to most medieval West African states, in Takrur rural commoners as well as urban elites took up the new religion. A rival of the larger, more powerful, and better documented empire of Ghana that lay to its east and that came to control the export of Bambuk gold, in the eleventh century Takrur sided with the Almoravids who were also Muslim rivals of Ghana and flourished as that other empire faded away. Takrur was then incorporated into the vast empire of Mali, which rose as Ghana fell (see Almoravid and Almohad Movements). With Mali’s decline, Takrur split into a number of Wolof polities as well as the kingdoms of Futa Toro and Futa Jalon.

Further Reading

Timbuktu
Timbuktu, located above the Niger Bend—the northernmost point of the Niger River—in what is today Mali, was an extremely important medieval West African city situated where the southern Sahara met the sahel. From the fourteenth century, when it displaced Walata, Timbuktu played a key role in trans-Saharan trade as the most critical transshipment point where goods passed between the control of the desert Berbers and the peoples of the savannah. From there gold and a host of other exports were sent north across the Sahara, while salt and many other goods were shipped south down the Niger River as far as Jenné-jeno and were then dispersed throughout West Africa.

Founded by Tuareg Berbers early in the second millennium C.E., control of Timbuktu passed into the hands of the great West African empire of Mali in the mid-1300s, though in concert with Mali’s decline power reverted to the Berbers in 1433, only to be lost in 1468 to the rising power of Songhai as the medieval years drew to a close. The city continued to serve its central role in trans-Saharan trade under all of these authorities. Timbuktu also played a preeminent role in the intellectual life of Islam in West Africa, an identity which began to take shape following the 1324–1325 hajj, or religious pilgrimage to Mecca, of the Malian ruler Mansa Musa, who came back from that journey a devoted patron of Islamic architecture, arts, and scholarship. He underwrote the construction of a new mosque, the Jingere-Ber or Great Mosque, and encouraged Islamic studies, forging intellectual linkages with Muslims in the Maghrib and Egypt. Some of these seeds sown by Mansa Musa came to full fruition after his lifetime: the Sankoré Mosque, and its famous Sankoré University whose renown reached far beyond West Africa, date to the late fourteenth century, and Timbuktu reached its greatest heights as a center of Islamic learning in the sixteenth century. See also Document 12.

Further Reading
Warfare

Warfare in medieval Africa was practiced quite differently depending on whether the combatants came from smaller, often lineage-based stateless societies without centralized governments or larger states with hierarchical political structures and identified political leaders. In either case, warfare typically involved hand-to-hand combat using a variety of weapons including knives, spears, and swords. Ehret pointed out that in Central Africa, a dreaded multi-bladed throwing knife was used in the late medieval centuries until the horrors of this weapon led to its banishment by one Central African state in the seventeenth century in an early example of disarmament.

Combatants were usually trained in the techniques of hand-to-hand combat, and in defensive measures, which aimed to minimize the risk of injury when engaged in this type of fighting. In stateless societies the conflicts tended to be fought by people for whom military service was at most an occasional activity and whose wars were typically of very short duration, whereas conflict between
states utilized professional soldiers and military leaders whose wars could last for years. Wars of conquest were waged commonly by expansionist medieval states seeking to force neighboring peoples into vassal and tribute-paying statuses. Indeed, some would argue that the lesser frequency and intensity of warfare in stateless societies was one of a number of examples of their benefits relative to states with centralized governance.

Relatively few parts of the continent utilized cavalry, because horses were (and remain) ill suited to the many parts of Africa where the sleeping sickness-transmitting tsetse fly caused rapid equine death. Even in the West African savannah where Songhai and the Hausa states were using them relatively frequently by the later medieval centuries, the horses tended to be lighter than the ideal cavalry mount making it difficult to outfit them with the body armor that best prolonged their lives in warfare, though some states such as Songhai did utilize such protections. Cavalry allowed some later medieval West African states to more easily enslave neighboring peoples, with Kanem and the Hausa being prime examples of this use of military might (see Kanem-Bornu).

In stateless societies outstanding success as a warrior conferred heightened status on individual men, whereas some powerful states such as Bornu rewarded particularly proficient military leaders with grants of land. In societies that organized men into age grades, found mainly in East Africa, members of the age grade of young adults served as the designated warriors of their societies—in a pattern still familiar to human societies of the twenty-first century, typically fighting the wars decided upon by the age grade of elders who monopolized political decision making in their societies.

Further Reading

Women

Although it is possible to make generalizations about women in medieval Africa, it is simultaneously an imperative to recognize that the position and status of women, as well as the meanings attached to biological sex, have always varied over space and time: Gendered conditions could and did diverge markedly from place to place, as well as in any one place at different points in time. They also differed depending on a host of social identities other than gender. For example, ethnicity, religion, age, socioeconomic status, family and kinship identities, free or unfree status, and a multitude of other factors likewise influenced any one individual’s standing and situation, and intersected with gender in significant ways. Therefore, it is vitally important to recognize the immense value of specificity when talking about gender and women.

Nonetheless, some general points regarding medieval African women can be made. In regards to political authority, it is clear that some African women wielded marked political power in a number of medieval African societies, indeed to a much greater extent than African women have been able to achieve in the most recent hundred years: Medieval African history contains numerous examples of politically powerful women. The institution of queen mother, a woman’s political office, existed among the Yoruba and was created just post-medievally in Benin, whereas in the Luba kingdom women fulfilled critically
important functions as royal spirit mediums and ambassadors. On the Swahili coast and among the Yoruba, women as well as men served as local rulers, whereas in Bornu high-ranking women of the royal family held significant political offices (see Kanem-Bornu). That numerous female rulers who appeared to be part of the normal order of things rather than anomalies were documented in the late 1400s and 1500s by Europeans visiting Africa is compelling evidence that women were extremely likely to have held such roles mediavely also.

Scholars of gender in Africa have also considered the informal mechanisms which, often operating through marriage and lineage ties, allowed women to wield very considerable if indirect influence over affairs of state even in places, which excluded women from formal political positions. For example, the epic of Sundjata shows the key roles played in his success by this founder of Mali’s mother and sisters, as well as the overt political power wielded by his father’s senior wife. Medieval African women played important religious roles too, including spirit medium, healer, and priestess. Even in Muslim and Christian areas where religious authority in these monotheistic traditions was vested in men, the religious syncretism typical of African Islam and Christianity allowed for the continued practice of numerous aspects of African traditional religions, with the result that women still held considerable religiously based authority. This is demonstrated, to give just one example, in medieval women’s involvement in spirit possession cults in many Muslim parts of the continent.

In the realm of the economy and work, medieval women played key agricultural roles; they were the main producers of farmed foodstuffs and also saw to their storage and preparation (as they still do today), tasks also requiring them to gather firewood and water for their households, often from considerably distant locations. The gendered division of labor in farming gave men in most African societies responsibility for clearing land, and women responsibility for planting, weeding, and harvesting, activities that were in toto considerably more time-demanding than men’s agricultural duties. In foraging societies the dietary contributions women made through their gathering contributed the majority of calories to everyone’s daily diet, far eclipsing the share deriving from the meat provided by male hunters. Among herders, women typically bore responsibility for milking cattle and churning butter.

Craft production was gendered too, with female potters and male metal-workers; weaving and dying cloth were the purview of women in some societies and men in others. It has been speculated that some of the great medieval African artwork that has been preserved to the present, the terra-cotta and clay sculptures produced by many different societies, which have generally been presumed by Western art historians of the last century to have been the artistically valued achievements of men, may well have been made by women given their longstanding dominance in working clay. This dominance may have given women a role in the production of some of the most renowned medieval metal sculptures too, because many were produced using the lost-wax method, which requires an original clay mold. Another artistic medium, which women have dominated postmedievally, which may well have been practiced by them in earlier centuries too, is tattooing and other forms of body art.

In regards to children and the creation of the next generation, women were highly valued for their reproductive as well as productive abilities, a fact recognized—to women’s detriment—in a general medieval (and modern) African preference for female slaves, who were valued for precisely these capacities.
This emphasis on women’s reproductive capabilities could lead to loss of status and personal hardship and sorrow for medieval women who could not or did not bear children, however. Although all of these examples of women’s key contributions and agency can be found in the medieval African historical record, it is also clear that medieval African women could be marginalized in certain spheres at certain times in certain places. One example lies in the fact that though women could and did play vitally important political roles, the historical record also indicates that they far less frequently served as heads of state and governmental officials than did men.

It was very likely the case that men typically held significantly greater authority in marriages and families too, though again many individual exceptions doubtless existed. As is often the case in explorations of gender, though women lived with the impediment of a number of socially institutionalized disenfranchisements, individually and collectively medieval African women clearly sought and often achieved ways to assert their authority and realize desired outcomes. See also Agriculture, Education, and Food.

Further Reading

Yoruba

Some time in the first millennium C.E., the Yoruba arose in what is today southwestern Nigeria, in the savannah and forest lands that lie to the west of the lower Niger River. Their story of origin relates the appearance from heaven of Oduduwa, who founded the town of Ife (also known as Ile-Ife), which dates to the late first millennium and became the spiritual center of the Yoruba people. In the early centuries of the second millennium the Yoruba radiated out from Ife and established a number of independent city-states, the most important of which were said to be founded by the children and grandchildren of Oduduwa, the founding ancestor.

From early on the Yoruba were an urban people, residing in cities, often walled, which had a palace and a marketplace at the core surrounded by private homes. Each city-state was ruled by an oni or king who wielded his power from the centrally located palace, which was nestled in a series of walls, which served to separate the ruler spatially and psychologically from those he ruled. The so-called Pavement Period of Ife, which has been the site of numerous archaeological digs, has revealed their practice, in the first half of the second millennium C.E., of paving areas such as courtyards with mosaics constructed from broken pieces of potsherds and white stones. Agriculture, a key activity of Yoruba men, took place in the farms, which surrounded a given city and were located outside its walls. Women, who expected to earn their own incomes, which they kept separate from those of their husbands, dominated local market trading. Craft production of goods such as metal wares, textiles, and woodcarvings formed another important sector of the economy, and the
Yoruba were involved in systems of commerce that stretched north to locations such as Hausaland and Songhai in the savannah, and from there connected to Saharan and trans-Saharan trade, as well as south to the coast and east and west within the forest zone (see Hausa).

Among other achievements, the Yoruba are renowned for a medieval tradition of stunningly graceful artistry in the form of cast metal sculptures worked in brass and copper. The best known of these are a series of human heads that radiate a calm beauty and serene composure and are thought to depict the ideal oni or king. An extensive corpus of skillfully and beautifully worked terracotta statuaries forms another part of their sophisticated and elegant artistry.

Further Reading

Zimbabwe Plateau

The Zimbabwe Plateau, which lies between the Limpopo and Zambezi rivers in southeastern Africa and is located mainly in the modern state of Zimbabwe, was home to a series of medieval polities noted for their construction of striking stone-walled enclosures, the most magnificent of which were built at Great Zimbabwe. Although these stone structures are noteworthy intrinsically given the mastery of dry stone masonry they illustrate and the immense and awe-inspiring design of the largest examples of this tradition, their deeper significance lies in the light they shed on social and political processes occurring on the Plateau in the first half of the second millennium C.E.

Immediately before the medieval age began, from the earliest centuries of the Common Era, the Zimbabwe Plateau was peopled by individuals practicing the agriculture, herding, and craft production typical of Africa’s Iron Age. Cattle keeping rose to great prominence here, not only because the Plateau provided extensive grazing lands but because its elevation placed it outside of the range of the trypanosomiasis-transmitting tsetse fly so devastating to livestock and people at lower altitudes. Interregional trade of significant scope and distance also grew to play a role in the local economy, as individuals exchanged the products of one ecological zone for another. For example, the deposits of gold and copper ore that lay on the Plateau were both exploited, while its elephant herds supplied ivory.

Added to these activities, and significantly increasing the wealth accruing to emerging elites from farming, herding, and regional trade, was growing involvement as a supplier of ivory and gold to the vast Indian Ocean trading network in which the Swahili of the East African coast, located to the Plateau’s northeast, played a prominent role. As a result of all of these sources of wealth, the Zimbabwe Plateau witnessed increased social stratification, urbanization, and centralization of political authority from around 1000. Mapungubwe, located just to the south of the Limpopo River and occupied in the eleventh to mid-thirteenth centuries, was the first of the Zimbabwe polities to demonstrate these changes. This state constructed stone-walled structures that appear to have enclosed the living
quarters of social and probably political elites, attested to by the presence at their burial sites of luxury goods including a gold-plated wooden carving of a rhinoceros, glass beads, and finely worked gold and copper objects.

Succeeding Mapungubwe was the greatest of these polities, Zimbabwe, headquartered at the archaeological site known as Great Zimbabwe, where the traditions of dry stone masonry using blocks of local granite reached their greatest heights with the construction of the Great Enclosure, Valley Complex, and Hill Complex. The scale and technological artistry of this monumental architecture—the massive walls of the Great Enclosure reach heights of 30 feet and the sophistication of the stonework increased markedly over time—bespeaks the ability of Zimbabwe’s rulers to mobilize labor and resources to construct monuments that, lacking defensive fortifications as they did, appear to have existed mainly as an expression of the power and strength of these political elites. Although archaeological research has until recently focused on these more spectacular architectural elements of Zimbabwe Plateau societies, there is growing recognition of the need to consider also the more humble homes of commoners, constructed of a very hard clay known as daga.

When one takes these into account, for example, estimates of the population of Great Zimbabwe alone climb markedly, to a population of perhaps eighteen thousand inhabitants at its peak. After its monumental structures were built in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Zimbabwe went into a decline in the first half of the fifteenth century and was largely abandoned by the mid-fifteenth century, probably due to environmental degradation resulting from an overexploitation of local sources of timber as well as grazing and agricultural lands, and changes in long-distance trade routes that did not work to its advantage. The economic linkages between Zimbabwe and Indian Ocean trade are attested to not only by finds at Great Zimbabwe of Chinese porcelain, Persian faience, more than fifty-thousand glass beads, and a coin minted at the prominent Swahili city of Kilwa, all imported from the coast; they are also illustrated by the fact that Kilwa, which received the lion’s share of the ivory and gold exported by Zimbabwe (the latter of which was mined in the lands lying to Zimbabwe’s north and west) before exporting it across the Indian Ocean, rose in tandem with Zimbabwe in the early fourteenth century and declined in tandem with it in the early decades of the 1400s.

The sociopolitical developments occurring in the Zimbabwe Plateau that Mapungubwe and Zimbabwe embodied survived these states and found expression in Zimbabwe’s immediate successors of Torwa and Mutapa (also known as Munhumutapa). Torwa though not Mutapa also continued and even further developed the Zimbabwean architectural traditions of stone-built settlements. Indeed, these traditions extended far beyond the Zimbabwe Plateau: To date over one-hundred-fifty sites demonstrating dry stone wall architecture have been located not only on the Plateau but in the neighboring Transvaal region of today’s South Africa, as well as in Mozambique and eastern Botswana.

Further Reading

This account of Indian Ocean trade, which dates from very early in the Common Era, shows the deep historical roots of this intercontinental network, which, in the medieval centuries, linked Africa, the Middle East, India, and points as far east as the ports of southern China. This commercial network utilized not only the Indian Ocean, but also the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, both of which fed into it. This selection was written by a Greek-speaking mariner from Egypt, most likely Alexandria. The portion excerpted here describes the East African coast from around Mogadishu to Mozambique, here called Azania, and the towns involved in Indian Ocean trade that dotted its shoreline.

Beyond Tabæ, after four hundred stadia, there is the village of Pano. And then, after sailing four hundred stadia along a promontory, toward which place the current also draws you, there is another market-town called Opone, into which the same things are imported as those already mentioned, and in it the greatest quantity of cinnamon is produced, (the arebo and moto), and slaves of the better sort, which are brought to Egypt in increasing numbers; and a great quantity of tortoiseshell, better than that found elsewhere. The voyage to all these far-side [beyond the Red Sea, into the Indian Ocean proper] market-towns is made from Egypt about the month of July, that is Epiphi. And ships are also customarily fitted out from the places across this sea, from Ariaca and Barygaza [Red Sea ports], bringing to these far-side market-towns the products of their own places; wheat, rice, clarified butter, sesame oil, cotton cloth . . . and girdles, and honey from the reed called sacchari. Some make the voyage especially to these market-towns, and others exchange their cargoes while sailing along the coast. This country is not subject to a King, but each market-town is ruled by its separate chief. Beyond Opone, the shore trending more toward the south, first there are the small and great bluffs of Azania; this coast is destitute of harbors, but there are places where ships can lie at anchor, the shore being abrupt; and this course is of six days, the direction being south-west. Then come the small and great beach for another six days’ course and after that in order, the Courses of Azania, the first being called Sarapion and the next Nicon; and after that several rivers and other anchorages, one after the other, separately a rest and a run for each day, seven in all, until the Pyralae islands and what is called the channel; beyond which, a little to the south of south-west, after two courses of a day and night along the Ausanitic coast,
is the island Menuthias, about three hundred stadia from the mainland, low and wooded, in which there are rivers and many kinds of birds and the mountain-tortoise. There are no wild beasts except the crocodiles; but there they do not attack men. In this place there are sewed boats, and canoes hollowed from single logs, which they use for fishing and catching tortoise. In this island they also catch them in a peculiar way, in wicker baskets, which they fasten across the channel-opening between the breakers. Two days’ sail beyond, there lies the very last market-town of the continent of Azania, which is called Rhapta; which has its name from the sewed boats (rhaptôn ploiarîôn) already mentioned; in which there is ivory in great quantity, and tortoise-shell. Along this coast live men of piratical habits, very great in stature, and under separate chiefs for each place. The Mapharitic chief governs it under some ancient right that subjects it to the sovereignty of the state that is become first in Arabia. And the people of Muza now hold it under his authority, and send thither many large ships; using Arab captains and agents, who are familiar with the natives and intermarry with them, and who know the whole coast and understand the language. There are imported into these markets the lances made at Muza especially for this trade, and hatchets and daggers and awls, and various kinds of glass; and at some places a little wine, and wheat, not for trade, but to serve for getting the good-will of the savages. There are exported from these places a great quantity of ivory, but inferior to that of Adulis [a great port city on the Red Sea’s African coast], and rhinoceros-horn and tortoise-shell (which is in best demand after that from India), and a little palm-oil. And these markets of Azania are the very last of the continent.


2. An Account of Trade with the Etiopian Kingdom of Aksum, 525

Cosmos Indicopleustes, believed to have been a Greek born in Alexandria who first worked as a merchant and later in life became a monk, journeyed to Aksum in what is today Ethiopia in 525. He has left us a record of the trade—including the export of frankincense, in demand in the Mediterranean world for its use in burials—which flowed in and out of this powerful state through Adulês [Adulis], its port on the Red Sea.

From Byzantium, again, to Alexandria there are fifty stages, and from Alexandria to the Cataracts [of the Nile] thirty stages; from the Cataracts to Axômis [Aksum], thirty stages; from Axômis to the projecting part of Ethiopia, which is the frankincense country called Barbaria, lying along the ocean, and not near but at a great distance from the land of Sasu which is the remotest part of Ethiopia, fifty stages more or less. . . . The region which produces frankincense is situated at the projecting parts of Ethiopia, and lies inland, but is washed by the ocean on the other side. Hence the inhabitants of Barbaria, being near at hand, go up into the interior and, engaging in traffic with the natives, bring back from them many kinds of spices, frankincense, cassia, calamus, and many other articles of merchandise, which they afterwards send by sea to Adulês [Adulis], to the country of the Homerites [in Arabia], to Further India, and to Persia. This very
fact you will find mentioned in the Book of Kings, where it is recorded that the Queen of Sheba [Saba, in the southwestern Arabian Peninsula], that is, of the Homerite country, whom afterwards our Lord in the Gospels calls the Queen of the South, brought to Solomon spices from this very Barbaria, which lay near Sheba on the other side of the sea [Red Sea], together with bars of ebony, and apes and gold from Ethiopia which, though separated from Sheba by the Arabian Gulf [Red Sea], lay in its vicinity. . . . For the Homerites are not far distant from Barbaria, as the sea which lies between them can be crossed in a couple of days . . . The country known as that of Sasu is itself near the ocean, just as the ocean is near the frankincense country, in which there are many gold mines. The King of the Axômites accordingly, every other year, through the governor of Agau [another Ethiopian people], sends thither special agents to bargain for the gold, and these are accompanied by many other traders—upwards, say, of five hundred—bound on the same errand as themselves. They take along with them to the mining district oxen, lumps of salt, and iron, and when they reach its neighbourhood they make a halt at a certain spot and form an encampment, which they fence round with a great hedge of thorns. Within this they live, and having slaughtered the oxen, cut them in pieces, and lay the pieces of the top of the thorns, along with the lumps of salt and the iron. Then come the natives bringing gold in nuggets like peas, called tancharas, and lay one or two or more of these upon what pleases them—the pieces of flesh or the salt or the iron, and then they retire to some distance off. Then the owner of the meat approaches, and if he is satisfied he takes the gold away, and upon seeing this its owner comes and takes the flesh or the salt or the iron. If, however, he is not satisfied, he leaves the gold, when the native seeing that he has not taken it, comes and either puts down more gold, or takes up what he had laid down, and goes away. Such is the mode in which business is transacted with the people of that country, because their language is different and interpreters are hardly to be found. The time they stay in that country is five days more or less, according as the natives more or less readily coming forward buy up all their wares. On the journey homeward they all agree to travel well-armed, since some of the tribes through whose country they must pass might threaten to attack them from a desire to rob them of their gold. The space of six months is taken up with this trading expedition, including both the going and the returning. In going they march very slowly, chiefly because of the cattle, but in returning they quicken their pace lest on the way they should be overtaken by winter and its rains. For the sources of the river Nile lie somewhere in these parts, and in winter, on account of the heavy rains, the numerous rivers which they generate obstruct the path of the traveller.


3. A Letter Illustrating Relations Between Muslim Egypt and Christian Nubia, 759

After Arab Muslims conquered Egypt between 639 and 642, they attempted to spread their power southward into the Christian states of Nubia, which lay further into the African interior along the Middle Nile. However, the Muslims met their match in the famed archers of Nubia, who repelled them in
battle in 641 and 652. In consequence, Nubia retained its independence and its Christianity for many centuries to come, although not without occasional disagreements with its northern neighbor, as this 759 “Letter from the Governor of Egypt to the King of the United Kingdom of Makouria and Nobatia” illustrates. The letter refers to the baqt, or pact, which was made between Nubia and Egypt following Nubia’s seventh-century victories, an agreement that recognized Nubian sovereignty and set the terms for peaceful relations between the two states.

God, blessed and exalted is he, says in His book “Fulfill the compact of God when you make a compact, and do not break the oath after it has been affirmed and you have made God your guarantor . . . ” We have fulfilled for you that which we took upon ourselves for you in turning away from your blood and your property and you know your security in our land and your dwelling wherever you wish in it and the repairing of your merchants to us; no oppression or harm comes to them from us; no one of you who is among us is attacked by us nor is he denied his right; no obstacle is placed between your merchants and what they want—they are safe and contented wherever they go in our land, this being in fulfillment of our compact, in truth to our word. . . . You, however, in that which lies between us, behave otherwise. You do not bring to us that to which you are liable according to the baqt on the basis of which agreement was made with you; nor do you return those of our slaves who run away to you; nor are our merchants safe among you; nor do you hasten to permit our messengers to return to us. You know that the people of all religions and the persuasions which neither know a lord, nor believe in a resurrection, nor hope for recompense, nor fear punishment, even these do not attack a merchant or detain a messenger. You make manifest to the people of your persuasion belief in Him who created the heavens and the earth and what is between them, you believe in Jesus the son of Mary and his book, and you make manifest to them justice and the doing of what is right, while what you do in that which is between you and us is contrary to that which you make manifest. One of the merchants of the people of our country, Sa’d by name, came to you with much wealth, having made off with it from its owners, and you detained him among you, stood between him and the one who rightly pursued him . . . Secondly, a man of the people of Aswan, named Muhammad b. Zayd, sent to you a merchant of his, on his business and seeking rights for him. You detained him and the wealth that he had with him. . . . So look into that about which I have written to you and hasten the dispatching to us of your remaining liability according to the baqt for the years for which you owe . . . send to us the merchant of Muhammad b. Zayd and the wealth which was with him . . . and send to us Sa’d the merchant who is among you and be not tardy in that in any respect if you wish us to fulfill for you our compact and to continue as we did in dealing correctly with you.


4. A Muslim Account of Ghana, 1067–1068

The following excerpts are from Al-Bakri’s mid-eleventh-century account of the West African empire of Ghana. He gives obvious precedence to the question of Islamicization, which was dear to the heart of
this Spanish-born Muslim, but also provides insight into the physical geography of Ghana’s capital city. The city of Ghana had a quarter for Muslim visitors to this sub-Saharan polity whose people had not yet widely adopted Islam but which conducted vitally important commerce with Muslim merchants from North Africa. Al-Bakri also speaks to Ghana’s indigenous religious practices and trade.

The city of Ghana consists of two towns in a plain. One of these towns is inhabited by Muslims. It is large with a dozen mosques in one of which they assemble for the Friday prayer. . . . Around the town are wells of sweet water from which they drink and near which they cultivate vegetables. The royal town, called al-Ghaba [“the grove”], is six miles away [from the Muslim town], and the area between the two towns is covered with houses. Their houses are made of stone and accacia wood. The king has a palace and conical huts, surrounded by a wall-like enclosure. In the king’s town, not far from the royal court of justice, is a mosque where pray the Muslims who come there on missions. . . . Around the king’s town are domed huts and groves where live the sorcerers, the men in charge of their religious cult. In these are also the idols and the tombs of their kings. These groves are guarded, no one can enter them nor discover their contents. The prisons of the king are there, and if anyone is imprisoned in them, no more is ever heard of him. . . . Their religion is paganism and the worship of idols. When the king dies, they build a huge dome of wood over the burial place. Then they bring him on a bed lightly covered, and put him inside the dome. At his side they place his ornaments, his arms and the vessels from which he used to eat and drink, filled with food and beverages. They bring in those men who used to serve his food and drink. Then they close the door of the dome and cover it with mats and other materials. People gather and pile earth over it until it becomes like a large mound. Then they dig a ditch around it so that it can be reached only from one place. They sacrifice to their dead and make offerings of intoxicating drinks. . . . The best gold in the country [of the king of Ghana] comes from the town of Ghiyaru, eighteen days traveling from the king’s town . . . Gharantal [on this route] is a large territory and an important kingdom. Muslims do not live there, but the people treat them with respect, and come out to meet them, when they enter the country. . . . The town of Ghiyaru is twelve miles distant from the Nile [Niger], and there are many Muslims. . . . West of Ghiyaru on the Nile [Niger] the town of Yaresna is inhabited by Muslims, but is surrounded by pagans. . . . From Yaresna Sudanese, known as Banu Naghmartah, trade in gold to [all] countries.


On every donkey-load of salt when it is brought into the country their king levies one golden dinar, and two dinars when it is sent out. From a load of copper the king’s due is five mithqals, and from a load of other goods ten mithqals. . . . The nuggets found in all the mines of his country are reserved for the king, only this gold dust being left for the people. But for this the people would accumulate gold until it lost its value.

The king of Ghana can put two hundred thousand warriors in the field, more than forty thousand being armed with bow and arrow. . . . When he gives audience to his people . . . he sits in a pavilion. . . . on his right hand are the sons of the princes of his empire, splendidly clad and with gold plaited into their hair. . . . The gate of the chamber is guarded by dogs of an excellent breed, who never leave the king’s seat: they wear collars of gold and silver.


5. Accounts of the Saharan City of Sijilmasa (tenth-twelfth centuries)

Sijilmasa, located at an oasis in the northwestern Sahara, played a key role in trans-Saharan trade as the northern entrepôt to which camel caravans came and went as they made the desert crossing. The three selections below speak to various elements of this important medieval city, including commerce, wealth, agriculture, and international diplomacy. These accounts, written in the order in which they appear below, are by Ibn Hawqal (based on his travels to the Maghrib in 947–951), al-Bakri (who penned his history in the eleventh century), and al-Maqqari (quoting al-Sarakhsi, who met individuals from Sijilmasa when he was in Marrakech between 1197 and 1203).

Ibn Hawqal

. . . there is at Sijilmasa an uninterrupted trade with the land of the Sudan and other countries, abundant profits, and the constant coming and going of caravans. . . . I saw at Awdaghust a warrant which was the statement of a debt owed to one of them [the people of Sijilmasa] by one of the merchants of Awdaghust, who was [himself] one of the people of Sijilmasa, in the sum of 42,000 dinars. I have never seen or heard anything comparable to this story in the East. . . . Muʿtazz, during the period of his emirate there, continuously received revenue from taxes on caravans setting out . . . as well as tithes, land tax, and old-established dues from what was bought and sold there . . . to a total of about 400,000 dinars and this from Sijilmasa and its district alone.

Al-Bakri

The town of Sijilmasa is situated on a plain the soil of which is salty. Around the town are numerous suburbs with lofty mansions and other splendid buildings. There are also many gardens. The cathedral mosque of the town is strongly built. . . . The water in the town is brackish as it is in all the wells of Sijilmasa. The cultivated land is irrigated with water from the river collected in basins like those used for watering gardens. There are many date-palms, grapes, and all sorts of fruit. The grapes grown on trellises which the sun does not reach do not turn into raisins except in the shade, and for this reason they are known as zilli “shady”, but those which the sun does reach become raisins in the sun.

Al-Maqqari

These are some of his [the Governor of Sijilmasa’s] words in a letter of reply to the king of the Sudan in Ghana, complaining to him of the detention of some traders: “We are neighbors in benevolence even if we differ in religion;
we agree on right conduct and are one in leniency towards our subjects. It goes without saying that justice is an essential quality of kings . . . tyranny is the preoccupation of ignorant and evil minds. We have heard about the imprisonment of poor traders and their being prevented from going freely about their business. The coming to and fro of merchants to a country is of benefit to its inhabitants and a help to keeping it populous. If we wished we would imprison the people of that region who happen to be in our territory but we do not think it right to do that. We ought not to ‘forbid immorality while practicing it ourselves’. Peace be upon you.”


6. The Kebra Negast: An Account of the Origins of the Christian Kings of Ethiopia (c. thirteenth-fourteenth centuries)

Ethiopia’s Christian Solomonid dynasty legitimized its rule in part through its assertion that its rulers were descended from King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. This story is told in the Kebra Negast or “Book of the Glory of Kings,” which also relates how Ethiopians became God’s chosen people who gained possession of the Ark of the Covenant, and Ethiopia was anointed the new Zion.

And the Queen [of Sheba] said . . . “I desire wisdom and my heart seeketh to find understanding” . . . by the Will of God, her heart desired to go to JERUSALEM so that she might hear the wisdom of SOLOMON . . . And seven hundred and ninety-seven camels were loaded, and mules and asses innumerable were loaded, and she set out on her journey . . . And she arrived in JERUSALEM . . . And King SOLOMON answered and said unto her, “Wisdom and understanding spring from thee thyself. As for me, [I only possess them] in the measure in which the God of ISRAEL hath given [them] to me because I asked and entreated them from Him. And thou, although thou dost not know the God of ISRAEL, hast this wisdom which thou hast made to grow in thine heart, and [it hath made thee come] to see me, the vassal and slave of my God” . . . And the Queen [said] . . . “From being a fool, I have become wise by following thy wisdom, and from being a thing rejected by the God of ISRAEL, I have become a chosen woman because of this faith which is in my heart; and henceforth I will worship no other god except Him.” . . . the King rose up and he went to the Queen, and he said unto her . . . “Take thou thine ease here for love’s sake until daybreak.” . . . he worked his will with her and they slept together. And after he slept there appeared unto King SOLOMON [in a dream] a brilliant sun, and it came down from heaven and shed exceedingly great splendour over ISRAEL. And when it had tarried there for a time it suddenly withdrew itself, and it flew away to the country of ETHIOPIA, and it shone there with exceedingly great brightness for ever, for it willed to dwell there. And [the King said], “I waited [to see] if it would come back to ISRAEL, but it did not return.” . . . And the Queen departed and . . . nine months and five days after she had separated from King SOLOMON . . . the pains of childbirth laid hold upon her, and she brought forth a man child . . . And when he was two and twenty years old . . . he said unto the Queen, “I will go and look upon
the face of my father, and I will come back here by the Will of God”. And then SOLOMON the King said, “Come, let us make him king of the country of ETHIOPIA”. And they made ready the ointment of the oil of kingship. And they brought the young man into the Holy of Holies, and he laid hold upon the horns of the altar, and sovereignty was given unto him. And behold, the Angel of the Lord appeared and said, “Stand up, be strong, and take the pieces of wood and I will open for thee the doors of the sanctuary. And take thou the Tabernacle of the Law of God” and it was taken away by them forthwith, in the twinkling of an eye, the Angel of the Lord being present and directing. And had it not been that God willed it, ZION could not have been taken away.


7. Mansa Musa’s Pilgrimage to Mecca, 1324

Mansa Musa, king of the great medieval empire of Mali, which controlled the flow of West African gold to North Africa and points beyond, made the long and arduous journey from his capital in the West African Sudan to Mecca, located near Arabia’s Red Sea shore, in 1324. For Mansa Musa, the trip fulfilled one of the Five Pillars of Islam, the ḥajj or religious pilgrimage. On the way, Mansa Musa stopped in Cairo, where his fabulous wealth and lavish spending made a lasting impression on that great city’s citizens (and its gold exchange). The following selection was written by Al-Umari, who was in Cairo a dozen years later and recorded impressions of Mansa Musa’s visit.

The Emir spoke of the sultan’s noble appearance, dignity and trustworthiness. “When I went out to greet him in the name of the glorious Sultan [of Egypt],” he told me, “he gave me the warmest of welcomes and treated me with the most careful politeness. But he would talk to me only through an interpreter, although he could speak perfect Arabic. He carried his imperial treasure in many pieces of gold, worked or otherwise. I suggested that he should go up to the palace and meet the Sultan. But he refused, saying: ‘I came for the pilgrimage, and for nothing else’. He argued about this. However, I well understood that the meeting was repugnant to him because he was loath to kiss the ground [before the Sultan] or to kiss his hand. I went on insisting, and he went on making excuses. But imperial protocol obliged me to present him, and I did not leave him until he had agreed. When he came into the Sultan’s presence we asked him to kiss the ground. But he refused and continued to refuse, saying, ‘However can this be?’ Then a wise man of his suite whispered several words to him that I could not understand. ‘Very well,’ he thereupon declared, ‘I will prostrate myself before Allah who created me and brought me into the world.’ Having done so, he moved towards the Sultan. The latter rose for a moment to welcome him and asked him to sit beside him: then they had a long conversation. After Sultan Musa had left the palace the Sultan of Cairo sent him gifts; this man [Mansa Musa] spread upon Cairo the flood of his generosity: there was no person, officer of the [Cairo]
court or holder of any office of the [Cairo] sultanate who did not receive a sum in gold from him. The people of Cairo earned incalculable sums from him whether by buying and selling or by gifts. So much gold was current in Cairo that it ruined the value of money.” Let me add [continues Omari] that gold in Egypt had enjoyed a high rate of exchange up to the moment of their arrival. The gold mitqal that year had not fallen below twenty-five drachmas. But from that day [of their arrival] onward, its value dwindled; the exchange was ruined, and even now it has not recovered. The mitqal scarcely touches twenty-two drachmas. That is how it has been for twelve years from that time, because of the great amounts of gold they brought to Egypt and spent there.


8. Ibn Battuta’s Description of East Africa’s Swahili Coast, 1331

Ibn Battuta, a world traveler, journeyed to Mogadishu, Mombasa, and Kilwa along the East African shoreline in 1331. Among other things, the sub-Saharan African tradition of hospitality to strangers—including those with whom one may conduct business—is evidenced in these passages. Given his familiarity with many of the great cities of his day, Ibn Battuta’s praiseworthy description of Kilwa deserves particular notice.

From there we sailed fifteen nights and arrived at Mogadishu, which is a very large town . . . The merchants are wealthy . . . Among the customs of the people of this town is the following: when a ship comes into port, it is boarded from sanbuqs, that is to say, little boats. Each sanbuq carries a crowd of young men, each carrying a covered dish, containing food. Each one of them presents his dish to a merchant on board, and calls out: “This man is my guest.” And his fellows do the same. Not one of the merchants disembarks except to go to the house of his host among the young men, save frequent visitors to the country. In such a case they go where they like. When a merchant has settled in his host’s house, the latter sells for him what he has brought and makes his purchases for him. Buying anything from a merchant below its market price or selling him anything except in his host’s presence is disapproved of by the people of Mogadishu. They find if of advantage to keep to this rule. . . . The food of these people is rice cooked with butter, served on a large wooden dish. With it they serve side-dishes, stews of chicken, meat, fish, and vegetables. They cook unripe bananas in fresh milk, and serve them as a sauce. They put curdled milk in another vessel with peppercorns, vinegar, and saffron, green ginger and mangoes, which look like apples but have a nut inside. Ripe mangoes are very sweet and are eaten like fruit; but unripe mangoes are as acid as lemons, and are cooked in vinegar. When the Mogadishu people have taken a mouthful of rice, they take some of these pickles. . . . Then I set off by sea . . . for the land of the Swahili. . . . We arrived at Mombasa, a large island two days’ journey from the land of the Swahili. The island is quite separate from the mainland. It grows bananas, lemons, and oranges. . . . The people . . . follow the Shafi’i rite, and are devout, chaste, and virtuous. Their mosques are very strongly constructed of wood. Beside the door of each mosque are one or two
Anyone who wishes to enter the mosque first washes his feet; beside the door is a piece of heavy material for drying them. Anyone who wishes to perform the ritual ablutions, takes the vessel between his thighs, pours water on his hands, and so makes his ablutions. Everyone here goes barefoot. We spent a night on the island and then set sail for Kilwa, the principal town on the coast, the greater part of whose inhabitants are Zanj of very black complexion. A merchant told me that Sofala is half a month’s march from Kilwa, and that between Sofala and Yufi in the country of the Limiim is a month’s march. Powdered gold is brought from Yufi to Sofala. Kilwa is one of the most beautiful and well-constructed towns in the world. The whole of it is elegantly built. The roofs are built with mangrove poles.


9. Ibn Battuta’s Descriptions of Mali, 1352–1353

These descriptions of Mali come from the widely traveled Ibn Battuta, who journeyed across the Sahara to the West African Sudan in the mid-fourteenth century. Clearly his descriptions are colored by the assumptions and values he brought with him as a North African Muslim visiting a Mali whose rulers were Islamized yet practiced a mix of Muslim and indigenous religious and social traditions, and whose citizens had, for the most part, not embraced the new faith.

The sultan has a raised cupola which is entered from inside his house. He sits in it a great part of the time. It has on the audience side a chamber with three wooden arches, the woodwork is covered with sheets of beaten silver and beneath these, three more covered with beaten gold . . . When the sultan has sat down three of his slaves go out quickly to call his deputy . . . The farariyya [commanders] arrive, and they are the amirs [officers], and among them are the preacher and the men of fiqh [jurisprudence], who sit in front of the armed men on the right and left of the place of audience. The interpreter Dugha stands at the door of the audience chamber wearing splendid robes . . . On his head is a turban which has fringes, they have a superb way of tying a turban. He is girt with a sword whose sheath is of gold . . . In his hands there are two small spears, one of gold and one of silver with points of iron. The soldiers, the district governors, the pages and the Massufa and others are seated outside the place of audience in a broad street which has trees in it. Each farari [commander] has his followers before him with their spears, bows, drums and bugles made of elephant tusks. Their instruments of music are made of reeds and calabashes, and they beat them with sticks and produce a wonderful sound . . . Inside the audience chamber under the arches a man is standing; he who wants to speak to the sultan speaks to Dugha, Dugha speaks to the man who is standing, and he speaks to the sultan.

The blacks are the most humble of men before their king and the most extreme in their self-abasement before him. . . . When he calls one of them while he is in session in his cupola . . . the man invited takes off his clothes and wears patched clothes, takes off his turban, puts on a dirty cap, and goes in raising his clothes and trousers up his legs half-way to his knees. He advances with
humility looking like a beggar. He hits the ground with his elbows, he hits it hard. He stands bowed . . . When one of them speaks to the sultan and he gives him an answer, he removes his clothes from his back and throws dust on his head and back, as a person does when bathing with water . . . If the sultan says to him that he has spoken the truth or thanks him, he takes off his clothes and dusts. This is good manners among them.


Sometimes the sultan holds meetings in the place where he has his audiences. There is a dais in that place, situated under a tree, with three big steps called *penpi*. The dais is covered with silk and embellished with cushions, and above it is placed a parasol that looks like a silken dome. On the top of the parasol is a golden bird as big as a sparrow hawk . . . On his head he wears a gold hat that is held in place by a band, also of gold . . . Most often he is dressed in a red velvet tunic . . . The singers come out in front of the sultan . . . Behind him are about 300 armed slaves. The sovereign walks patiently, advancing very slowly . . . As soon as the sultan is seated, drums are beaten, a horn is sounded, and trumpets blare.

What I Found to Be Praiseworthy About the Conduct of the Negroes in Contrast to What I Found to Be Bad.

Among the good qualities of this people, we must cite the following:

1. The small number of acts of injustice that take place there [in Mali], for of all people, the Negroes abhor it the most . . .
2. The general and complete security that is enjoyed in the country. The traveler, just as the sedentary man, has nothing to fear of brigands, thieves, or plunderers.
3. The blacks do not confiscate the goods of white men who die in their country, even when these men possess immense treasures. On the contrary, the blacks deposit the goods with a man respected among the whites, until the individuals to whom the goods rightfully belong present themselves and take possession of them.

Some of the actions of these people are:

1. The female servants and slaves, as well as little girls, appear before men completely naked . . .
2. All the women who come into the sovereign’s house are nude and wear no veils over their faces; the sultan’s daughters also go naked . . .

The Copper Mine

The copper mine is situated outside Takedda. Slaves of both sexes dig into the soil and take the ore to the city to smelt it in the houses. As soon as the red copper has been obtained it is made into bars one and one-half handspans long—some thin, some thick. Four hundred of the thick bars equal a ducat of gold; six or seven hundred of the thin bars are also worth a ducat of gold. These bars serve as a means of exchange, in place of coin. With the thin bars, meat and firewood are bought; with the thick bars, male and female slaves,
millet, butter, and wheat can be bought. The copper of Takedda is exported to the city Couber [Gobir], situated in the land of the pagan Negroes. Copper is also exported to Zaghai [Dyakha— western Masina] and to the land of Bernon [Bornu], which is forty days distant from Takedda and is inhabited by Muslims . . . Beautiful slaves, eunuchs, and cloth dyed with saffron are brought from Bernon to many different countries.


10. Jews in the Sahara and Sudan (fifteenth–sixteenth centuries)

By the later medieval centuries, Jews had moved south from communities in North Africa, first into Saharan oases and eventually into some sub-Saharan cities, including Timbuktu. As the excerpt from Antoine Malfante’s letter written in 1447 indicates, relations between Muslims and Jews were amicable in the Saharan community of Tuat in the midfifteenth century. John Hunwick’s book, however, tells how, around 1490, at the behest of Muhammad al-Maghili, a Muslim from North Africa, the Jews of Tuat became the targets of a successful campaign to eliminate their community—though it is vital to note that al-Mahili had to search far and wide to find Islamic scholars who sanctioned this act. Al-Maghili also journeyed further south, beyond the desert, where he persuaded the king of Songhai to purge Jews from his lands, resulting in the attitudes and decrees the traveler Leo Africanus found extant in the early sixteenth century.

There are many Jews, who lead a good life here [Tuat], for they are under the protection of the several rulers, each of whom defends his own clients. Thus they enjoy very secure social standing. Trade is in their hands, and many of them are to be trusted with the greatest confidence. . . . In the lands of the blacks [however], as well as here, dwell the Philistines [Tuareg Berbers] . . . They are sworn enemies of the Jews, who do not dare to pass hither.


This is an epistle from the servant of God Most High, Muhammad . . . al-Maghili . . . to every Muslim man and woman . . . One of the goodly folk asked me about the obligation for Muslims to steer clear of unbelievers, and about the necessity for ‘protected persons’ to pay jizya [a tax levied on Jews and Christians] and to receive humiliation and abasement . . . I say—and God it is whose help is sought, and upon whom dependence is placed: . . . The essence is that one brings no unbeliever close to himself or his relatives, nor employs him for jobs of his, and puts any money of his in his hands, unless one has no religion, no intelligence, and no manly virtue. . . . God—Exalted is He—said: “O you who believe, do not take Jews and Christians as friends. They are friends one to another. Whoever among you befriends them is indeed one of them. God does not guide wrongdoing people [Qur’an, 5:51]. . . . He who is
Exalted also said: "You see many of them befriending those who disbelieve. Surely ill for them is what they send on before themselves, that God’s wrath will be upon them, and in doom shall they abide.” . . . On this topic I [al-Maghili] uttered these [poetry] verses:

In love for the Prophet, hatred of the Jews is necessary;  
Have regret for what has passed. Don’t repeat it.  
Whoso befriends the enemies of the Prophet, 
How will it be for you in the grave, 
And resurrection into the flaming Fire?  
Who will plead on behalf of him if [the Fire] comes close 
To the face of him who gave satisfaction to the Jews?

. . . it is obligatory for every believer to procure hatred for all unbelievers of our Prophet—our lord, our beloved one and intercessor—and to call to mind the greatness of their demands on us, and their challenge against us over our religion. Surely every unbeliever is a friend of the cursed Demon, the obvious enemy. . . . God—Exalted is He—said: “Fight those who do not believe in God . . . until they pay tribute readily, being brought low” [Qur’an, 9:29]. . . . As for humiliation, the occurrence is that they adhere to depravity and humility in their talk and actions and all their conditions, so that by that they will be taken over by every Muslim—male or female, free or slave.


He [the king of Songhai] so deadly hateth all Iewes [Jews], that he will not admit any into his citie: and whatsoeuer Barbarie merchants he understandeth haue any dealings with the Iewes, he presently causeth their goods to be confiscate.


11. A European Description of the East African Coast, 1500–1518

Duarte Barbosa traveled to East Africa more than once in the first two decades of the sixteenth century. He gives detailed eyewitness accounts of a number of Swahili cities as they appeared in the earliest years of contact with the Portuguese. Note his use of the term Moors to denote Muslims.

Sofala

Having passed the Little Vciques . . . there is a river . . . whereon is a town of the Moors called Sofala . . . These Moors established themselves there a long time ago on account of the great trade in gold which they carry on with the Gentiles of the mainland: these speak somewhat of bad Arabic (garabia), and have got a king over them . . . And the mode of their trade is that they come by sea in small barks which they call zanbucs (sambuk), from the kingdoms of Quiloa, and Mombaza, and Melindi; and they bring much cotton cloth of many
colours, and white and blue, and some of silk; and grey, and red, and yellow
beads, which come to the said kingdoms in other larger ships from the great
kingdom of Cambay [in India], which merchandise these Moors buy and col-
lect from other Moors who bring them there, and they pay for them in gold by
weight, and for a price which satisfied them; and the said Moors keep them
and sell these cloths to the Gentiles of the kingdom of Benemata [Mutapa,
also known as Munhumutapa, located in the East African interior] who come
there laden with gold, which gold they give in exchange for the before men-
tioned cloths without weighing, and so much in quantity that these Moors
usually gain one hundred for one. They also collect a large quantity of ivory,
which is found all round Sofala, which they likewise sell in the great kingdom
of Cambay at five or six ducats the hundred weight, and so also some amber,
which these Moors of Sofala bring them from the Vciques. They are black men,
and men of colour—some speak Arabic, and the rest make use of the language
of the Gentiles of the country. They wrap themselves from the waist down-
wards with cloths of cotton and silk, and they wear other silk cloths above
named, such as cloaks and wraps for the head, and some of them wear hoods
of scarlet, and of other coloured woollen stuffs and camelets, and of other
silks. And their victuals are millet, and rice, and meat, and fish. In this river
near to the sea there are many sea horses, which go in the sea, and come out
on land at times to feed. These have teeth like small elephants, and it is better
ivory than that of the elephant, and whiter and harder, and of greater durabil-
ity of colour. In the country all round Sofala there are many elephants, which
are very large and wild, and the people of the country do not know how to
tame them: there are also many lions, ounces, mountain panthers, wild asses,
and many other animals. It is a country of plains and mountains, and well
watered.

Island of Quiloa [Kilwa]

After passing this place and going towards India, there is another island close
to the mainland, called Quiloa, in which there is a town of the Moors, built of
handsome houses of stone and lime, and very lofty, with their windows like
those of the Christians; in the same way it has streets, and these houses have got
their terraces, and the wood worked in with the masonry, with plenty of gar-
dens, in which there are many fruit trees and much water. This island has got a
king over it, and from hence there is trade with Sofala with ships, which carry
much gold, which is dispersed thence through all Arabia Felix, for hencefor-
ward all this country is thus named on accounts of the shore of the sea being
peopled with many towns and cities of the Moors; and when the King of Portu-
gal discovered this land, the Moors of Sofala, and Zuama, and Anguox, and
Mozambique, were all under obedience to the King of Quiloa, who was a great
king amongst them. And there is much gold in this town, because all the ships
which go to Sofala touch at this island, both in going and coming back. These
people are Moors, of a dusky colour, and some of them are black and some
white; they are very well dressed with rich cloths of gold, and silk, and cotton,
and the women also go very well dressed out with much gold and silver in
chains and bracelets on their arms, and legs, and ears.

Island of Mombaza [Mombasa]

Passing Quiloa, and going along the coast of the said Arabia Felix towards
India, close to the mainland there is another island, in which there is a city of
the Moors, called Bombaza [Mombasa], very large and beautiful, and built of high and handsome houses of stone and whitewash, and with very good streets, in the manner of those of Quiloa. And it also has a king over it. The people are of dusky white, and brown complexions, and likewise the women, who are much adorned with silk and gold stuffs. It is a town of great trade in goods, and has a good port, where there are always many ships, both of those that sail for Sofala and those that come from Cambay and Melinde, and others which sail to the islands of Zanzibar, Manfia, and Penda . . . This Monbaza is a country well supplied with plenty of provisions, very fine sheep, which have round tails, and many cows, chickens, and very large goats, much rice and millet, and plenty of oranges, sweet and bitter, and lemons, cedrats, pomegranates, Indian figs, and all sorts of vegetables, and very good water.

Melinde

After passing the city of Mombaza, at no great distance further on along the coast, there is a very handsome town on the mainland on the beach, called Melinde, and it is a town of the Moors, which has a king. And this town has fine houses of stone and whitewash, of several stories, with their windows and terraces, and good streets. The inhabitants are dusky and black, and go naked from the waist upwards, and from that downwards they cover themselves with cloths of cotton and silk, and others wear wraps like cloaks, and handsome caps on their heads. The trade is great which they carry on in cloth, gold, ivory, copper, quicksilver, and much other merchandise, with both Moors and Gentiles of the kingdom of Cambay, who come to their port with ships laden with cloth, which they buy in exchange for gold, ivory, and wax. Both parties find great profit in this.


12. A Description of Timbuktu in the Early 1500s

Leo Africanus’s description of Timbuktu in the era of Songhai reveals the wealth and sophistication of this city, which for centuries played such an important role in trans-Saharan trade and was a center of Islamic scholarship. It also notes the linkages between this sub-Saharan city, North Africa, and Europe. (Note the reversal of the letters “u” and “v” in this translation produced in 1600.)

Howbeit there is a most stately temple to be seene, the wals whereof are made of stone and lime; and a princely palace also built by a most excellent workeman of Granada [Spain]. Here are many shops of artificers, and merchants, and especially of such as weaue linen and cotton cloth. And hither do the Barbarie-merchants bring cloth of Europe. All the women of this region except maid-servants go with their faces couered, and sell all necessarie victuals. The inhabitants, & especially strangers there residing, are exceeding rich, insomuch, that the king that now is, married both his daughters unto two rich merchants. Here are many wells, containing most sweete water; and so often as the riuer Niger ouerfloweth, they conueigh [convey] the water thereof by
certaine sluces into the towne. Corne, cattle, milke, and butter this region yeeldeth in great abundance: but salt is verie scarce here; for it is brought hither by land from Tegaza, which is fiue hundred miles distant. When I my selfe was here, I saw one camels loade of salt sold for 80 ducates. The rich king of Tombuto [Timbucktu] hath many plates and scepters of gold, some whereof weigh 1300 poundes: and he keepes a magnificent and well furnished court. When he trauelleth any whither he rideth vpon a camel, which is lead by some of his noblemen; and so he doth likewise when hee goeth to warfar, and all his soldiers ride vpon horses. Whosoeuer will speake vnto this king must first fall downe before his feets, & then taking vp earth must sprinkle it vpon his owne head & shoulders: which custom is ordinarily obserued by them that neuer saluted the king before, or comes as ambassadors from other princes. He hath always three thousand horsemen, and a great number of footmen that shoot poisoned arrows, attending vpon him. They haue often skirmishes with those that refuse to pay tribute, and so many as they take, they sell vnto the merchants of Tombuto. Here are vereie few horses bred, and the merchants and courtiers keepe certaine little nags which they vse to trauell vpon: but their best horses are brought out of Barbarie. And the king so soone as he heareth that any merchants are come to towne with horses, he commandeth a certaine number to be brought before him, and chusing the best horse for himselfe, he payeth a most liberall price for him. . . . Here are great store of doctors, iudges [judges], preists, and other learned men, that are bountifully maintained at the kings cost and charges. And hither are brought diuers [diverse] manuscripts or written bookees out of Barbarie, which are sold for more money than any other merchandize. The coine of Tombuto is of gold without any stampe or superscription: but in matters of small value they vse certaine shells brought hither out of the kindome of Persia, fower hundred of which shells are worth a ducate: and sixe peeces of their golden coine with the third parts weigh an ounce. The inhabitants are people of a gentle and cheerful disposition, and spend a great part of the night in singing and dancing through all the streets of the citie: they keep great store of men and women-slaues [slaves], and their towne is much in danger of fire: at my second being there halfe the town almoyst was burnt in fiue howers space. Without the suburbs there are no gardens nor orchards at all.

Appendix: Dynasties of Medieval Africa

Rulers of Mali

Sundjata (Mari Djata) (c. 1235–1255)
Uli
Wati
Khalifa
Abu Bakr
Sakura (c. 1300)
Qu
Muhammad (?–1312)
Mansa Musa (1312–1337)
Magha (1337–1341)
Sulayman (1341–1360)
Qasa (1360)
Mari Djata II (1360–1373/4)
Musa II (1373/4–1387/8)
Magha II (1387/8)
Sandaki (1388/9–1390)
Mahmud (1390–?)


Rulers of Songhai

Sonni Ali (1464–1492)
Sonni Baru (1492–1493)
Askiya Muhammad (1493–1528)
Musa (1528–1531)
Muhammad Bankan (1531–1537)
Ismail (1537–1539)
Ishaq I (1539–1549)
Daud (1549–1582)
Muhammad II (1582–1586)
Muhammad Bani (1586–1588)
Ishaq II (1588–1591)
Muhammad Gao (1591–1592)


Rulers of the Solomonid Dynasty of Ethiopia

Yekuno Amlak (1270–1285)
Salomon I (1285–1294)
Bahr Asgad, Senfa Asgad, Hezba (1294–1299)
Ared, Kedma Asgad, Zhin Asgad (ca. 1296–ca. 1299)
Wedem Ared (1299–1314)
Amda Seyon I (1314–1344)
Newaya Krestos (1344–1372)
Newaya Maryam (1372–1382)
Dauti (David) I (1382–1413)
Tewodros (Theodore) I (1413–1414)
Yeskaq (1414–1429)
Endreyas, Takla Maryam, Sarwa (1429–1434)
Iyasus, Amda Iyasus (1433–1434)
Zara Yaqob (1434–1468)
Baeda Maryam (1468–1478)
Eskender (1478–1494)
Amda Seyon II (1494)
Naod (1494–1508)
Lebna Dengel (Dauti II) (1508–1540)
Galawdewos (Claudius) (1540–1559)
Minas (1559–1563)
Sarsa Dengel (1563–1597)
Yaqob (I) (1597–1603)
Za Dengel (1603–1604)
Yaqob (2) (1604–1607)

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Yeskaq (1414–1429)
Endreyas, Takla Maryam, Sarwa (1429–1434)
Iyasus, Amda Iyasus (1433–1434)
Zara Yaqob (1434–1468)
Baeda Maryam (1468–1478)
Eskender (1478–1494)
Amda Seyon II (1494)
Naod (1494–1508)
Lebna Dengel (Dauti II) (1508–1540)
Galawdewos (Claudius) (1540–1559)
Minas (1559–1563)
Sarsa Dengel (1563–1597)
Yaqob (I) (1597–1603)
Za Dengel (1603–1604)
Yaqob (2) (1604–1607)
Susneyos (1607–1632)
Fasiladas (1632–1667)
Yohannes I (1667–1682)
Iyasu I (1682–1706)
Takla Haymanot (1706–1708)
Tewoflos (1708–1711)
Yostos (1711–1716)
Dauti III (1716–1721)
Bakaffa (Asma Giorgis) (1721–1730)
Iyasu II (with Menetewab as regent) (1730–1755)
Iyoas I (1755–1769)

“Era of the Princes” (1769–1855)
Tewodros (Theodore) II (1855–1868)
Takla Giorgis II (1868–1872)
Yohannes (John) IV (1872–1889)
Menelik II (1889–1913)
Iyasu V (Lij Iyasu) (1914–1916)
Zauditu (1916–1930)
Haile Selassie (1930–1974)

NORTH AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST

James E. Lindsay
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Chronology

c. 570  Muhammad is born in the Arabian city of Mecca

c. 610–622  Muhammad is called to prophethood and begins preaching in Mecca

622  Muhammad makes his Hijra (Hegira, meaning “Migration”) from Mecca to Medina; the Hijra marks the official beginning of the religion of Islam and this year counts as year 1 of the Muslim calendar

628–632  Islam is consolidated and expands within Arabia

632  Death of the prophet Muhammad; Abu Bakr is proclaimed the first Muslim caliph

638  Muslims conquer Jerusalem

650s  Compilation of the Qur’an (Koran), the holy scripture of Islam

661  Assassination of ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad and fourth and last Rashidun caliph (r. 656–661); Mu‘awiya ibn Abi Sufyan (r. 661–680) established the Umayyad dynasty: this dispute eventually splits the Islamic community into Sunni and Shia branches, with Shia Muslims considering Ali and his descendents as rightful heirs of Muhammad

661–750  Umayyad caliphate is based in Damascus

680  Martyrdom of Husayn at Karbala; Husayn becomes the model of protest and suffering for Shia Muslims down to the present day

690s  Muslims conquer Byzantine North Africa

691  Completion of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem; the venerated mosque is built on the site of the original Jewish temple

705–715  Construction of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus

711  Muslims conquer most of the Iberian Peninsula, thus establishing a strong presence in Europe

732  Muslim expansion into western Europe is halted by the Frankish leader Charles Martel at the Battle of Tours

744–750  Third civil war in the Islamic world results in the defeat of the Umayyads by the Abbasids

750–1258  Long rule of the Abbasid caliphate marks the golden age of Islamic civilization

762  Baghdad is founded and becomes the capital of the Abbasid caliphate

786–809  Reign of Harun al-Rashid marks the height of the Abbasid caliphate

833–945  Emergence of regional states within Abbasid territories
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>836</td>
<td>Abbasid capital is moved from Baghdad to Samarra, a new city lying about 80 miles to the north</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>909–969</td>
<td>Fatimid caliphate rules in North Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>945</td>
<td>Buyid dynasty occupies Baghdad; end of direct rule by Abbasid caliphs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>969–1171</td>
<td>Fatimid caliphate of North Africa also rules Egypt and Syria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1038–1194</td>
<td>Seljuk dynasty rules in Iraq and Iran</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1071</td>
<td>Muslim Turks crush a Byzantine army at the Battle of Manzikert, forcing the Byzantine emperor to seek help from the West</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1099</td>
<td>European knights conducting the First Crusade capture Jerusalem and establish the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1171</td>
<td>Muslim ruler Saladin conquers Egypt, thus threatening the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem and leading to calls in Europe for a new Crusade</td>
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<tr>
<td>1187</td>
<td>Saladin defeats the Franks at the Battle of Hattin and reconquers Jerusalem for Islam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1189–1192</td>
<td>Third Crusade, know as the Kings’ Crusade because it was led by Richard I of England and Philip II of France, tries unsuccessfully to wrest Jerusalem from Saladin</td>
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<tr>
<td>1219–1221</td>
<td>Mongols conquer Persia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1250–1517</td>
<td>Mamluk dynasty rules in Egypt and Syria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1258</td>
<td>Mongols sack Baghdad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1260</td>
<td>Mamluks defeat Mongols at Ayn Jalut in Palestine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1281–1924</td>
<td>Ottoman Empire, a Turkish Muslim state, is established in Asia Minor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1291</td>
<td>Mamluks capture Acre, the last Frankish stronghold in Syria, thereby ending the Crusader presence in the Holy Land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1402</td>
<td>Ottoman ruler Bayezit I is defeated by the Turko-Mongol invader Timur at the Battle of Ankara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1421</td>
<td>Mehmet I begins expansion of the Ottoman Empire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1453</td>
<td>Byzantium falls to the Ottomans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1481</td>
<td>Beyezit II ascends the Ottoman throne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1512</td>
<td>Selim I comes to the Ottoman throne and expands the empire to the east and south</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1520–1566</td>
<td>Rule of the Ottoman Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent; who expands the Ottoman dominions into southeastern Europe</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Mohammad’s Missions and Campaigns to 632
Expansion of Islam, 624–c. 750
The Middle East in the late Eleventh Century
Byzantine Empire, c. 1270
The Islamic World in 1500
1. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Although most of the great world religions have their origins in the Ancient and Classical worlds, Islam was born some two centuries after the Middle Ages commenced (at least according to the dates used in this series). According to Islamic tradition, Islam began around the year 610 with a revelation from God to Muhammad ibn Abd Allah in the brackish settlement of Mecca in Western Arabia. By 750, Islam had become the religion of the military and political elite of a vast empire that spanned from Spain in the west to the Indus Valley in the east and parts of Central Asia to the north. Although Anatolia—Constantinople in particular—was a target of Islamic expansion since the late 600s, it did not begin to be incorporated into the Islamic world until the eve of the Crusader period in the eleventh century. It was not brought under complete Muslim political domination until the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottoman sultan, Mehmed II, in 1453.

Initially, Islam was the religion of a small elite, but by the mid-900s, Islam had become the majority religion in most of the places where Islamic political authority held sway. By the mid-900s as well, the Arabic language had become the preferred language of science and learning for nearly every ethnic and religious group under Muslim rule. Arabic served to unite the educated elites in the Islamic world in much the same way that Latin did in medieval Western Europe or English does in the modern world. That is, in the tenth century, an educated Jew in Baghdad wrote in Arabic (often with Hebrew characters), while he employed Hebrew for religious purposes, and possibly a dialect of Aramaic in everyday speech. An educated Muslim or Zoroastrian in Iran could speak and write Arabic but used a dialect of Persian for everyday speech. Educated Christians in Cairo were fluent in Arabic but used Coptic for religious purposes and possibly everyday speech. The same held true for educated Christians in Damascus. They knew Arabic but used a dialect of Aramaic for religious purposes and possibly everyday speech as well. Similar situations existed among the educated Muslim and non-Muslim populations of Spain, North Africa, Central Asia, and Sind (the Indus River plain).

How is it then that a small—even minor—religious movement in Western Arabia in the early seventh century could be transformed into a far-flung Islamic empire by the early eighth century and a sophisticated Islamic civilization by the tenth century and beyond? In a sense this is the very question that early Muslim historians grappled with. Not surprisingly, Muslim historians—like
their Jewish and Christian predecessors—credit God with their success and for
the miraculous victories of the early Islamic conquests. What the Muslim histori-
ans did is reminiscent of what one finds in the historical books of the Tanakh
(Hebrew Bible/Old Testament), in which God is portrayed as having entered
into a covenant relationship between Himself and the Children of Israel, often
intervening on their behalf against their enemies. One also finds examples of
this in the Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament, in which persecutions of
early Christians are portrayed as ordained by God for the purpose of dispersing
the community and spreading the Gospel around the Mediterranean basin. Most
modern historians do not claim (at least in public) to see the hand of God in his-
tory. Ancient Jewish and Christian writers as well as early Muslim writers could
not help but see it nor did they hesitate to write about it. Needless to say, cau-
tion is required of modern historians, who must rely on accounts that were writ-
ten by people with worldviews so different from our own.

**The Life of Muhammad (c. 570–632)**

According to the Islamic sources, Muhammad’s prophetic career spanned
some two decades, beginning around the year 610 when he was about 40 years
old and lasting right up to the year of his death in 632. These sources also agree
that Muhammad was a reluctant prophet when the angel Gabriel brought him
the first revelation. However, he soon realized that he was a prophet in the mold
of the ancient Hebrew prophets; and like Moses, Isaiah, and Jeremiah of old, he
knew that he could not refuse to preach. After all, in a world where people still
believed very concretely in the supernatural and were aware of at least the gist
of the Biblical stories of God’s powerful and miraculous dealings with the Chil-
dren of Israel and their enemies, one simply could not ignore a summons from
the very creator and sustainer of the universe.

Muhammad’s biographers tell us far more about Muhammad’s career after
he received his revelations than about his childhood and early adulthood.
Nevertheless, what they do have to say about his early years tells us a great
deal about the values of the Arabian kinship-based society into which Mu-
hammad was born, as well as the desire on the part of his biographers to dem-
onstrate that Muhammad was indeed the Messenger of God. Like Abraham,
Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and Jesus—to name but a few of the Biblical prophets—
Muhammad is portrayed as having a prophetic pedigree. He, too, could trace
his lineage to Abraham, though unlike the Biblical prophets, his genealogy
went through Abraham’s son Ishmael rather than Isaac. In addition to geneal-
ogy, Muhammad’s biographers include numerous stories in which Christian
and Jewish holy men gave their stamp of approval to Muhammad’s prophet-
hood. What better ways to prove to one’s audience that God’s chosen mesen-
ger was indeed who he claimed to be? Not only did he belong to a long line of
prophets, but the very holy men who had access to the special knowledge that
only holy men possess agreed that he was in fact who he claimed to be.

Muhammad was born in Mecca around the year 570 to a woman named
Amina. Most accounts indicate that his father, Abd Allah, died before Mu-
hammad was born. Muhammad’s mother died while he was a young boy,
after which he came under the protection of his father’s brother, Abu Talib, the
leader of Muhammad’s clan, the Banu Hashim—an honorable, though certainly
not the most important, branch of the Banu Quraysh. The dominant group in Mecca at the time, the Banu Quraysh derived much of its prestige and wealth from two things. First, it was the custodian of the principal pagan shrine of the town: the Kaaba. Second, it was involved in regional trade. It is doubtful that Mecca was a major player in long-distance trade at the time, but its trading activities and shrine custodianship did serve as the basis for the group’s relations with outlying tribal confederations in the Hijaz and other regions of Arabia.

Muhammad’s biographers portray him as a trustworthy young man who participated in the religious and commercial activities of Mecca. In fact, his trustworthiness in business affairs ultimately led to his first marriage (c. 600) to a wealthy widowed businesswoman named Khadija. Khadija provided significant moral support to Muhammad during the early years of his prophetic career—after he received his first revelations around the year 610 and especially after he received the revelation to begin his public preaching 3 years later. She remained his sole wife until her death in 619, the year that his uncle and protector, Abu Talib, also died.

Muhammad’s prophetic career can be divided into two roughly equal periods. The first took place in his hometown of Mecca from about 610 to 622. By 622, he had fallen out of favor with the leaders of Mecca and negotiated a move for himself and his followers to the oasis settlement of Medina approximately 250 miles to the north. Those early Meccan converts who moved to Medina with Muhammad are referred to as muhajirun (emigrants). The people of Medina who embraced Muhammad and his message and who welcomed him to Medina are referred to as ansar (helpers). These two groups and their descendants played major roles in the course of Islamic history during Muhammad’s career in Medina as well as after his death in 632.

It was only after Muhammad had made his hijra to Medina in 632 that he was in a position to implement his vision of a society governed by God’s law, for according to the Qur’an, Islam is the perfect divinely established religion and was to be the sole authority in Muhammad’s new state in Arabia. Muhammad’s role would no longer be limited to proclaiming God’s revelations. He now added to his duties the role of political and military leader of the new order in Medina. In fact, Muhammad’s hijra and the establishment of his new political order in Medina is of such importance that Muslims established Muhammad’s hijra as year one of the Islamic calendar.

Muhammad’s agenda during his career in Medina was much like that of King David in the establishment of Ancient Israel as well as the later Hebrew prophets who proclaimed the word of the Lord (YHWH) and summoned the Children of Israel to obedience. Unlike modern U.S. society—the basis of which is supposed to be our Constitution written by men—Muhammad’s principal goal was to create a society that lived in accordance with God’s commandments in part by persuasion, but also by coercion and even warfare as necessary. Like King David, Muhammad was a very successful and at times bloody-minded warlord in his mission to establish himself as God’s designated ruler of the Hijaz. Although violence in the name of religion tends to make modern Westerners uncomfortable, the idea that brutality and bloodshed could be an expression of piety was neither new nor unique to the seventh-century Near East.

Muhammad spent his first 2 years in Medina organizing its residents into a new community based on the revelations he had already received and a
document that modern historians call “The Constitution of Medina.” The year 624 marks the beginning of a series of bloody conflicts between Muhammad and his supporters in Medina and the Banu Quraysh of Mecca. It also marks the beginning of a number of conflicts between Muhammad and three of the major Jewish clans of Medina, which by 627 had resulted in the expulsion of two Jewish clans and the extermination of the adult males and the enslavement of the women and children of a third. The conflict with Mecca ended in 630 when the leaders of Mecca agreed to accept Muhammad as the Messenger of God along with his religion and to restore Mecca to its rightful place as a pilgrimage center as established by Adam and Abraham. (Obviously, the Islamic tradition’s depiction of Adam and Abraham differs considerably from that of Genesis.)

By the time Muhammad died in 632, he had become the ruler of the Hijaz and had established tributary alliances with a number of the outlying tribes in Arabia. At his death, Muhammad’s senior associates reached a consensus about a successor and proclaimed Muhammad’s close friend, early convert, and father-in-law—Abu Bakr—as the head of the community. As such, Abu Bakr enjoyed all of Muhammad’s authority except prophethood. The earliest sources refer to the holders of this office by three titles: (1) Khalifat Rasul Allah (caliph: deputy or successor of the Messenger of God), (2) Amir al-Mu’minin (commander of the believers), and (3) imam (religious leader).

For all intents and purposes, these titles emphasize different aspects of the caliph’s political, military, and religious authority. Whatever the title, there was a general consensus about the basic responsibilities of the office: (1) the caliph should be the sole leader of the community, (2) all political power was to be invested in this one man, and (3) this office was to be a lifetime office. Most of the major Muslim factions agreed with the above positions. The basic problem was related to the criteria for determining who was qualified to hold this office. Although there was and remains a great deal of diversity of opinion within the Muslim community on this issue, during the first century or so of Islamic history three broad factions emerged that came to be known the Sunnis, the Shi’is (see Shiism), and the Kharijis.

The Early Islamic Conquests (632–750)

Whereas the Tanakh’s (Hebrew Bible/Old Testament) ancient vision of a just society living in accordance with God’s instruction (torah) was limited by ethnicity and geography to the People of Israel, the Land of Israel, and the Temple at Jerusalem where the God of Israel caused his name to dwell, the vision articulated in the Qur’an and the early Islamic historiographical tradition is much more ambitious in that it is neither limited by ethnicity nor geography. Rather, it is to strive in the path of God (jihad fi sabil Allah) until the whole world and its people are subjugated under Islamic authority and rule. That is, Muhammad and his community were commanded to “fight them until there is no sedition [fitna] and the religion is Allah’s entirely” (Qur’an 8:39). After Muhammad’s death, it fell to Abu Bakr and his Rashidun, Umayyad, and Abbasid successors to undertake the conquest and subjugation of Arabia and far beyond. And as they did, they sought and easily found inspiration for their religious, political, and military policies in the life and deeds of the most perfect
of examples: Muhammad the son of Abd Allah, known to his followers as Muhammed the Messenger of Allah.

Abu Bakr’s principal objective during his short reign (r. 632–634) was to subdue a rebellion in Arabia among the tribes who believed that their agreements with Muhammad died with him or who did not think that Abu Bakr was worthy of their allegiance. Abu Bakr and Muhammad’s companions obviously disagreed. For them, the tribes’ submission to Muhammad during his lifetime was equal to their submission to God; therefore, they did not have the option of seceding from the new political and religious community. Hence, the wars to subjugate the peoples of the peninsula are known as the Ridda Wars—or the Wars of Apostasy, although not all of those who were compelled to accept Islam and submit to Muslim political authority were actual apostates. That is, some had never been Muslims nor had they submitted to Muhammad’s authority during his lifetime.

By the early 650s, the Arabian Muslim armies had conquered the Iranian Plateau, Syria, Egypt, and part of North Africa, primarily under the leadership Umar ibn al-Khattab (r. 634–644). After Umar’s assassination, the conquests continued under his successor, Uthman ibn Affan (r. 644–656); however, they were interrupted by internal disputes over Uthman’s policies in Iraq and Egypt that ultimately led to Uthman’s assassination in 656. ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib’s (r. 656–661) caliphate was torn apart by the first civil war. Ali’s death—also by an assassin’s hand—marked the end of the Rashidun (or rightly guided) caliphate according to what came to be known as the Sunni tradition. The Shi’i tradition, however, argued that Muhammad had designated Ali (and his progeny) to be his successor at a place called Ghadir Khumm in 632. Consequently, according to the Shi’i conception of the caliphate/imamate, the first three caliphs were usurpers of Ali’s rightful position.

After Ali’s assassination, leadership of the Islamic empire shifted to Mu’awiya ibn Abi Sufyan (r. 661–680), the first of the Umayyad caliphs (661–750) to rule from Damascus. Mu’awiya reinvigorated the conquest and extended the frontiers of the empire further into North Africa in the west and Eastern Iran and Afghanistan in the east. In the 710s, the Muslim forces began the conquest of Spain in the west and Sind in the east. It is worth noting, that the point of the conquests—apart from the Ridda Wars in Arabia—was not conversion of the local populations to Islam per se. Rather, it was to spread Islamic political authority and rule throughout the world. Not surprisingly, the phenomenal success in this project only served to convince the conquerors that theirs was a divinely sanctioned mission: a mission that would be renewed throughout Islamic history with calls for jihad to expand the borders of Islamic rule. Although it is impossible to determine the precise number of Arabian Muslim troops involved in the conquests during the first century of Islamic history, it is abundantly clear that the Arabian Muslim conquerors were a very small minority in a vast non-Muslim sea.

**Fragmentation of the Caliphate**

The political fragmentation of the Islamic empire and of the institution of the caliphate had its beginnings under the Abbasid caliphs (750–1258). The Abbasids came to power by manipulating a Shi’i revolt against their predecessors,
the Umayyads (661–750), in the late 740s. But once the Abbasids assumed power they began to follow the Sunni paradigm for the caliphate. The second Abbasid caliph, al-Mansur (r. 754–775), founded Baghdad in 762 as his new capital. Initially established as a palace complex, Baghdad soon grew into one of the most cosmopolitan cities of the medieval Islamic world. The Abbasid caliphate never fully recovered from the civil war between Harun al-Rashid’s (r. 786–809) two sons, al-Amin (r. 809–813) and al-Ma’mun ibn Harun al-Rashid (r. 813–833). By the 860s and 870s, many petty states had established themselves under Muslim rulers in North Africa and Spain to the west and in Iran and lands further east. In fact, by the tenth century, there were three caliphates at the same time: the Abbasid caliphate with its capital at Baghdad and the Fatimid caliphate (909–1171) with its capital at Cairo; whereas in Cordoba, the Umayyad Abd al-Rahman III (r. 912–961) claimed the title of caliph for himself.

In 945, Baghdad was sacked by the Buyids—a group of Shi’i soldiers of fortune from the region of Daylam on the southern shores of the Caspian Sea. From 945 onward, the Abbasid caliphs remained subordinate to a series of Muslim warlord regimes until 1258, when the invading Mongol armies sacked Baghdad and, for all intents and purposes, brought an end to the Abbasid caliphate. A version of the Abbasid caliphate continued under the tutelage of the Mamluk Sultanate (1250–1517) in Cairo, but it amounted to little more than a means to provide a veneer of legitimacy for the Mamluk sultans. In spite of the failure of the political ideal of a single community of believers under the universal government of Muhammad’s successors, it was during the tenth through the fifteenth centuries that we see Islam’s capacity to expand, geographically as well as in the intellectual, cultural, and economic spheres.

There was an important ethnic shift also, because by the tenth century Islam had begun to lose its close and almost exclusive association with those who traced their lineage to the first Arabian Muslim warriors. In the political realm, people who could trace their lineage to the Arabian Muslim conquests had lost their leading role by 900 as well. Throughout the following centuries (and in fact into the twentieth century), dynasties of Turkic origin dominated the political life of the Islamic world from modern Algeria to India. In fact, it was the Turkish Ghaznavids who initiated the definitive Islamic conquest of northern India from Afghanistan. The Delhi Sultanates (1206–1526) had their origins in inner Asia as well. This Turkish political domination reflected a substantial migration of Turkic peoples from Inner Asia into the Middle East, though only in a few areas did these immigrants come to constitute a majority of the population: Transoxiana (Central Asia north of the Oxus River), Northwestern Iran, and eventually Anatolia. The newcomers did not drive out or assimilate the old Muslim populations in the lands they ruled, and in many respects the Turkic conquerors became the firmest advocates of the established cultural and religious traditions of Sunni Islam.

One faction of these immigrants, named after a man called Seljuk, belonged to the great Oghuzz confederation of Turkic tribesmen. In 1040, under the leadership of two of Seljuk’s grandsons—Toghril Beg and Chagri Beg—the Seljukids defeated the Ghaznavids at the Battle of Dandanqan in Afghanistan and established themselves in Afghanistan and eastern Iran. Leaving his younger brother, Chagri, to administer the family lands in the east, Toghril turned his attention westward. In 1055, Toghril and his Sunni Seljukid Turko-man tribesmen overthrew the Shi’i Buyids in Baghdad. The Abbasid caliph conferred on Toghril the title of sultan.
Toghril and his successors determined early on that if they were to administer a thriving urban and agrarian society in Iraq and Iran they would need a disciplined standing army. Toghril’s successor, Sultan Alp Arslan (r. 1063–1073), pursued an aggressive policy of removing the fiercely independent Turkomans and replacing them with his own Mamluk slave troops. Some of the Turkomans migrated north and east; others migrated to the northwest and pursued their nomadic raiding practices along the Byzantine frontier. For the Byzantines, these Turkomans were nothing but bandits and genuinely threatened their territory and subjects. The Turkomans, on the other hand, legitimated their raiding and pillaging in eastern and central Anatolia as the righteous work of holy warriors (ghazis) engaged in jihad against the Byzantines. After all, from the Turkomans’ point of view, they were merely striving in the path of God (jihad fi sabil Allah) against the preferred infidel enemy of Islam since the seventh century. Things came to a head in 1071 as the Byzantine emperor Romanus Diogenes (r. 1068–1071) led several Byzantine columns eastward to deal with this Turkish menace once and for all. Already on campaign in Syria, Alp Arslan turned his forces north to come to the aid of his fellow Turkomans and fellow Muslims. A pitched battle between the two sides took place at Manzikert, near Lake Van, in the summer of 1071. Alp Arslan’s forces were victorious, and Romanus Diogenes was taken captive. He was ultimately ransomed and deposed. The Battle of Manzikert marks the beginnings of the process by which Anatolia became Turkey.

In 1095, Pope Urban II preached a sermon in Clermont, France, in which he called on the interminably feuding nobility of Western Europe to turn their energies to the cause of Christ and his Church. Urban II was by no means the first to call on them to use their military skills in aide of their Byzantine Christian brothers who, since the Battle of Manzikert, were increasingly threatened by Muslim Turkish marauders in eastern and central Anatolia. In fact, Pope Gregory VII had proposed that he himself lead a force of some fifty-thousand men to liberate their Eastern brethren in 1074. More important, however, Urban called on the Frankish nobility to take up the cross of Christ and make an armed pilgrimage to Jerusalem to redeem their Lord’s patrimony, which had been stolen by the infidel Saracens some four centuries earlier. By the summer of 1099, Jerusalem was in the hands of the Crusaders. Unfortunately for Pope Urban II, he died shortly after Jerusalem was taken, but before word reached Western Europe.

In 1092, the Seljukid wazir, Nizam al-Mulk, was murdered by Nizari Ismailis (better known in the west as the Assassins). A month later, the Seljukid Sultan Malikshah died under suspicious circumstances. Two years later, “the year of the death of caliphs and commanders,” brought with it the death of al-Mustansir, the Fatimid caliph in Egypt, and his wazir Badr al-Jamali. In Baghdad, the Abbasid Caliph al-Muqtadi died in 1094 as well. Consequently, Egypt, Syria, and Iraq were largely devoid of effective political leadership during the last decade of the eleventh century. Although there is no evidence that the Franks had been briefed on the disarray in Syria when they responded to Urban’s call, they could not have arrived at a more auspicious time.

There is evidence that some Syrian preachers and scholars decried the loss of Jerusalem and even undertook missions to Baghdad for assistance from the Abbasid caliphs and Seljukid sultans. But neither was in a position to respond favorably to such requests. It was not until 1144 when a Turkish commander named Zengi (d. 1146) captured the Frankish city of Edessa (ostensibly
on behalf of his Abbasid overlords) that the first successful Muslim counteroffensive against the Franks took place. His son Nur al-Din (d. 1174), after occupying Damascus in 1154, was able to unite the Muslim-controlled areas of Syria and undertook his own jihad against the Franks as well as against the domestic enemies of Sunni Islam: the Shi’i Fatimids in Egypt and their co-religionists in Syria. But his successor and Kurdish protégé, Saladin (d. 1193), was finally able to bring an end to the Fatimid caliphate in Cairo in 1171. He also dealt the Franks a decisive defeat at the Battle of Hattin in 1187 and retook Jerusalem shortly thereafter.

Under Saladin’s leadership, Egypt and Syria were ruled as a family confederation, with members of his extended family administering various provinces throughout the realm. Named after Saladin’s father, Ayyub (Job), the Ayyubid family confederation did have some success against the Franks. The nearly six decades after Saladin’s death were characterized by a series of shifting alliances and accommodations among various Ayyubid and Frankish princes. Not until the Egyptian branch of the Ayyubid house was overthrown in 1250 and the Mamluk forces defeated the Mongols at Ayn Jalut on September 3, 1260 did the policy of accommodation with the Franks begin to change. The transition from the Ayyubid family confederation to the Mamluk sultanate took a good decade to complete. One of the more fascinating aspects of this transition is the brief tenure of Shajar al-Durr, the widow of Sultan al-Salih Ayyub, as sultana in her own right.

Overcome by illness, Sultan al-Salih Ayyub died in the midst of Louis IX’s invasion of Egypt on November 21, 1249. His only living son and successor, Turanshah, was a governor in northern Mesopotamia at the time. Shajar al-Durr kept her husband’s death a secret from all save his commander-in-chief, Fakhr al-Din ibn al-Shaykh, and a few others. They held things together until Turanshah reached Egypt to assume the sultanate. By the time he arrived on February 23, 1250, Fakhr al-Din had been killed in battle with the Franks and things looked bleak. Turanshah had, however, arrived in time to lead a victory over Louis IX and even captured the French king on April 6. In a “last will and testament” letter to Turanshah, the sick Sultan al-Salih Ayyub advised his son to stay away from alcohol and to be generous to his father’s Mamluks. As sons often do, Turanshah chose to ignore his father’s wise counsel and sought to replace his father’s Mamluks with those of his own. In the end, his disloyalty cost him his life as his father’s Mamluks killed him on May 2, 1250. But what to do now that al-Salih Ayyub and his only surviving son were gone?

Enter Shajar al-Durr who became sultana in May 1250, one of the few Muslim women who held real political authority in premodern Islamic history. The minting of coins (sikka) and the invocation of the ruler’s name in the Friday sermon (khutba) were two of the most important symbols of political legitimacy in the medieval Islamic world. Hence, Sultana Shajar al-Durr’s name was invoked in Friday sermons, and coins were minted in her name. The coins referred to her as the Queen of the Muslims; they also declared her fealty to the Abbasid caliph in Baghdad. However, her sultanate was neither popular in Cairo nor was it acceptable to the caliph who offered to send a man from Baghdad to rule the country if none could be found in Egypt. So in July 1250, she abdicated in favor of her new husband, al-Salih Ayyub’s former food-taster, Izz al-Din Aybak al-Turkomani, chosen primarily because of his apparent malleability. Five days later, he was replaced by an Ayyubid child prince,
al-Ashraf Musa, whom he served as atabeg, that is, as guardian of the prince and as commander of the army. It would take another decade and the defeat of the Mongols at Ayn Jalut before the Mamluk sultanate was firmly established in Egypt and Syria under Sultan Baybars and his successors.

Sultan Baybars (r. 1260–1277) aggressively pursued a remarkably effective, multifaceted foreign policy to achieve his goals of fending off renewed Mongol incursions and removing the Franks from Syria. He cultivated good relations with the Golden Horde branch of the Mongol empire in Russia that controlled the reservoir for the regime’s new Mamluk recruits and also served as a counter to the Mongol Il-Khans in Iraq and Iran with whom the Golden Horde and the Mamluk Sultanate were frequently at war. He concluded a commercial treaty with Genoa, whose merchants held a near monopoly on trade in the Black Sea. The treaty supplied the Mamluk Sultanate with new recruits who could no longer be transported by land through Il-Khan territory, but it had the added benefit of strengthening the Genoese in their competition with the Venetians. In addition, he established a commercial treaty with the Byzantine Empire that controlled access from the Black Sea to Alexandria via Constantinople. It too had an added benefit for the Mamluk Sultanate in that it served as a counter to the Papacy’s efforts to support the Franks in Palestine. In the end, the Mamluks were able to drive the Franks from Acre in 1291, thus ending nearly two centuries of Frankish presence in the Near East. By the end of the twelfth century the Il-Khans had converted to Islam and by the 1320s were no longer a major threat to the Mamluk regime in Syria and Egypt. See also Documents 4 and 5.

Further Reading

2. RELIGION

Muslim scholars have long described the five basic ritual practices of Islam in architectural terms. They refer to them as Five Pillars: the supports that define one’s submission (islam) to God. The Five Pillars upon which the entire edifice of Islam rests are the statement of belief (shahada), ritual prayer (salat), almsgiving (zakat), fasting (sawm) during the daylight hours of Ramadan (the ninth month of the Islamic calendar), and the pilgrimage (hajj) to Mecca during the
twelfth month of the Islamic calendar. Islam as a religion comprises Five Pillars (for many, jihad is equally important and functioned essentially as a sixth pillar) as an idea that was developed and implemented by scholars and jurists decades and more after Muhammad’s death. Nevertheless, these Five Pillars are the instruments that for centuries have produced the rhythms and the melodies of daily life in all Islamic societies.

As with most issues concerning the first Islamic centuries, when precisely each of the Five Pillars began to be practiced in a way recognizable to us and to medieval Islamic scholars is a matter of some debate and conjecture. It is clear that each developed in its own way and had its own history. It is also clear that the sources allow us to speak with greater confidence about Islamic ritual practices by the time we get to the third Islamic century, when we observe a tremendous deepening of Islamic culture and identity within the old Islamic lands of North Africa and the Middle East. For the great majority of the population in this region, Islam came to provide not only a system of beliefs, but also a framework for social action and cultural expression.

Whether in the city or the countryside, the subject populations had wide areas of autonomy in daily life. Still, relations among individuals and relations between individuals and a regime were, in principle, governed by shari’a, one of the many Arabic words that convey the idea of pathway. Although shari’a is sometimes translated as Islamic law, it is not a formal body of legislation in the modern sense; rather, it is an all-encompassing code of behavior worked out over the centuries by religious scholars (ulama), who sought to determine how Muslims could best fulfill the Qur’anic admonition to “obey God and His messenger” (Qur’an 3:132)

**Shahada—Statement of Faith**

The first of the Five Pillars, the shahada or statement of belief is a simple two-part statement that is at the center of Islamic belief, ritual, and worship. This statement declares: There is no god but God (la ilaha illa’llah); Muhammad is the messenger of God (Muhammadun rasul Allah). Both of these statements are in the Qur’an, but not side by side as in the shahada formula. Nevertheless, versions of both phrases begin to appear on coins in the late seventh century. Because we do not find the shahada formula per se on earlier coins, it appears that the shahada had not been officially established as a ritual statement of faith until the end of the first Islamic century.

The inscriptions on the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (est. 692) provide additional early examples of the sentiments of the shahada. One overtly anti-Trinitarian, hence, anti-Byzantine Christian inscription reads, “There is no god but God alone; He has no partner with Him; Muhammad is the messenger of God.” Another reads, “Muhammad is the servant of God and His messenger whom He sent with the guidance and the religion of truth.” This latter phrase is the same one embossed on Umayyad coins after the reign of Abd al-Malik (r. 685–705), the Umayyad caliph who built the Dome of the Rock.

Although the shahada is the simplest of the Five Pillars to perform because of its brevity, it is arguably the most important of all. For to recite the shahada publicly with proper intent in front of Muslim witnesses is to accept one’s obligation to perform the remaining four as well. The shahada is the very wellspring from
which the remaining four flow. That is, without belief in the one God and that Muhammad is His messenger, the remaining four pillars are without meaning. Moreover, though any monotheist can proclaim the first part of the shahadah (there is no god but God), it is from the second part of the shahadah (Muhammad is the messenger of God) that the entirety of Islamic ritual and practice is ostensibly derived. And as noted above, the whole process of the sharia can be viewed as an effort to determine how best to fulfill the Qur’anic admonition to “obey God and His messenger” (Qur’an 3:132).

Salat—Ritual Prayer

Although the shahadah is the most important of the Five Pillars, in practice, it is the salat—the ritual prayer performed five times per day—that is the ubiquitous symbol of Islamic ritual and piety. Qur’an 11:14 provides general guidance as to when and how often one should perform the salat: “Attend to your prayers, morning and evening, and in the night-time too.” What we do not find in the Qur’an are instructions that one should perform the salat five times per day (rather than three), the precise hours of the day in which the salat should be performed, the specific procedures for ablutions necessary to make one ritually clean (tahara) so that one’s prayers can be valid, the exact words that should be said in the salat, or the physical acts that should be performed during the salat. Rather, we learn these things—and in great detail—from the hadith literature about Muhammad’s life and teachings.

For example, one of the most famous episodes in these biographies is Muhammad’s night journey, during which Muhammad was taken from Mecca to Jerusalem on Buraq—a winged horse with a human face. From Jerusalem he was taken up to the seventh heaven where God informed him that his community would be required to perform fifty prayers per day. According to Ibn Ishaq (d. 767), Muhammad described his return journey as follows:

On my return, I passed by Moses and what a fine friend of yours he was! He asked me how many prayers had been laid upon me and when I told him fifty he said, “Prayer is a weighty matter and your people are weak, so go back to your Lord and ask Him to reduce the number for you and your community.” I did so and He took off ten. Again I passed Moses and he said the same again; and so it went on until only five prayers for the whole day and night were left. Moses again gave me the same advice. I replied that I had been back to my Lord and asked Him to reduce the number until I was ashamed, and I would not do it again. He of you who performs them in faith and trust will have the reward of fifty prayers. (Ibn Ishaq, 186–187)

Ibn Ishaq’s account of Muhammad’s negotiations with God to reduce the number of prayers from fifty to five is reminiscent of Abraham’s negotiations with God to reduce the number of righteous men necessary to save Sodom from fifty to ten (Genesis 18:22–30). More important, Ibn Ishaq’s account provides a powerful narrative explanation for why the faithful should perform the ritual prayer five times per day.

Prior to his hijra to Medina, Muhammad had instructed his followers to pray toward Syria, which was understood to mean toward Jerusalem. He continued this practice after his arrival in Medina as well. After encountering stiff opposition from a number of the Jewish clans of Medina, Muhammad received a
revelation instructing him to henceforth pray facing Mecca. The importance of determining the direction of Mecca is evidenced by the fact that each mosque has a mihrab, which usually takes the form of a niche in a wall to indicate the direction (qibla) of Mecca. Near the mihrab is a minbar, or elevated pulpit, from which the sermon (khutba) is preached.

The five designated prayer times are the morning, noon, afternoon, evening, and night prayers. Each of the five prayers (if possible) is to be performed during specific periods determined according to the position of the sun, not a time on the clock. Thus, the period for the morning prayer begins with the crack of dawn and ends at sunrise; the noon prayer when the sun is at its midpoint, not at noon. The afternoon prayer is usually performed when an object’s shadow is slightly longer than itself. The evening prayer can be performed at any time after sunset and before the disappearance of the last light over the horizon; the night prayer at any time between the end of the time period for the evening prayer and beginning of the time period for the morning prayer.

Although each prayer is valid during its appointed time frame, it is preferable to perform the salat shortly after the muezzin calls the faithful to prayer if possible. Once one has performed the appropriate ablution he or she is ready to perform the salat. The five daily prayers may be recited in the privacy of one’s home (the customary practice among women), though it is more meritorious to say them with others in a mosque, especially on Friday, which is the designated day for congregational prayer.

The act of ritual prayer is the same whether one performs it by oneself or with others. It consists of a series of precise bowings and prostrations, which together are called a raka (lit., bowing) or prayer cycle. In a congregational setting, those performing the salat line up behind an imam (prayer leader) in straight rows facing the direction (qibla) of Mecca. Hence, those performing the salat in Syria face south, in Yemen they face north, in India they face west, and in Morocco they face east. Men line up behind the imam; if women are present, they line up at the back of the mosque behind the men or in an ante-chamber of some sort. Following the imam’s lead, the worshipers stand erect and recite the first chapter of the Qur’an, the Fatiha (lit., opening), which is always recited in Arabic, even if the person reciting it is not an Arabic speaker.

In the name of God the Compassionate the Merciful. Praise be to God, Lord of the Universe, the Compassionate, the Merciful, Sovereign of the Day of Judgment! You alone we worship, and to You alone we turn for help. Guide us to the straight path, the path of those whom you have favored, not of those who have incurred Your wrath [Jews], nor of those who have gone astray [Christians]. (Qur’an 1:1–7)

After a minute or so they briefly bow at the waist with their back straight (roughly 90 degrees) and their hands on their knees; they then stand erect again, and almost immediately place their knees, hands, and forehead on the ground. They hold this position for a few moments and then assume a sitting position. They then prostrate themselves a second time, all the while reciting short prayers. This completes the first raka, after which they stand erect and begin the cycle all over again for as many times as required for each daily prayer. The evening prayer consists of three rakas, the night four, the morning two, the noon four, and the afternoon four. After the final raka is performed
the worshipers remain seated and turn to their right and to their left and say al-salam alaykum (peace be upon you).

Those who are unable to perform the salat because of a physical malady should perform those aspects of the salat that they can and recite the appropriate passages at the appropriate times. The five daily salats represent the required ritual prayers in Islamic ritual and worship. They do not represent the full extent of prayer in Islamic practice. Additional passages from the Qur’an may be recited during the salat, and additional greetings and blessings may be said. Supererogatory salat—that is, additional rakas—are highly recommended as expressions of piety and devotion as well. In addition to the ritual prayer of the salat, more open-ended supplications are part of Muslim worship. However, such petitions are referred to as duat and do not fall under the rubric of salat, nor do they require the performance of a raka. Additional types of prayer are also found as part of the Shi’i and Islamic mystical (Sufi) traditions.

Zakat—The Giving of Alms

Despite its frequent admonitions to give alms, the Qur’an does not specify what percentage of one’s wealth should be given as zakat beyond that one should give “what you can spare” (Qur’an 2:219). The Qur’an does, however, set forth who the legitimate recipients of alms are.

Alms (zakat) shall be only for the poor and the destitute, for those that are engaged in the management of alms and those whose hearts are sympathetic to the Faith, for the freeing of slaves and debtors, for the advancement of God’s cause, and for the traveler in need. That is a duty enjoined by God. God is all-knowing and wise. (Qur’an 9:60)

Because the very concept of the Five Pillars of Islam was worked out by scholars and jurists decades or more after Muhammad’s death, it reflects the vision of right religion as understood by educated and relatively well-to-do individuals. As the scholars and jurists extrapolated from the Qur’an and the hadiths what the specific obligations of the zakat were for the faithful, they determined that they only applied to those Muslims who possessed wealth and that the zakat should be paid from one’s profit, not necessarily the totality of one’s wealth. Consequently, the poor and destitute are under no obligation to give it. A consensus also emerged that the portion of one’s profit that should be given as zakat can range anywhere from 2.5 percent of one’s gold, silver, or merchandise to 10 percent of one’s crops to be paid at harvest time. How the zakat was actually collected and/or distributed is difficult to ascertain. While the Qur’an speaks of giving zakat to those “engaged in the management of alms,” individuals could legitimately give their zakat directly to the deserving recipients.

Sawm—Fasting

Fasting as an integral part of religious observance certainly was not new with Islam in seventh-century Arabia. It had long been part of the religious observances of Ancient Rome, Greece, Babylon, Egypt, and India. Moreover, it is abundantly clear from even a cursory examination of the Bible that it was
essential to the religious life of Ancient Israel and the early Christian Church as an act of repentance, contrition, atonement, mourning, prayer, supplication, and devotion. According to the Bible, Moses (Deuteronomy 9:9–10), Elijah (1 Kings 19:7–9), and Jesus (Matthew 2:1–11) each fasted 40 days as preparation for major supernatural encounters at the beginning of their public careers.

It was during the Medinan phase of his career (when Muhammad encountered a large Jewish community that practiced fasting) that Muhammad received the revelation that established the month of Ramadan as the time for the Muslim fast (Qur’an 2:183–187). Ramadan came to take on a special sanctity in Islamic religious practice as well. According to Qur’an 2:185, it was during the month of Ramadan that Muhammad received his first revelation. This correlation between revelation and fasting parallels the connection between the giving of the tablets to Moses on Mt. Sinai and the fast on the Jewish Day of Atonement.

Based on Qur’an 2:183–87 and the hadith tradition, Muslim scholars developed lengthy and elaborate treatises that addressed a host of questions regarding the Ramadan fast, including how and when it was to be performed, who should perform it, what exempted one from it, which behaviors and consumable products were to be avoided, and what invalidated one’s fast. Scholars argued that the fast was obligatory for all adult Muslims (generally defined as those who had fully entered into puberty) who were in good physical and mental health. For one’s fast to be valid, one is required to begin each day by declaring one’s intention to abstain from those things that are forbidden from that point when “you can tell a white thread from a black one in the light of the coming dawn” until nightfall. Many Muslims break their fast each evening by eating dates, which according to Islamic tradition was how Muhammad used to break his fasts.

During the fast, one should abstain from all food and drink, even swallowing spittle that could be expectorated. As specified in Qur’an 2:187, sexual relations with one’s legitimate sexual partners (wives and female slaves for men; husbands and masters for women) are forbidden during this period. Deliberate seminal emission, menstruation, and bleeding in the wake of childbirth all invalidate one’s fast. Those who could not perform it because of illness, travel, warfare, or other exigent circumstances should make up the fast at a later time; the same applies to women who are menstruating, pregnant, or nursing. Those who simply break the fast without good reason are required to fast for 2 months to make up for each day. The moral importance of the fast as an act of worship and piety is amplified by a hadith according to which Muhammad said, “Five things break the fast of the faster—lying, backbiting, slander, ungodly oaths, and looking with passion” (Murata and Chittick, 17). Here it is engaging in morally reprehensible activities that are always forbidden, rather than failing to temporarily abstain from activities normally permitted, that invalidates one’s fast.

Ramadan begins on the first day of the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar; that is, when the new crescent moon is sighted. The Ramadan fast, of course, begins the following morning. It ends with the Festival of Fast Breaking (Id al-Fitr) when the next crescent moon is cited at the beginning of the tenth month, Shawwal. Because lunar months generally last 29 or 30 days, if the skies are too cloudy to see whether there is in fact a crescent moon, the first of Ramadan is deemed to be 30 days after the first of the preceding month.
Those accustomed to the 365-day Gregorian Christian solar calendar tend to find the 354-day Islamic lunar calendar rather frustrating since the Islamic calendar does not employ any mechanism to ensure that it coincides with the four seasons of the year. According to the Gregorian calendar, the ninth month (September) always straddles the end of summer and the beginning of autumn. According to the Islamic calendar, the ninth month (Ramadan) can correspond to September. But because Ramadan comes 11 days (give or take a day) earlier each year, it would take another 33 years or so before it would correspond with September again.

**Hajj—Pilgrimage**

What ultimately became the rituals of the Islamic *hajj* represent a combination of several preexisting Arabian practices associated with two uninhabited sacred pilgrimage areas outside of Mecca: Arafat and Mina. Visitations to the Kaaba in Mecca were later added to these rituals. Other pre-Islamic pilgrimage practices that were incorporated into the Islamic *hajj* include the inviolability of the pilgrim, particular dress called the *ihram*, performances of certain rituals and sacrifices, and commerce. In time, these rituals came to be associated with Abraham who, according to Qur’an 2:127, built the Kaaba with his son Ishmael as a place of veneration of the One God.

The annual pilgrimage takes place in and around the precincts of Mecca, and it begins on the eighth and ends on the thirteenth day of the last lunar month of the Islamic calendar, Dhu l-Hijja (The *Hajj* Month). The annual *hajj* is required of those adult Muslims who are able to undertake it and can withstand the many physical and financial hardships required of the pilgrims who come from the entire Islamic world. In addition to the required annual *hajj*, many Muslims perform another pilgrimage (*umra*), which can be performed at any time of the year. Although the *umra* is considered praiseworthy, it is neither obligatory nor is it considered a substitute for the *hajj*.

Prior to entering and after months, even years in transit, pilgrims remove their regular clothes, performed the necessary ablutions, and donned a special garment consisting of two rectangular pieces of unstitched white cloth, called an *ihram*. Men wrap one piece of cloth around their waists. This piece should be large enough that it reaches to the ankles. The second piece of cloth is wrapped around the torso and draped over the left shoulder. The *ihram* is worn throughout the entire *hajj*. Pilgrims either go barefoot or wear sandals without heels. Women’s *ihram*, consists of clean, modest, and plain clothes. Although women cover their heads, they are not required to wear a face veil as is the custom in some of their home countries.

Upon entering Mecca, the pilgrim enters the Haram mosque and walks counterclockwise around the Kaaba seven times—three times quickly and four times slowly. The pilgrim then proceeds to the Station of Abraham, which is opposite the Kaaba. Standing behind the Station, the pilgrim performs two *rakas*, after which he or she goes to the well of Zamzam, drinks some of the water, and performs additional ablutions. According to Islamic tradition, at Zamzam the Angel Gabriel miraculously brought forth water for Hagar and Ishmael after Abraham had left them at Mecca and headed into the desert. The Bible records a similar story; however, according to Genesis 21:8–21, Hagar
and Ishmael’s exile, their thirst, and the angel of God’s miraculous provision of water occurred in the wilderness near Beersheba in the northern Negev desert of modern Israel.

Next, the pilgrim leaves the Haram complex through the southeastern gate and proceeds to a small hill called Safa and then he or she runs or jogs about a quarter mile to another rise called Marwa. The pilgrim repeats this seven times, all the while reciting prayers in commemoration of Hagar’s frantic search for water. After completing this ritual, the pilgrims enter the bazaar and have their hair cut, concluding the rituals of the umra. Those performing the hajj have only just completed the preliminary rituals. Instead of having their hair cut, they leave the Haram complex and find their lodgings, for there are many more journeys and rituals to be fulfilled.

First, pilgrims travel east through the desert some four miles to Mina where they spend the night on the eighth day of Dhu l-Hijja. They set out the next day for the plain of Arafat, about 7 miles further east. Although the wealthy could afford to hire camel transport, most walked the whole way. Some even walked barefoot as an act of piety. At noon on the ninth day of Dhu l-Hijja, pilgrims begin the part of the hajj that is called “The Standing” at Arafat. That is, they keep vigil around the Mount of Mercy until sundown, all the while reciting, “What is Your command? I am here!” and listening to sermons preached from the summit where, according to Islamic tradition, the first man, Adam, had prayed and Muhammad had preached his farewell sermon. At sunset, the pilgrims pack up and begin their return to Mecca. By tradition, the pilgrims wait until they have reached Muzdalifa, some 3 miles behind them toward Mina, to perform their evening prayers. Although most of the pilgrims sleep at Muzdalifa overnight, women, children, and the infirm can continue the trip to Mina.

At Mina, on the tenth of the month, the pilgrims perform a series of rituals in remembrance of God’s instruction to Abraham to sacrifice a ram instead of his son (Qur’an 37:103–109). Three stone pillars are located east to west along the valley. The first ritual act at Mina is for pilgrims to throw pebbles at the westernmost pillar. This “stoning of the devil” symbolically identifies the pilgrim with Abraham, who threw stones at the devil as he sought to convince Abraham not to sacrifice his son as God commanded. Because the Qur’an does not name which son Abraham was commanded to sacrifice, there was disagreement among the earliest commentators as to whether the son in question was Isaac or Ishmael. Eventually, majority opinion came to be that (unlike the Biblical account in Genesis 22) it was Ishmael.

After the stoning, the pilgrim purchases a goat or a sheep (or a camel if he or she can afford it) to sacrifice. The pilgrim then turns the face of the animal toward Mecca and slits its throat as Abraham did. Slitting the animal’s throat is the final act of the ihram phase, after which the pilgrim finds one of the many barbers present at Mina and has his head shaved, or at least has some of his hair cut. After this, he is free to put on his regular clothes. He then returns to Mecca where he circumambulates the Kaaba once again. In the remaining days of the hajj, pilgrims return to Mina to throw pebbles at all three pillars, sacrifice additional animals, and enjoy the festivities with fellow pilgrims.

Although it is not required, many (if not most) pilgrims also make the trek northward to Medina to visit Muhammad’s mosque there before returning home.
Although one must be in Mecca and its surroundings to perform the annual hajj rituals, markets in villages, towns, and cities throughout the medieval Islamic world teemed with animals in the days leading up to the day on which pilgrims sacrificed at Mina as Muslims prepared to sacrifice and feast in solidarity with their brothers and sisters in the Arabian desert. (For nonpilgrims, this is known as the Feast of Sacrifice or Ḥaḍra.) In addition, as the Islamic conquests vastly expanded the territories under Islamic political authority, the hajj caravans from the furthest reaches of the Islamic world proved to be indispensable to Islamic learning and international commerce.

In addition to themes discussed in this volume there are two other important strains of Islamic religious thought and practice that developed in the middle ages— Shiism and Sufism. Important to each of these expressions of Islamic religion is pilgrimage and the visitation (ziyara) of the shrines and tomb complexes of the Shi'i imams and Sufi saints. These traditions will be discussed in detail below in Global Ties. See also Sunnis and Document 1.

Further Reading

3. ECONOMY

Daily life in the medieval Islamic world revolved around its markets and its mosques—two institutions essential to the hustle and bustle of daily life in every city and town—for it was in the local markets that goods were manufactured and food was bought and sold. In the major cities such as Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo, and others everything imaginable from all over the Abode of Islam and beyond could be found as well. Consequently, the bulk of this section will be devoted to markets of three major cosmopolitan centers—Damascus, Baghdad, and Cairo—and the provinces of Syria, Iraq, and Egypt. Whereas Damascus is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, Baghdad (est. 762) and Cairo (est. 969) were founded as palace cities for new imperial dynasties: the Abbasids (750–1258) and Fatimids (909–1171), respectively. The main congregational mosque—the center of official religious and political life—was always located within or next to a market. In those instances where congregational mosques were constructed in new garrison towns such as Basra and Kufa or in new palace cities such as Baghdad and Cairo, new markets soon sprung up adjacent to the principal gathering place for the faithful.
**Syria and Damascus**

As the administrative center of Syria after the initial conquests in the 630s and as the seat of the *Umayyad caliphate* (661–750), Damascus oversaw the consolidation and continued expansion of the Islamic empire and the development of many of the administrative policies and institutions that would be employed by the Umayyads’ successors. With the conclusion of the first civil war (656–661) and *Muʿawiya ibn Abi Sufyan’s* consolidation of his position in Syria, Islamic expansion was renewed—in Iran to the east as well as in North Africa and Spain in the west. During this early period, the Umayyads also initiated a number of policies to consolidate their administrative control over the new empire. Most notable are the reforms undertaken by *Abd al-Malik* (r. 685–705) to issue a distinctive currency and to establish Arabic as the principal administrative language of the regime. It was under Abd al-Malik’s direction that the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem was constructed as a symbol that the new Islamic regime had permanently replaced that of the Byzantines. Abd al-Malik’s son, al-Walid (r. 705–715), continued with this theme as he transformed the ancient church of St. John the Baptist in Damascus into the great Umayyad mosque in the center of the city. He also refurbished and rebuilt Muhammad’s mosque in Medina.

Although the Syria of the medieval Muslim geographers and travelers included the modern state of Syria, it also included the modern states of Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, and the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip—that is, everything north of the western Arabian Peninsula. In addition, they rarely used the word *Syria* to describe the region; rather, they generally referred to it as *al-Sham*. The tenth-century geographer, *al-Muqaddasi*, explains the meaning of *al-Sham* as follows:

> It has been said that Syria is called “Shâm” because it lies on the left of the Kaʿbah, and also because those who journey thither (from the Hijaz) bear to the left or north; or else it may be because there are in Syria so many Beauty-spots, such as we call Shâmât—red, white, and black—(which are the fields and gardens held to resemble the moles on a beauty’s face). (Le Strange, 14; Collins, 129)

The rather mundane directional etymology of *al-Sham* is certainly correct. Nevertheless, the fact that al-Muqaddasi takes the trouble to include his fanciful “beauty-spot” etymology is indicative of the lengths that scholars were willing to go to praise the merits of their home provinces or cities.

Al-Muqaddasi describes in detail the physical geography of Syria and then turns his attention to Syria’s climate, which is generally temperate, but because of its mountains and valleys it is also subject to the extremes of bitter cold and debilitating heat. Baalabakk in the mountains of Lebanon qualifies as the coldest place in Syria, while the Jordan Valley ranks as the hottest. In the tenth century, al-Muqaddasi could not have known that the Dead Sea, just south of Jericho in the Jordan valley, is the lowest place on the planet (1,300 feet below sea level). However, he was well aware that the Jordan Valley rift stretched south past the Hijaz and that it was a “Wâdy of heat and of palm-trees” (Le Strange, 15; Collins, 150).

As a good geographer al-Muqaddasi is rather fond of lists. A list of particular importance for our purposes is his list of the agricultural bounty and other goods produced in Syria. For it is from his list (arranged according to region...
and town) that we can know what people ate in tenth-century Syria and what
they manufactured and sold in their local markets. Many of these foodstuffs
and manufactured goods were purchased by merchants and other middlemen
for sale in Damascus, but also in the markets of Cairo and Baghdad. Some
may have even been purchased by long-distance traders for sale in the mar-
kets of Cordoba in Andalusia, Isfahan in Iran, and even Constantinople, the
capital of the Byzantine Empire.

Al-Muqaddasi’s list of Jerusalem’s produce is the longest and most detailed.
As one might expect, some of his hometown’s produce is celebrated, excellent,
and without equal.

From Jerusalem come cheeses, cotton, the celebrated raisins of the species known
as ‘Ainûnî and Dûrî, excellent apples, bananas—which same is the fruit in the
form of a cucumber, but when the skin is peeled off, the interior is not unlike the
water-melon, only finer flavored and more luscious—also pine-nuts of the kind
called “Kuraish-bite,” and their equal is not found elsewhere; further mirrors,
lamp-jars, and needles. (Le Strange, 18; Collins, 151)

Elsewhere, al-Muqaddasi reports that Palestine was known for olives, dried figs,
raisins, the carob-fruit, textiles of mixed silk and cotton, soap, and kerchiefs; Jer-
icho for excellent indigo; Amman for grain, lamb, and honey; Tiberias for carpet
stuffs, paper, and cloth; Beit Shean for indigo, dates, and rice; Tyre for sugar,
glass beads, as well as cut and blown glass vessels; Aleppo for cotton, clothes,
dried figs, dried herbs, and a red chalk called al-maghrah (that is, the mineral
Rubrica Sinopica). Al-Muqaddasi’s list for Damascus is fuller, though not as
long as his list for his hometown. “From Damascus come all these: olive-oil
fresh-pressed, the Bal’îsiyyah cloth, brocade, oil of violets of an inferior quality,
brass vessels, paper, nuts, dried figs, and raisins” (Le Strange, 19; Collins, 151).

In addition to the wide variety of foodstuffs produced in Syria, al-Muqaddasi’s
list illustrates very nicely the types of local manufactured goods found in
Syria: various types of textiles made from locally grown silk and cotton, soap,
carpets, cotton paper, glass wear, brass vessels, and al-maghrah. Similar types
of manufactured products dominated the lists of goods produced in Iraq and
Egypt as well. Of particular importance for our purposes is the extensive pres-
ence of a range of textiles, cotton paper, and al-maghrah. Textiles were impor-
tant staples of trade in the medieval Islamic world. Paper production exploded
in the medieval Islamic world after the introduction of paper-making technol-
ogy in the eighth century. Finally, the red chalk called al-maghrah was thought
to have curative powers for a range of liver disorders and is an example of
the type of medicine employed in large part on the recommendation of Galen
(d. 203 A.D.) and other ancient medical practitioners whose works had been
translated into Arabic between the eighth and tenth centuries under the patron-
age of the Abbasids. In the medieval Islamic world, textiles, paper, and medi-
cines were particularly attractive to long-distance traders because of their great
value and the relative ease with which they were transported by ship as well
overland by camel caravan.

Iraq and Baghdad

Despite their many successes, including extensive conquests in North Africa,
Spain, Sind, and Central Asia, the Umayyad caliphate (661–750) was riddled
with internal divisions by the 740s. In the end, the Umayyad house was toppled by a clandestine revolutionary movement, which operated in the name of “the approved one from the house” of Muhammad. During a Friday sermon in late October or early November 749, Abu l-Abbas Abd Allah ibn Muhammad al-Saffah (r. 749–754) publicly declared himself “the approved one from the house” in the main congregational mosque in Kufa in Iraq. Al-Saffah and his Abbasid successors based their claims principally on their kinship with Muhammad because they were descendants of his paternal uncle, Abbas.

Whereas Syria was the home province of the Umayyad caliphate and Damascus its capital, the Abbasids found their center of gravity in Iraq. Although the political discontent of Kufa had proved advantageous during the revolutionary phase of the movement, al-Saffah’s brother and successor, al-Mansur (r. 754–775), determined that the movement’s consolidation phase required the establishment of a new palace city in more stable surroundings. Al-Mansur searched along the Tigris River for the ideal location, and in 762, he settled on the site of the ancient Persian village of Baghdad. According to one report preserved by al-Tabari (839–923), when al-Mansur settled on Baghdad he said the following:

This is a good place for an army camp. Here’s the Tigris, with nothing between us and China, and on it arrives all that the sea can bring, as well as provisions from the Jazira, Armenia and surrounding areas. Further, there is the Euphrates on which can arrive everything from Syria, al-Raqqah, and surrounding areas. The caliph therefore dismounted and pitched his camp on the Sarat Canal. He sketched a plan of the city and put an army commander in charge of each quarter. (McAuliffe, 238)

Unlike medieval Syria, which encompassed much more than the modern state of Syria, medieval Iraq was far smaller than modern Iraq. Medieval geographers divided the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (Mesopotamia) into two broad regions that roughly corresponded to the ancient designations of Lower and Upper Mesopotamia. Generally, when medieval geographers spoke of Iraq, they meant Lower Mesopotamia—the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers south of the town of Tikrit. The territory between the two rivers north of Tikrit (Upper Mesopotamia) was generally referred to as the Jazira (The Island).

Not surprisingly, al-Muqaddasi’s description of Iraq and the Jazira focuses on the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and how they affected agriculture and daily life from the Persian Gulf to their headwaters in Eastern Anatolia. According to al-Muqaddasi, the waters of the Tigris are “feminine, pleasant and excellent, favorable to jurists. . . . Indeed, two-thirds of the charm of Baghdad derives from this river” (Collins, 103). The Euphrates, on the other hand, “is a masculine river: it has a hardness about it” (Collins, 104). An ancient network of canals from the Euphrates had long watered the fertile black (sawad) agricultural lands between the rivers that gave Lower Mesopotamia its other name: the Sawad. In the region of Baghdad a network of four canals connected the Euphrates to the Tigris. South of Kufa, the Euphrates winds its way toward Wasit where it begins to disperse into a vast marshland. The waters of the Tigris were used to irrigate the lands to its east, primarily by means of the ancient Nahrawan canal that ran from Tikrit in the north and reconnected to the Tigris
about 50 miles north of Wasit in the south. By the time the rivers converged at Basra, they had so intermixed with the sea tides and waste that drinking water had to be brought from up-river by boat. According to al-Muqaddasi, there was a saying that the water in Basra “is one-third seawater, one third tidewater, and one third sewage. This is because at ebb tide the canal banks are laid bare and people relieve their bowels there: then the tide coming in carries the excrement with it” (Collins, 108).

Textiles, fish, luxuries, dates, and figs are what caught al-Muqaddasi’s eye in Iraq. Basra was renowned for its silks and linens, twenty-four varieties of fish, for pearls, gems, antimony, cinnabar, verdigris, and litharge of silver and for forty-nine types of dates which were exported along with henna, silk, essence of violet, and rosewater. Kufa was renowned for silk turbans, essence of violet, and azadh dates; Hulwan for figs; Wasit for fish and draperies; Numaniyya for “superb garments and cloths of wool the colour of honey;” Baghdad for strong cloth, silks, fine apparel, mats, as well as “shawls and turbans of special yakanaki fabrics” (Collins, 107–108). The Jazira, whose climate is similar to northern Syria’s, was a land of far greater agricultural diversity and was especially renowned for horses, soap, chains, leather straps, cotton, balance scales, and a preserve called qubbayt made from locust fruit and nuts. More specifically, Mosul was renowned for grains, honey, dried meats, coal, fats, cheese, honeydew, sumac, pomegranate seeds, pitch, iron, metal buckets, knives, arrows, salted fish, and chains; Nasibin for chestnuts, dried fruits, scales, inkstands, and rods for fulling carpets; Raqqa for soap, olive oil, and reed pens; Harran for qubbayt, honey, earthen wine jars, cotton, and balance scales; Malathaya for dairy products, coal, grapes, fresh fruit, cannabis seeds, hemp, and dried meat (Collins, 123).

Once again al-Muqaddasi’s lists illustrate the importance of textiles (cotton, silks, linens, garments, fine apparel, and draperies) to the economy of the medieval Islamic world. Although al-Muqaddasi does not mention paper, the first paper mill in the Islamic world was established in Baghdad in 794 to 795 during the reign of Harun al-Rashid. Paper’s production and its many uses spread from Baghdad throughout the region and ultimately, via Muslim Spain, to Europe (Bloom, 48). Antimony, cinnabar, verdigris, and litharge of silver were minerals thought to have special medicinal powers. And finally, dates, salted fish, dried meats, dried fruits, and nuts were easily preserved and exported well beyond the regions where they were produced.

**Egypt and Cairo**

In the wake of a clandestine revolutionary movement among the Berbers of North Africa, Ubayd Allah al-Mahdi proclaimed himself the first Fatimid imam in 910. Despite the similarities between the methodology and rhetoric of the Fatimids and that of the Abbasids, the Fatimid imams belonged to the Isma'il branch of Shi'i Islam, which was openly hostile to the Sunni Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad (see Shiism). In fact, the Fatimids’ intent had long been to use North Africa as a staging ground for their ultimate goal of conquering Baghdad and unseating the Abbasids. To that end, and after several failed attempts, Fatimid forces finally conquered Egypt in 969. Almost immediately, the Fatimid general, Jawhar, began laying the foundations for the new palace
city, al-Qahira (Cairo). The Fatimids never were able to overthrow the Abbasid caliphs, but under their tutelage Egypt and its new capital became one of the wealthiest and most important cosmopolitan way stations for international trade and culture in the Mediterranean world, southwest Asia, and the Indian Ocean. Saladin brought an end to the Fatimid caliphate in 1171, but Cairo and Egypt continued to flourish under his leadership and that of his Ayyubid successors (1171–1250) and of the Mamluk sultans (1250–1517).

Egypt, too, played an important role in Islam’s sacred past. It was the land of the evil Pharaoh and the beautiful Joseph. It was the land in which Moses performed many of his miracles; it was the land of prophets, the wilderness, and Mount Sinai; and the land where Mary took refuge with her son Jesus (a claim made by Damascus as well). Despite al-Muqaddasi’s great affection for his home province, as far as he was concerned, “Syria, with all its greatness, is just a rural district of [Egypt]; and [the] Hijaz, with its inhabitants, depends on it” (Collins, 163). There are a number of legends about the founding of al-Qahira and the etymology of its name.

According to one legend, Jawhar had staked out the perimeter of the city with wooden stakes and ropes with bells on them but wanted to wait to break ground until the astrologers determined the most propitious time. When a crow lit on one of the ropes, the workmen took the sound of the ringing bells as the signal to begin their work. Although the astrologers determined that Mars (al-Qahir, the Ruler) was in the ascendant—a bad sign—work commenced nevertheless. Another legend relates that the Fatimid imam, al-Muizz, had instructed Jawhar before he left North Africa to build a new walled city and call it al-Qahira for it would rule the world. According to yet another legend, the city was first called al-Mansuriyya (the Victorious; the name of the Fatimid capital in North Africa), but al-Muizz changed it to al-Qahira after his arrival 4 years later. Whatever the truth of these stories, Jawhar built the new Fatimid capital on a sandy plain north of Fustat where it was protected on the east by the Muqattam Hills and on the west by a canal running along the east bank of the Nile.

Because al-Muqaddasi visited Cairo only a few decades after its founding, Cairo had yet to become the bustling cosmopolitan city that travelers would later find under the Fatimids and their successors, the Ayyubids and the Mamluk Sultans. According to al-Muqaddasi,

Al-Qahira (Cairo) is a town which Jawhar the Fatimid built after he had conquered Egypt, and subjugated [qahara] its inhabitants. It is large and well-built, with a splendid mosque. The imperial palace stands in its center. The town is well fortified, having iron-plated gates. It is on the main road to Syria, and no one may enter al-Fustat except through here, as both places are situated between the mountains and the river. The Musalla (place of prayer), where public prayers in connection with the two festivals [Ghadir Khumm and Ashura] are said, is beyond the town, while the burial grounds are between the metropolis and the mountain. (Collins, 169)

In al-Muqaddasi’s day, Fustat was still the principal city of Egypt and the center of commerce and culture. According to al-Muqaddasi, “It has superceded Baghdad, and is the glory of Islam, and is the marketplace for all mankind. It is more sublime than the City of Peace [Baghdad]. It is the storehouse of the Occident, the entrepôt of the Orient, and is crowded with people at the time of
the Pilgrimage festival” (Collins, 166–167). Fustat’s markets were without equal, its baths were the peak of perfection, its mosques were crowded with the faithful, and its teeming population lived in four- and five-story tenements, which housed as many as two hundred people. In addition, “Victuals here are most appetizing, their savories superb. Confectionaries are cheap, bananas plentiful, as are fresh dates; vegetables and firewood are abundant. The water is palatable, the air salubrious. It is a treasury of learned men; and the winter here is agreeable” (Collins, 167). Clearly, in al-Muqaddasi’s mind, there was no finer city in the entire Islamic world.

He was particularly struck by the abundance of ships plying their trade along the Nile and those anchored at Fustat’s port. When a man asked al-Muqaddasi where he was from, he told him that he was from Jerusalem. The man proceeded to tell him that if the vessels along the shore of Fustat were to go to Jerusalem, they could carry away all its people, all their possessions as well as all the stones and timbers that made up the city; such was the capacity of the ships at Fustat that when they were full, nothing of Jerusalem would remain. One gets the impression that this man told a version of this story to many a stranger, but al-Muqaddasi relates it to convey his sense of wonder about Egypt’s teeming economic prosperity in the tenth century.

Many of these ships were small ferries for local use. Some sailed north to the Mediterranean ports of Alexandria and Damietta. Others traveled south to Aswan where they took on goods that had been transported across the desert from the Red Sea port of Aydhab. Still others were ships that plied the waters of the Mediterranean Sea, and had sailed down the Nile to offload their goods and passengers—pilgrims, traders, artisans, Muslims, Christians, and Jews—from throughout the Mediterranean world. Some of these Mediterranean ships flew Muslim flags; others flew Byzantine or various “Frankish” flags. Clearly, political sensibilities were not to interfere with business in Fatimid Egypt. The abundance brought to Fustat by these many ships can be seen in the eleventh-century traveler, Naser-e Khosraw’s, glowing description of one of the markets near the mosque of Amr ibn al-As, named after the general who conquered Egypt and became its first Muslim governor in 642.

On the north side of the mosque is a bazaar called Suq al-Qanadil [Lamp Market], and no one ever saw such a bazaar anywhere else. Every sort of rare goods from all over the world can be had there: I saw tortoise-shell implements such as small boxes, combs, knife handles, and so on. I also saw extremely fine crystal, which the master craftsmen etch beautifully. [This crystal] had been imported from the Maghreb, although they say that near the Red Sea, crystal even finer and more translucent than the Maghrebi variety had been found. I saw elephant tusks from Zanzibar, many of which weighed more than two hundred maunds. There was a type of skin from Abyssinia that resembled a leopard, from which they make sandals. Also from Abyssinia was a domesticated bird, large with white spots and a crown like a peacock’s. (Thackston, 53)

The frontiers of medieval Syria and Iraq were different than their modern counterparts; medieval Egypt, however, basically corresponds to modern Egypt. Al-Muqaddasi divides Egypt into seven districts. He begins with the settled areas along the Mediterranean coast of the Sinai Peninsula, then lists three districts in the Nile Delta region ranging westward from modern day Suez to Alexandria; the fifth region is immediately south of the delta, the capital of which
is Fustat. The sixth district is Upper Egypt, which lies to the south of Fustat, and its capital is Aswan, just north of the first cataract on the Nile. The seventh district is the desert and its oases.

Al-Muqaddasi devotes a great deal of attention to the Nile, its annual rise and fall, the public ceremonies held each year to break the dykes when it reached the appropriate level, as well as canals and water wheels used to irrigate farmers’ fields and bring water to villages. He was particularly impressed with the crocodile, which looked like a lizard, was terrifyingly dangerous, was invulnerable to all weapons, and could snatch a whole person in its mouth. Even more impressive, though far less dangerous, were the lighthouse at Alexandria and the Pyramids at Giza, Sakkara, and elsewhere along the Nile.

But most important of all for al-Muqaddasi was the produce, because Egypt was a country of commerce as well as agriculture. Its goods included incomparable reed pens and their vitriol, vinegar, wool, canvas, cloth, flax, linen, leather, shoes, leggings, geese, plantains, bananas, sugar cane, dies, apparel, spun yarn, water skins, and fish. In particular, Fustat was renowned for its fine leather, leggings, and cloth made from a three-ply yarn of camelhair and goat’s wool; Upper Egypt was known for rice, wool, dates, vinegar, and raisins; Tinnis for multicolored cloth; Damietta for sugar cane; Fayyum for rice and inferior linen; Busir for shrimp and superior cotton; Farama and its villages for fish, baskets, fine ropes, fine white cloth, wraps, canvas, mats, grains, jasmine, and other oils (Collins, 171–172).

Once again, we see the importance of textiles (dies, canvas, spun yarn, cloth, linen, wool, and fine white and multicolored cloth) to international trade in the medieval Islamic world. Paper was also produced in Egypt by al-Muqaddasi’s day, having by then largely replaced parchment and papyrus. Although al-Muqaddasi focuses his attention on Egypt as a center for the production of textiles, leather, grain, and other foodstuffs, Egypt had long been a major center for the production of metal works (gold, silver, copper, tin, and lead), fine glass products, as well as pottery (Goitein, 1:108–111).

Money and Markets

Essential to the economic prosperity of the far-flung medieval Islamic world was a degree of political stability, traders’ confidence that their persons and property would be generally secure along caravan and sea routes, and a stable currency with which they could buy and sell their goods. In the wake of the Islamic conquests, Muslim rulers and their subjects continued to employ the currency already in use in the conquered Byzantine and Sassanian territories. New coins were struck as well. Medieval Islamic rulers minted three types of coins. For the most part a gold coin was called a dinar, a silver coin was called a dirham, and a base metal coin (usually copper) was generally called a fals. There were other regional (even slang) names for the coins, but dinar, dirham, and fals were the customary terms used throughout the medieval Islamic world.

Because at any given time one could find merchants from Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo, Cordoba, Isfahan, Tashkent, Bukhara, Delhi, Constantinople, and a host of other Afro-Eurasian cities in the markets of the medieval Islamic world, one of the most important men in any market was the sayrafi, usually translated as money-changer. But his job entailed far more than simply making
change: It was also to determine the precise value of a coin, especially foreign coins that traveling merchants needed to exchange for Islamic issues. In addition to the sayrafi, the muhtasib (market inspector or public censor) was essential to the smooth functioning of markets, long-distance trade, and the overall economy in any given region. His job was to ensure that the weights and measures in the market (including those used by the sayrafi) were correct and that business was transacted honestly, but also that public morality in the very public space of the market was upheld. See also Document 10.

**Further Reading**


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**4. THE ARTS**

Before we turn our attention to examples of art in the medieval Islamic world, it is important to dispel a common myth about “Islamic art” that one frequently finds in nonspecialist discussions of the subject. That is, the assertion that Islam forbids depictions of Muhammad or the representation of the human form—especially in religious settings. There were and are strains—particularly the more puritanical Sunni strains—of Islamic thought that held and still hold to such views. However, early Islamic coins, ceramics, palace inscriptions, manuscript illuminations, and so forth make it abundantly clear that though such depictions were never ubiquitous as in Byzantine and Latin Christian art, the notion that such depictions are absolutely forbidden is one of those myths that apparently cannot be dispelled no matter how much evidence there is to the contrary.

As in most premodern societies, the arts in the medieval Islamic world tended to be expressions of the artists’ and craftsmen’s religious and political patrons’ interests. That is not to say that art was purely utilitarian in nature. Rather, it stood in stark contrast to the rather modern notion of art for art’s sake or as an expression of an artist’s narcissistic notions of reality. In this section, we examine a range of art forms that flourished in the medieval Islamic world, including monumental architecture, calligraphy, metalwork, woodwork, ceramics, textiles, literature, and manuscript illuminations.
The Mosque

Probably the most recognizable examples of art in the medieval Islamic world fall under the umbrella of monumental architecture: mosques, palaces, citadels, caravanserais, and so forth. Because the mosque is central to the practice of the Islamic religion and the primary example of monumental architecture in all Islamic societies, it is fitting that we begin our discussion of Islamic art with the mosque. The Arabic word for mosque (masjid) literally means “place of prostration.” Its function was essentially the same as a synagogue or church in the ancient world; that is, it was a place for the formal worship and assembly of the community of faith.

The first mosque was actually the courtyard of Muhammad’s house in Medina. Once the Islamic forces began their conquests of Arabia, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Egypt, and North Africa, we find that the armies built congregational mosques in their newly established military bases such as Kufa and Basra in Iraq as well as Fustat in Egypt and Qayrawan in North Africa. It was around these congregational mosques that these military bases served as administrative centers and gradually developed into full-fledged cosmopolitan cities.

Unlike medieval cathedrals, which tended to be long and narrow to accommodate the procession of the liturgy of the mass from the back of the church to the altar at the front, mosques tended to be broad to accommodate the rows of worshipers who lined up in prayer behind the imam. Because the faithful are required to face Mecca wherever they perform their five daily prayers (salat), the prayer hall of a mosque was constructed to face the direction (qibla) of Mecca. The front wall contained a mihrab that indicated the qibla. To the right of the mihrab was the minbar or pulpit from which the sermon would be preached. Frequently the mihrab took the form of a niche in the wall that was decorated with verses of the Qur’an in elaborate calligraphy as well as naturalistic and geometric designs. (For Islamic prayer rituals, see “Religion” section.)

In early Islamic history, the entire male Muslim population was required to worship together during the Friday noon prayer in each city’s local congregational mosque. Such attendance was a defining marker of membership in and allegiance to the Muslim political and military ruling class. With the passage of time and eventual conversion of much of the local population to the religion of the conquerors, it became necessary to construct several congregational mosques in each large city. Most mosques were built as mosques from the start. However, there were instances where existing religious structures or holy sites were selected as the location for a mosque. Probably the most famous example of this is the transformation of the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist into the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus as “one of the most celebrated mosques of the world,” located in the center of the city (Broadhurst, 272). Initially constructed in 375 as the cathedral of St. John the Baptist by Emperor Theodosius I, the church had long been a place of veneration and pilgrimage for Christians, because the main building housed the tomb of John the Baptist. In the early 700s, al-Walid ibn Abd al-Malik (r. 705–715) appropriated the cathedral and transformed it into a congregational mosque symbolizing Umayyad and Islamic
supremacy. However, in the years between the Islamic conquest of Damascus (635) and al-Walid’s reign, the cathedral of St. John the Baptist had served as a place of worship for the majority local Christian population and the relatively few Islamic forces.

Legend has it that the early Islamic armies conquered Damascus from the west and the east. Abu Ubaydah ibn al-Jarrah (the general in charge of the conquest of Syria) had made peace with the city’s Christians prior to entering the city and the church from the west. However, Khalid ibn al-Walid (hero of the Ridda Wars and early Islamic conquests) had made no such peace and conquered the city and the church from the east. Henceforth, the eastern part of the cathedral belonged to the Muslims, the western part to the Christians. The cathedral’s gradual transition to cathedral/mosque and then to mosque illustrates the degree to which Syria’s early Muslim rulers were required to accommodate the majority local Christian population until their own position was solidified by Abd al-Malik and his son, al-Walid.

As one might expect, Ibn Jubayr’s account of al-Walid’s construction of the new cathedral mosque paints Islam and al-Walid in the best possible light. According to Ibn Jubayr, al-Walid initially asked the Christians for the church in exchange for compensation. When they refused his generous offer, he seized the building by force and razed it. When he began to rebuild it anew as a mosque, al-Walid wrote to the “king of Rum at Constantinople ordering him to send twelve thousand craftsmen from his country, offering threats in case he should delay” (Broadhurst, 272). Of course, the Byzantine Emperor submissively obeyed the caliph and complied. The details of this story have long been disputed, especially the nature of the cathedral’s joint use and whether the Christians were fairly compensated for it or whether it was seized by force. Whatever the actual truth of the details, al-Walid’s mosque in Damascus is an impressive example of early Islamic monumental architecture. It soon became an object of veneration and pilgrimage for Muslims of the Middle Ages and remains so to this day. Subsequent to al-Walid’s transformation, it took on even greater importance as an Islamic pilgrimage site because the head of al-Husayn ibn Ali (Muhammad’s martyred grandson) was buried in the eastern side of the courtyard after he was killed at Karbala, Iraq in 680.

Palaces

The earliest remains of palace architecture—the most elaborate of the housing for Muslims—date to the Umayyad period. Most of these appear to have served primarily as desert retreats from the city, from plague outbreaks, as well as from the prying eyes of the Umayyads’ more pious subjects. In the wake of the Abbasid seizure of power, we begin to see a change in the use of palatial architecture; that is, the Abbasids established their new palace cities of Baghdad (est. 762) and later Samarra (est. 836) not as retreats but as monumental edifices designed to legitimate their claims to the caliphate and leadership of the entire Islamic world. Palaces provided center for entertainment in the Muslim world.

A keen devotee of astrology, al-Mansur consulted his astrologers to ensure that the heavens agreed with his choice of Baghdad as the location for his new palace city. According to al-Khatib al-Baghdadi, after the city was completed al-Mansur had Ibrahim ibn Muhammad consult the stars. The astrologer obeyed
and was pleased to inform his caliph that the horoscope was indeed auspicious; the city would be long lived, it would be the home of a great civilization, and the world and its people would gravitate to it. Moreover, he said, “May God honour you, O Commander of the Faithful. I bring you good tidings of yet another gift indicated by the stars. No Caliph shall ever die in the city” (Lassner, 46–47). Needless to say, Ibrahim’s pronouncement greatly pleased al-Mansur, though assassins and civil wars would clarify for subsequent caliphs that the astrologer’s forecast was not entirely accurate.

The Fatimids pursued a similar policy with their establishment of palace cities at Mahdiyya and al-Mansuriyya in North Africa and of course Cairo after their conquest of Egypt in 969. The Umayyads in Spain challenged the Fatimids and Abbasids to caliphal leadership in the tenth century, in part, by constructing Madinat al-Zahra (est. 936)—a new palace city within the traditional capital of Cordoba. Unfortunately for our purposes, it was customary for new rulers to destroy the palaces of their predecessors and use the material to build their own edifices. Such was the fate of Abbasid palaces in Baghdad and Samarra, Fatimid palaces in North Africa and Cairo, as well as Madinat al-Zahra in Cordoba. Hence, no palaces prior to the fourteenth century have been preserved intact.

The only palace constructed in the medieval Islamic world that remains largely intact today is the famous Alhambra (Red Fortress) built by the fourteenth-century Nasrid rulers in Granada, Spain. Ironically, it was the Christian forces that had long warred against Granada and finally subdued it in 1492 that preserved the palace. The magnificent Ottoman Topkapi Palace in Istanbul was constructed in the wake of Mehmed II’s conquest of Constantinople in 1453 (after the time frame of this book) and was henceforth the home of the Ottoman sultans down to the reign of Sultan Abdulmecid (r. 1839–1860). Fortunately, detailed descriptions of palaces from throughout the medieval Islamic world have been preserved in a wide range of literary sources. Most palaces were built from stone, brick, and stucco. Some are even said to have been built out of sweets, glass, and ceramics. It should also be noted that it was common for huge and elaborate tents to be constructed specifically to serve as a ruler’s palace as well. A massive palace tent used by the Fatimids was famously known as “The Slayer” because at least two men are said to have died each time it was set up.

The Written Word—Calligraphy

For the vast majority of Muslims, the Qur’an is the eternal uncreated speech of God, flawlessly recited to mankind in Arabic by His messenger, Muhammad. It should come as no surprise then that the Qur’an and the study of the Arabic language were the fundamental building blocks of education in the medieval Islamic world. Nor should it come as a surprise that the medieval Islamic world was a world in which the written word was ubiquitous, after all we learn in the Qur’an that “your Lord . . . taught by the pen, taught man what he did not know” (Qur’an 96:3–5).

The oldest form of the Arabic script is what is known as Kufic, which is rather blockish and stubby in shape. Kufic was the most commonly used script in early Islamic history and was the only script used for transcribing the Qur’an for centuries. In time, Kufic was replaced by Naskhi as the most
common script used for the production of books, including the Qur’an. One of the highest examples of artistic expression in the medieval Islamic world was calligraphy—the use of the written word in highly decorative forms. By the tenth century the six classical scripts of Islamic calligraphy had been established: Kufic, Naskhi, Muhaqqaq, Raihani, Tawqi, and Riqa. Other scripts were employed as well, especially in much later Persian and Turkish calligraphic productions, both of which are written with the Arabic alphabet.

The exteriors and interiors of mosques and other public buildings were decorated with Qur’anic inscriptions. Elaborate and sophisticated inscriptions often were used to decorate the mihrab, or niche in the wall of a mosque that indicates the direction (qibla) of prayer toward Mecca. Some of the earliest artifacts of the Qur’anic text are the inscriptions on the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem that date to the late seventh century. Presumably, Abd al-Malik could have selected whatever verses he wished from the Qur’an to decorate his new shrine; however, he saw fit to employ passages that assert the finality of Muhammad’s prophethood and the superiority of Islam over Christianity, themes that emphasize the change in the religious and political landscape more than half a century after the initial Islamic conquest of formerly Byzantine Christian Syria.

In addition to pious and laudatory inscriptions on public buildings, coins, swords, textiles, carpets, ceramics, lamps, and so forth, one could find inscriptions, poetry, and belles-lettres with far less noble themes as well. Fine calligraphy was such a highly regarded and sought-after art form that trade in the works of famous calligraphers was a highly lucrative business, so lucrative in fact that there are numerous reports of highly skilled calligraphers passing off their own forgeries as authentic works of earlier masters.

**Metalwork**

Unlike medieval Europe, where metalwork tended to be viewed as a rather minor art form, metalwork—especially work in precious metals—was one of the leading art forms in the medieval Islamic world. Artists who worked in metal were of such repute that it was quite common for metalworkers to actually sign their works. Major centers of metalwork were located in northern and eastern Iran, where artists employed techniques that were inherited for the most part from their Sassanian predecessors. In the wake of the Mongol conquests in the thirteenth century, many skilled artisans understandably fled to the Mamluk lands of Syria and Egypt. Nevertheless, Iran continued to produce high-quality metalwork and other types of art, especially after the Ilkhanids embraced Islam and Persianate culture in the fourteenth century and presented themselves as patrons of Islamic learning and art. Iran continued to be a center of Islamic arts under the Timurids as well. Very few examples of gold and silver work have survived from the early period. Given the value of the metals themselves, it should not be surprising that many of these artifacts were melted down so that the metals could be reused. Much of what has survived is made of brass decorated with elaborate geometric designs and calligraphy of gold and silver inlay. Many of these pieces have been stripped of the gold and silver, with only the grooves where the precious metals had once been inserted. Examples of this kind of work that have survived include large water basins, candlesticks, lamps used in mosques, incense burners, hand warmers, and so forth.
Woodwork

Medieval artisans developed sophisticated ways to carve, turn, and embellish wood. We see this especially in the detailed woodwork in some of the elaborate minbars (stepped pulpits in mosques), Qur’an stands, chests, and other domestic furnishings that have survived. One common means of achieving ventilation and privacy in domestic and public buildings is what is known as mashrabiyya: a wooden grill or grate that was used to cover windows or balconies. The grills or lattice work were usually made of turned wood that was joined together with carved blocks or spheres of wood to create intricate patterns. (In the homes of the very wealthy or for use in public buildings, the screen was occasionally made of metalwork.) There are also numerous example of intricate inlay work. Depending on available materials as well as the stylistic tastes of patrons or craftsmen, elaborate geometrical patters constructed with different types of woods, mother of pearl, ivory, and so forth.

Ceramics

The medieval Islamic world produced a tremendous range of pottery and ceramics styles, types, and designs. Rather simple earthenware vessels were, of course, abundant for utilitarian purposes such as storing water, wine, olive oil, grain, and so forth. Basic methods of decorating pottery included coating it with a white clay slip or coating it with a glaze before firing it. In time more sophisticated glazing techniques were developed that allowed for more detailed decorative motifs. Display ware employed similar decorative designs to those used by metalworkers, manuscript illuminators, calligraphers, and woodworkers. That is, there was a fondness for elaborate geometric patterns and calligraphy. We also find artifacts that were decorated with depictions of the natural world as well as scenes from literature. Such decorative techniques were employed most notably in the ceramic tile work that decorates mosques, palaces, homes, bathhouses, fountains, and so forth throughout the medieval Islamic world. In addition to working with clay, craftsmen also produced similar decorative vessels with glass as well as carved them from crystal, jade, and ivory.

Textiles and Rugs

The textile and dying industries were two of the most important industries in the medieval Islamic world. Obviously, most of what was produced would not be classified as art. But some of what was produced were luxury items made of silk as well as gold and silver threads. Such items were intended as art as well as symbols of status and were treated as such. Fine textiles were major commodities in long-distance trade and because of its value could even serve as a kind of currency. Unfortunately, because textiles are made from biodegradable materials, very little from the early period has survived; the earliest examples are quite difficult to date. Probably the most famous example of Islamic art in the Western world is the “Persian carpet” or “Oriental rug.” Such pile carpets have long been favored as luxury items in the West since they were first introduced by Italian merchants in the later middle ages. In the Islamic world carpets were used as floor coverings, but also as decorative wall
hangings, for cushions, pillows, bags, and sacks of all types. The *sajjada* or prayer rug was ubiquitous as well, because it provided a clean place to perform one’s ritual prayers (*salat*).

The most famous textile in the medieval Islamic world was the *kiswa* or tapestry that covers the Ka’ba in Mecca. At the end of each *hajj*, the old *kiswa* was removed and replaced with a new one, a pilgrimage practice that has pre-Islamic origins as well. In Islam’s early years, it became customary for the caliph to supply the new *kiswa* each year. Ibn Jubayr made the pilgrimage in 1184 and records the installation of the new *kiswa* in his *Book of Travels*.

On Saturday, which was the Day of Sacrifice, the *Kiswah* [*“Robe” or covering*] of the holy Ka’bah was conveyed on four camels from the encampment of the Iraqi Emir to Mecca. Before it walked the new Qadi, wearing the black vestment given to him by the Caliph, preceded by banners and followed by rolling drums. . . . The *Kiswah* was placed on the venerated roof of the Ka’bah, and on Tuesday the 13th of the blessed month the Shaybites were busily employed in draping it. It was of a ripe green colour, and held the eyes in spell for its beauty. In its upper part it had a broad red band (that ran around the Ka’bah), and on the side that faces the venerated Maqam [Station of Abraham], the side that has the venerated door and that is blessed, there was written on this band, after the Bismillah [the invocation “In the name of God”] the words “Surely the first Sanctuary appointed for mankind (was that at Bakkah [Mecca])” [*Koran III, 95*]. On the other side was written the name of the Caliph with invocations in his favour. Running round the band were two reddish zones with small white roundels containing inscriptions in fine characters that included verses from the Koran as well as mentions of the Caliph. (Broadhurst, 185)

The *bismilla* is the opening sentence of all but one of the 114 chapters of the Qur’an, “In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.” It was customary for an author to write only a few phrases of a Qur’anic passage with the assurance that his reader had the Qur’anic text memorized and would fill in the blanks himself. Qur’an 3:96–97 in its entirety reads as follows, “The first temple [house] ever to be built for mankind was that at Bakkah, a blessed site, a beacon for the nations. In it there are veritable signs and the spot where Abraham stood. Whoever enters it is safe. Pilgrimage to the House is a duty to God for all who can make the journey. As for the unbelievers, God can surely do without them.” *Bakkah* is another name for Mecca.

**Poetry**

One of the most popular events at trade fairs in seventh-century Arabia was the poetry competition among the leading poets of the clans present. For to the best poet went not only a financial reward, but his entire clan benefited from the prestige of his poetic prowess. Arabic poetry performances continued to be extremely popular throughout the medieval Islamic world and remain so today, often selling out large auditoriums. Persian reemerged as a language of literature and administration in the tenth century. Public recitations of Ferdowsi’s (ca. 940–1020) *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings)—one of the earliest and greatest examples of new Persian epic poetry—were quite popular throughout the Persian-speaking world. Turkish poetry began to become popular as well by 1400 after the rise of the Ottoman house in Anatolia and southeastern
Europe. It should come as no surprise that poetry often dealt with themes of honor, glory, and heroism among men, but also the beauty of one’s beloved, the passions of unrequited love, and the romantic benefits of wine. Among the ruling elites as well as among the wealthy classes, poetry performances were often accompanied by music and performed by singing girls, many of whom were slaves purchased expressly for their beauty, voices, and dancing abilities.

**Illuminations**

The introduction of paper to the Islamic world in the eighth century made the production and reproduction of knowledge much easier and over time significantly cheaper. By the tenth century paper-making technology had been diffused throughout the Islamic world to such an extent that we see a major increase in the production of books, and with it the practice of illuminating texts with images. Examples of illustrated manuscripts that have survived include technical manuals on warfare, medicine, plants, human anatomy, astronomy, and so forth. *Kalila wa-Dimna* (a popular Arabic translation of Indian animal fables) and Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh* (one of the longest epic poems in world literature with some fifty-thousand couplets) provided a great deal of material for the illustrator’s imagination and talents. The earliest complete illustrated manuscripts of the *Shahnameh* were commissioned under the Mongol Ilkhans in the fourteenth-century Iran. The tradition of patronizing the illumination of the *Shahnameh* continued under the Timurids and Safavids as well. Finally, there is the illustrated “tales of the prophets” tradition that rather explicitly flies in the face of the assertion that Islam forbids the depiction of Muhammad or other prophets. Some of these manuscripts portray Muhammad with his face visible; some with his face veiled or effaced in some fashion; and others with flames about his head similar to the nimbus (or halo) above or around sacred figures in Christian iconography.

**Further Reading**


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**5. SOCIETY**

Full membership and participation in the medieval Islamic world was based on religion—an absolutely universal idea in the premodern world, whether in
Byzantium, Sasanian Iran, or fifteenth-century France. That is, if one had any hopes of being a full participant in Byzantine society, he had to be an Orthodox Christian; if one had any hopes of being a full participant in Sassanian Iranian society, he had to be a Zoroastrian; if one had any hopes of being a full participant in fifteenth-century France, he had to belong to the Latin rite of Christianity. Issues of superiority and inferiority are not limited to religion. Few themes in Islamic history cut against the grain of modern American social and cultural values than the role and status of women and men in Islamic societies. Hence, in this section we will use the themes of proper relations between Muslims, Christians, and Jews as well as proper relations between men and women to gain a broad understanding of the social order (real and ideal) in the medieval Islamic world. One of the physical marks of participation in Muslim society was circumcision, of both men and women. But before we turn our attention to these issues, a few words on the role of the muhtasib (market inspector or public censor) are in order.

The muhtasib’s responsibility was to ensure that the weights and measures in the market were correct and that business was transacted honestly, but equally (if not more) importantly that public morality in the very public space of the market was upheld. Nizam al-Mulk (d. 1092) emphasizes all three roles in his advice to the Seljukid Sultan Malikshah (r. 1073–1092):

In every city a censor must be appointed whose duty is to check scales and prices and to see that business is carried on in an orderly and upright manner. He must take particular care in regard to goods which are brought from outlying districts and sold in the bazaars to see that there is no fraud or dishonesty, that weights are kept true, and that moral and religious principles are observed. (Darke, 45)

According to Nizam al-Mulk, maintaining the integrity of the marketplace is “one of the foundations of the state and is itself the product of justice” (Darke, 45). For if the sultan does not give his full support to his muhtasibs and ensure the integrity of the markets in his realm, the poor will suffer, merchants will buy and sell as they see fit without regard to honesty, “sellers of short weight will be predominant; iniquity will be rife and divine law set at naught” (Darke, 45). Nizam al-Mulk’s moral vision of the marketplace with its emphasis on the importance of honest weights and measures is strikingly reminiscent of the Biblical admonition that “the L ORD abhors dishonest scales, but accurate weights are his delight” (Proverbs 11:1).

Another of the muhtasib’s many responsibilities was to remove or repair anything that might hinder the free passage of goods, beasts, merchants, and customers throughout the market. The absence of wheeled vehicles contributed to the warrens of relatively narrow streets and alleys of the medieval Islamic world’s bazaars and neighborhoods. Although some streets were wide, most only needed to be wide enough for two fully loaded camels, horses, or donkeys to pass one another. Needless to say, traffic jams, filthy streets, and open sewage were the bane of merchants in the medieval Islamic world as much, if not more so, as they are today. Rainstorms, floods, bad weather, and natural disasters created obvious traffic flow problems that were beyond the control of any muhtasib. Manmade congestion was another story. In fact, muhtasibs had to maintain constant vigilance against shop owners who were fond of arranging their wares well outside their storefronts, making the streets
impassable for beasts of burden and sometimes even fellow merchants and customers.

Nizam al-Mulk wrote his *Book of Government* in a time when no ruler could even imagine the kind of inspection and enforcement tools that modern Americans take for granted. Hence, the only way that a sultan could ensure that his markets were honest and that public morality was upheld was to appoint *muhtasibs* who were beyond reproach and who could not be bought off. The best candidates for such jobs in Nizam al-Mulk’s mind, of course, were the kinds of men that Mahmud of Ghazna (r. 998–1030) had selected. A nobleman was a good candidate, but even better would be a “eunuch or an old Turk, who having no respect for anybody, would be feared by nobles and commoners alike” (Darke, 45).

Nizam al-Mulk illustrates the near absolute authority of the *muhtasib* and the importance of public morality in the medieval Islamic world with a story. Mahmud and several of his boon companions had been up all night drinking together. When morning came, Ali Nustigin, who was still feeling giddy with drink, decided that it was time for him to go home. He asked Mahmud if he could take leave of the sultan, but Mahmud advised him that he should stay indoors until he had sobered up because it was inappropriate to go out in public intoxicated. “If the censor sees you like this in the bazaar, he will arrest you and give you the lash. You will be put to shame, and I shall be very embarrassed and unable to help you” (Darke, 45).

Ali was a general in the sultan’s army and a military hero and assumed that no *muhtasib* would dare approach him in public no matter how drunk he might be. As luck would have it, when he was in the middle of the bazaar, the *muhtasib* appeared with a hundred men. The *muhtasib*, who was an old and venerable Turkish eunuch, ordered his men to drag Ali off his horse. The inspector then dismounted his own horse and proceeded to beat Ali forty times with a stick until he fell to the ground while everyone silently watched. When the *muhtasib* left, Ali’s men carried him home. The next day Mahmud asked him if the *muhtasib* had seen him. When Ali showed him the stripes on his back, he laughed and said, “Now repent and resolve never to go outdoors drunk again” (Darke, 46).

### Jews and Christians: People of the Book

Relations between Muslims and non-Muslims were ostensibly governed by Qur’anic pronouncements, *hadiths* about Muhammad’s words, deeds, and attitudes towards non-Muslims, as well as the practice of the early Muslim community. Together, they provide the basis for the Islamic concept of *dhimma*, a term that means “protected people,” those who agree to pay a special tax and accept the rule of Muslim leaders. Through this concept, Muslims offer hospitality to those of other religions living in their lands. Muslim scholars considered Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians (Magians), Samaritans, and Sabeans to be adherents of “other revealed religions”; that is, *ahl al-kitab* (People of the Book). As such, only they were afforded *dhimmi* status. As Muslim armies conquered new territories and for reasons of political expediency, other groups such as Buddhists in Central Asia and Hindus in India were afforded de facto *dhimmi* status. However, Buddhism and Hinduism were not considered de jure revealed religions.
The Qur’an venerates Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and other Biblical figures as prophets who had preached the same monotheistic message that Muhammad proclaimed to his kinsmen and followers in Mecca and Medina. Although the Qur’an concedes that there are some individual Jews and Christians who are righteous, it condemns Jews and Christians in general as willfully errant communities of faith. “Had the People of the Book accepted the Faith, it would surely have been better for them. Some are true believers, but most of them are evil-doers” (Qur’an 1:111).

Jews are condemned in the Qur’an for having corrupted the *Tawrah* (Torah) given to Moses, for having killed God’s prophets, and for falsely claiming to have crucified Jesus (Qur’an 4:154–157). Christians are condemned for having corrupted the *Injil* (Gospel) given to Jesus, for claiming that Jesus is God’s son, and especially for the doctrine of the Trinity, which the Qur’an describes as polytheism, the worst of all sins (Qur’an 4:171). In spite of the Qur’an’s veneration of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, its attitude toward the People of the Book is explicitly aggressive and hostile, as follows:

> Fight against such of those to whom the Scriptures were given [*ahl al-kitab*] as believe neither in God nor the Last Day, who do not forbid what God and His apostle have forbidden, and do not embrace the true Faith, until they pay tribute [*jizya*] out of hand and are utterly subdued. (Qur’an 9:29)

Accordingly, once the People of the Book were properly subdued and had paid the *jizya* (tribute or poll-tax, essentially protection money), there was no need to continue to fight them.

As one might expect, how these and other texts were interpreted by jurists and how they were applied by rulers varied according to time period and region. Nevertheless, in exchange for their submission and tribute all members of these communities were supposed to be afforded protection of life and property as well as limited religious freedoms, at least in those areas such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance where their activities did not impinge on the ruling Muslim classes. Certain disabilities were imposed on them as well, including distinctive dress, restrictions on the construction of new places of worship, even prohibitions against riding horses.

According to *The Book of the Islamic Market Inspector*, compiled in the twelfth century by the Syrian jurist al-Shayzari (d. c. 1193),

> The *dhimmis* must be made to observe the conditions laid down for them in the treatise on *jizya* written for them by Umar b. al-Khattab, and must be made to wear the *ghiyar* [a distinctive piece of cloth]. If he is a Jew, he should put a red or a yellow cord on his shoulder; if a Christian, he should tie a *zunnar* [distinctive girdle] around his waist and hang a cross around his neck; if a woman she should wear two slippers, one of which is white and the other black. When a protected person goes to the baths, he must wear a steel, copper or lead neckband to distinguish him from other people. (Buckley, 121–122)

As a manual for *muhtasibs*, al-Shayzari’s admonitions are more prescriptive of what should be enforced rather than descriptive of what actually occurred. There is plenty of evidence that specific restrictions on *dhimmis* differed according to time, place, regime, and class. Sometimes they were not enforced at all; at other times, they were enforced with draconian cruelty.
Some of the most famous examples include the arbitrary policies of the Fatimid Caliph al-Hakim (r. 996–1021), who was thought to be mad, and the Almohad regime in North Africa and Spain (1130–1269) which was particularly brutal to Jews and Christians, but also to Muslims who did not conform to its particularly strict version of Islam. However dhimma regulations were enforced, their purpose was twofold: (1) to ensure that, as commanded in the Qur’an, the People of the Book properly submitted to Islamic authority and paid the jizya and (2) to demonstrate publicly the superiority of Islam and Muslims to the inferior dhimmi religions and communities.

In light of Muhammad’s conflicts with the leading Jewish clans of Medina hadiths such as the following were favorites of jurists who supported strict enforcement of dhimma regulations: “You will fight the Jews to such a point that if one of them hides behind a rock, the rock will say: Servant of God, here is a Jew behind me! Kill him” (al-Bukhari, volume 4, book 52, number 176). So too were Qur’anic passages that declare that those who violated the Sabbath and opposed God would be turned into apes and pigs (Qur’an 2:65; 5:60; 5:78; 7:166). In addition, the prolific ninth-century author, al-Jahiz (777–869), marshaled many of the standard Muslim arguments against Jews and Christians in his anti-Christian polemic, The Refutation of Christianity (Colville, 71–94). He begins his treatise with an account of why, despite their perversions and Trinitarian polytheism, Christians are “more trustworthy, more sociable, less pernicious, lesser infidels and generally, less of a torment, than Jews” (Colville, 73). His basic arguments against Jews are based on Muhammad’s negative encounters with the Jews of Medina. According to al-Jahiz, because the Christian Arab tribes and the lands of Christendom were far removed from Mecca and Medina, Christians “never resorted to intrigue, vilification and open hostility against Muslims. This is the principal reason why Muslim opinion became set against Jews but remains tolerant of Christians” (Colville, 73). Nevertheless, “the Christian is at heart, a foul and dirty creature. Why? Because he is uncircumcised, does not wash after intercourse and eats pig meat. His wife does not wash after intercourse, either, or even after menstruation and childbirth, which leaves her absolutely filthy. Furthermore she, too, is uncircumcised” (Colville, 79).

Jewish and Christian attitudes toward Muslims and toward each other were equally contemptuous. After all, all three religions claimed to possess the sole revealed truth. Polemics aside, demographic realities necessitated intercommunal contact between the superior Muslim community and the inferior Jewish and Christian communities. It should come as no surprise that the history of Muslim/non-Muslim relations varied considerably from the first Islamic centuries when the Muslim military and ruling elite represented such a small minority of the population to the later centuries after the majority of the local population had converted to the religion of the conquerors.

Muslim rulers had little choice but to retain non-Muslim peoples (Christians but also Jews in the formerly Byzantine lands; Zoroastrians and some Christians and Jews in the formerly Sassanian lands) in bureaucratic positions such as revenue collectors and administrators of various types. In fact, one of al-Jahiz’s reasons for writing his Refutation of Christianity was the presence of influential Christians and Jews in Baghdad in his day. Christians and Jews continued to be employed in government service during the Fatimid (969–1171) and Ayyubid (1171–1250) periods in Egypt as well.
Despite their inferior status, Jews and Christians were not consigned to ghettos as they were in parts of medieval Christian Europe. Jews, Christians, and Muslims often lived in the same neighborhoods and in adjoining properties. Muslims and non-Muslims rented apartments, warehouses, and market stalls from one another. Jewish and Christian congregations even occasionally rented space from Muslim landlords to use as synagogues or churches to circumvent the laws against the construction of non-Muslim places of worship. Occasionally, other legal ruses were used to permit the construction of new churches and synagogues. Muslims and non-Muslims entered into business transactions with one another, whether in the local market or long distance trade.

The frequency and type of such intercommunal contacts does not mean that the medieval Islamic world was a model of religious diversity and toleration in the modern American sense. Again, according to al-Shayzari,

The muhtasib [market inspector] must take the jizya from them according to their social status. Thus, at the beginning of the year a poor man with a family pays one dinar, while someone of middling wealth pays two dinars and a rich man pays four dinars. When the muhtasib or his agent comes to collect the jizya, he should stand the dhimmi in front of him, slap him on the side of the neck and say: “Pay the jizya, unbeliever.” The dhimmi will take his hand out of his pocket holding the jizya and present it to him with humility and submission. (Buckley, 122–123)

As the Cairo Geniza records make abundantly clear, the poll tax (jizya) was the dhimmi’s inescapable burden and clear marker of inferiority in any and all relations with Muslims. Hence, religious diversity in the medieval Islamic world was characterized by Jewish and Christian communities that essentially functioned as separate nations within the Abode of Islam, and which were tolerated only because they had little choice but to accept the terms of their inferior status.

The documents of the Geniza also make it abundantly clear that Jews were involved in extensive and profitable long-distance trade throughout the Mediterranean Basin, East Africa, India, and even as far as Indonesia in Southeast Asia. In fact, the Geniza records indicate that Jews owned many of the ships that operated in the Mediterranean Sea, the Nile, and the Indian Ocean, though there is little evidence that Jews actually piloted very many of them. S.D. Goitein discusses one case in which an Egyptian Jewish merchant had died in India after a 9-year sojourn there. After the merchant’s death, his brother paid his poll tax for the whole 9 years. He and others had little choice. Failure to pay the poll tax could result in beatings and/or imprisonment, where one faced starvation and even death. Needless to say, people of modest means found the poll tax particularly onerous. Wealthy Jews and Christians, of course, could more easily afford to pay it. In fact, petitions to wealthy Jews and/or to the head of the local Jewish community for assistance in paying the poll tax represent one of the most common themes in the many letters preserved in the Cairo Geniza.

Finally, al-Muqaddasi’s brief comment that “most of the assayers, the dyers, cambists, and tanners in [al-Sham] are Jews; while the physicians and the scribes are generally Christians” brings us to the important issue of the role of the dhimmi physician in the medieval Islamic world (Collins, 153). In keeping with the general distrust of Jews and Christians, Muslim jurists argued that Muslims should abstain from using the services of Jewish and Christian
doctors or pharmacists on the grounds that an unbeliever might prescribe medicines that would do them physical or spiritual harm. However, there is probably no dhimma regulation that was more frequently ignored than this. Jewish and Christian prohibitions against consulting physicians who did not belong to their own faith communities were widely ignored as well.

It appears that because many Muslims, Christians, and Jews (like many modern Americans) were far less concerned with their physician’s religion than with his medical knowledge and the quality of his practice, it was the medical profession in particular that transcended religious boundaries in the medieval Islamic world. According to S. D. Goitein, physicians were “the torch-bearers of secular erudition, the professional expounders of philosophy and the sciences. . . . [They] were the disciples of the Greeks, and as heirs to a universal tradition formed a spiritual brotherhood that transcended the barriers of religion, language, and countries” (Goitein, 2:240–241).

Women and Men in the Family and Society

Few themes in Islamic history cut against the grain of modern American social and cultural values than the role and status of women and men in the Qur’an. In traditional Islamic thought, concepts that modern Americans take for granted—individual liberty, individual choice, personal fulfillment—necessarily lead to moral chaos because they are not informed by the admonitions and guidance of God’s revelation to mankind in the Qur’an. Although the Qur’an has very little material that may be consider legal in nature, the bulk of the legal material in the Qur’an deals with the proper role and status of women and men in the family and in society as a whole. For a more detailed discussion of women and men in medieval Islamic thought see Women and Clothing and Modesty in the “Short Entries” section.

The discussion below intends to clarify what the role and status of women and men were supposed to be (especially in the context of the family), at least according to the Qur’an and its later interpreters as they worked out the requirements of shari’a, or Islamic law. Using the building blocks of shari’a—the Qur’an, the sunna of Muhammad, and Arabian custom—scholars in Medina and the urban culture of Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere during the first Islamic centuries sought to discern precisely what one’s submission (islam) to God entailed. In principle, at least, the role and status of women and men in Islamic thought are governed by three concepts that if not explicitly stated in the Qur’an, are certainly implied therein.

The first principle is embodied in the shahada—the simple two-part creedral declaration that is at the very center of Islamic belief, ritual, and worship. “There is no god but God; Muhammad is the messenger of God (la ilaha illa’lāh; Muhammadun rasul Allah).” Each man and each woman is personally responsible for making this declaration (shahada) and submitting (islam) to the one God and acknowledging Muhammad as His messenger. Consequently,

Those who surrender themselves to God and accept the true Faith; who are devout, sincere, patient, humble, charitable and chaste; who fast and are ever mindful of God—on these, both men and women, God will bestow forgiveness and a rich reward. It is not for true believers—men or women—to take their choice in their affairs if God and His apostle decree otherwise. He that disobeys God and His apostle strays far indeed. (Qur’an 33:35–36) (Emphasis added)
The second principle is that though the Qur’an condemns many of the practices of seventh-century Mecca and Medina including idolatry, polytheism, gambling, drinking wine, the abuse of the poor by the rich, and female infanticide, it accepts the *patrilineal* kinship system of Arabia and many of its values as the natural order of things. “Men have authority over women because God has made the one superior to the other” (Qur’an 4:34a). The third principle—that a man must provide for every member of his household (wives, children, servants, and slaves) from his own resources—is closely connected to the second, “because they [men] spend their wealth to maintain them [women]” (Qur’an 4:34b).

Although every man and woman is morally responsible before God for his or her beliefs and actions (and despite modern interpretations, polemics, and protestations to the contrary), medieval commentators interpreted the Qur’an as uncompromisingly patriarchal in its description of proper relations between men and women. One of the most important elements of the system of patrilineal kinship is paternal certainty, for without it the entire system would fall apart. According to this structure, chastity (especially female chastity) before marriage and fidelity in marriage are essential in guaranteeing *paternal* certainty. Sexual activity outside of marriage was not a matter of individual choice, but a violation of family honor and the Qur’anic sexual ethic that embraced it (Qur’an 24:2–5). In theory, the Qur’anic requirements of chastity and fidelity applied equally to men and women; however, the physical consequences of a man’s illicit sexual activity were less readily apparent and less strictly enforced. Related to chastity are the issues of modesty and separation of the sexes, which were rigorously observed in the public sphere; that is, essentially everywhere outside of the home and apart from one’s kin. In the most prominent of public spaces, the mosque and the market, this separation of the sexes consisted of the physical separation of women from men (e.g., congregational prayers in the mosque) as well as by means of modest dress.

Fundamental to family life in any society are the conditions under which new families are established in marriage. Unlike in the American ideal of marital bliss, where many believe one’s spouse should be one’s best friend and soul mate, the purpose of marriage in the Qur’an and the medieval Islamic world was the procreation of children and the strengthening of ties between two extended families. In principle, the man or the woman was able to decline a proposed match, but rarely was there an opportunity for such an arrangement to be initiated on the basis of mutual affection or common interests and certainly not after a period of courtship as in the American ideal of the institution.

Another way in which marriage differs from the modern American model is that according to the Qur’an, a man may take up to four wives at the same time, with the proviso that he treat each wife fairly to avoid injustice (Qur’an 4:3). Whether a man took one wife or as many as four, it is clear from the Qur’an that in return for his protection and provision, he was owed obedience. If a wife was not obedient, her husband was allowed to chastise her and even to beat her into submission.

Good women are obedient. They guard their unseen parts because God has guarded them. As for those from whom you fear disobedience, admonish them and send them to beds apart and beat them. Then if they obey you, take no further action against them. (Qur’an 4:35)
Not surprisingly, this passage often produces embarrassment among some modern Muslims, especially in the West, where women and men (at least according to the laws in most Western countries) are supposed to be equals in a marriage relationship. According to the Qur’anic worldview, however, “men have authority over women because God has made the one superior to the other, and because they spend their wealth to maintain them” (Qur’an 4:34).

Whereas a man was limited to having four wives at any given time, he could possess as many female slaves as he could afford. According to shari’a, in exchange for his maintenance and support, the head of the household had the right to obedience as well as sexual relations with his female slaves. Unlike the American slave system, the child of a free Muslim man and a female slave received the status of the father not the mother. That is, the child was a legally free Muslim and bore no stigma of illegitimacy. In addition, once a female slave had borne a child, she could not be put out of the house, she could legally expect maintenance and support, and she had to be granted her freedom upon the death of her owner. A wife on the other hand could bear her husband as many children as physically possible, and he could divorce her without cause.

**Slavery**

Slavery of some sort is a nearly universal constant in human societies. It should come as no surprise then that it was a key element in medieval Islamic societies as well. Certainly the most famous example of slavery in the medieval Islamic world is military slavery, known as the Mamluk institution. Mamluk is an Arabic word that means “one who is owned”; however, it is almost always used as a technical term for a particular type of military slavery designed to produce an elite force of mounted warriors. Abd and khālidīn are the Arabic words generally used to describe field hands, domestic servants, day laborers, concubines, singing girls, tutors—some of which evoke images of slavery and servitude that more closely resemble the history of slavery in the United States. In fact, there is plenty of evidence that the kinds of abuses that are equated with slavery in the United States were inflicted on field hands, domestic servants, day laborers, concubines, and so forth in Islamic history as well.

In the medieval Islamic world, however, having been enslaved as a young boy and raised to the profession of arms was anything but degrading. In fact, Mamluks served in a number of important offices on behalf of the ruler—personal attendants, cup bearers, officers charged with attending to and training the ruler’s horses and hunting falcons, even as provincial governors. Moreover, being a Mamluk was a position of privilege that opened the door to many avenues of wealth and status in society, even to the highest offices in the regime. It appears that in the ninth through eleventh centuries, it was not required for Mamluks who rose to such high positions to be manumitted. Thereafter, it was much more common that they were.

Although the preferred route for developing Mamluk regiments was to purchase boys and to train them in barracks apart from the rest of society in the sciences of horsemanship, warfare, and religion, some adults were incorporated into Mamluk regiments, especially during the early years of the institution. According to Islamic law, a free person could only be enslaved if he was
a non-Muslim and resided outside the Abode of Islam; that is, in the Abode of War. Hence, slaves were acquired by various means (purchase, conquest, as gifts, etc.) from peoples who lived on the fringes of the Abode of Islam: sub-Saharan Africans, Eastern Europeans, Greeks, Armenians, Circassians, Indians, and so forth. However, the preferred practice for creating Mamluk units was to purchase boys from the slave markets along the Central Asian frontier north of the Oxus River. These boys were generally referred to as “Turks”—a kind of shorthand for anyone who was a pastoral nomad from the Central Asian steppe, and it was this steppe that served as a vast military reservoir for many of the regimes in the medieval Islamic world.

In addition to their military prowess and horsemanship, Turkish slaves were renowned for their beauty, which served some in good stead in their service as pages, personal attendants, and occasional bedfellows. Turkish slave girls were prized as singing girls and concubines. We learn from the geographer, Ibn Hawqal (fl. 943–977), just how much people were willing to pay for the very best Turkish slaves—male and female—in the tenth century.

The most valuable slaves are those which come from the land of the Turks. Among all the slaves in the world, the Turks are incomparable and none approach them in value and beauty. I have not infrequently seen a slave boy sold in Khurasan for 3000 dinars; and Turkish slave girls fetch up to 3000 dinars. In all the regions of the earth I have never seen slave boys or girls which are as costly as this, neither Greek nor one born in slave status. (Bosworth, 209)

The Ottomans (c. 1300–1923) took non-Muslim slaves from neighboring Russia and the Caucasus region as well. However, they also undertook a policy that was a dramatic departure from the traditional practice of slave procurement; in the late fourteenth century they began to levy a rather peculiar tax on their (primarily) Balkan Christian subjects, which involved drafting Christian children into service to the sultan. This tax, called the *devshirme*, produced the elite janissary corps as well as so many high government officials in the Ottoman regime that there are instances where Muslim families in the Balkans presented their own children as Christians so that they too might benefit from such prestigious and lucrative opportunities.

**Further Reading**


6. SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Islamic Science

Frequently introductory discussions of science, technology, medicine, and so forth in the medieval Islamic world highlight the contributions of thinkers whose work was eventually translated into Latin (e.g., al-Khwarizmi, al-Razi, al-Biruni, Ibn Sina) and which found a following in the Latin west during the later Middle Ages. Although such an approach is certainly valid, it frequently overlooks the processes by which the Arabic language—the language of obscure Arabian tribesmen in late antiquity—became the vehicle by which some of the finest examples of classical science and learning were made accessible in the Islamic empire between the eighth and tenth centuries. Many of the earliest translators of this learning were in fact Christian scholars who knew the relevant languages, the most famous being the Assyrian scholar, physician, and scientist, Hunayn ibn Ishaq (809–873). It was only after Arabic had become the lingua franca of the educated classes and after many of the classics of Greek (and other) learning were made available in Arabic that Arabic-speaking Jews, Christians, and Muslims could undertake to transform this learning into a body of literature that is generally classified under the rubric of “Islamic science.”

As our sources make clear, what we now call Islamic science can only be classified as such because it was developed largely under the patronage of medieval Islamic rulers as well as their officials and associates. For medieval Muslims, the “Islamic sciences” were those subjects devoted to understanding the broad principles as well as the minutia of right religion—the Qur’an and its interpretation, hadith studies, the roots of jurisprudence (usul al-fiqh, legal theory), the branches of jurisprudence (furu’al-fiqh, practical application), the intricacies of Islamic mysticism, and so forth (see Shari’a and Sufism).

Subjects such as astronomy, medicine, mathematics—what we call the physical and natural sciences—belonged to the sciences shared by all peoples. The fourteenth-century North African historian and philosopher Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406) addresses this distinction in his monumental *Muqaddima*, or “Introduction” to the science of history and civilization.

The intellectual sciences are natural to man, inasmuch as he is a thinking being. They are not restricted to any particular religious group. They are studied by the people of all religious groups who are all equally qualified to learn them and to do research in them. They have existed (and been known) to the human species since civilization had its beginnings in the world. (Ibn Khaldun, 3:113)

Elsewhere in his *Muqaddima*, Ibn Khaldun draws a connection between Greek and Persian learning—a connection that highlights Persian self-conceptions of their intellectual and imperial heritage:

Among the Persians [in antiquity], the intellectual sciences played a large and important role, since the Persian dynasties were powerful and ruled without
interruption. The intellectual sciences are said to have come to the Greeks from the Persians, (at the time) when Alexander killed Darius and gained control of the Achaemenid empire. At that time, he appropriated the books and sciences of the Persians. (Ibn Khaldun, 3:113–114).

But what concerns us here are the conditions that made it possible—even necessary—for Greek and other classical learning to be transformed into scientific knowledge composed in the Arabic language. Or to paraphrase Dimitri Gutas, how is it that Greek knowledge became part of Arabic culture?

Two major reforms that the Umayyad caliph, Abd al-Malik (r. 685–705), undertook in the late seventh century were the minting of a new currency with distinctively Islamic themes and Arabic inscriptions (see Money and Coinage) and the establishment of Arabic as the principal language of administration throughout his domains. No longer would markets employ Byzantine and Sasanian coins. Nor would Umayyad bureaucrats (most of whom belonged to families that had served similar functions prior to the Islamic conquests) use Greek in the former Byzantine territories or Persian in the former Sasanian lands. Such changes in economic and administrative policy reflect a high degree of religious and political self-confidence on the part of Abd al-Malik a mere half century after the death of Muhammad.

In the wake of the Abbasid revolution in the 740s, the political and administrative center of the Islamic world shifted from Syria and Damascus to Mesopotamia, where the second Abbasid caliph, al-Mansur (r. 754–775), established Baghdad in 762 as his new palace city and capital. The move from Damascus to Baghdad represented much more than a simple change in geography, for it was in Baghdad and Mesopotamia that al-Mansur initiated the translation of Greek and other classical astronomical, philosophical, medical, mathematical, and scientific texts into Arabic, a monumental intellectual undertaking that would continue well into the tenth century.

Of course, some translations of classical texts had been produced in the Umayyad period, but al-Mansur’s policy went far beyond that of new rulers’ needs for pragmatic administrative or military knowledge. Although the specific circumstances and concerns of al-Mansur’s caliphate and those of his successors are complex, the essential need for any regime to legitimate itself can help clarify why such extensive translations of classical scientific works were undertaken.

The Abbasids’ claim that they were the legitimate successors to Muhammad by virtue of their descent from Muhammad’s clan of Hashim met the demands of their Muslim subjects (at least in theory); however, the majority of the population was not Muslim. With their center of gravity in Mesopotamia, the Abbasids also presented themselves as the successors of “the ancient imperial dynasties in Iraq and Iran, from the Babylonians to the Sasanians, their immediate predecessors. In this way they were able to incorporate Sasanian culture, which was still the dominant culture of large masses of the population east of Iraq, into mainstream Abbasid culture” (Gutas, 29).

Al-Mansur and his son al-Mahdi (r. 775–785) were the principal early architects of the translation program, whose intent, in part, was to appeal to the Sasanian cultural self-conception that all knowledge is derived from the Zoroastrian canon, but also to provide the intellectual and argumentative tools to buttress Abbasid political claims as well as to aid the proselytization efforts designed to defend the superiority of Islam against other religions—namely
Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism. According to the tenth-century historian al-Masudi (d. 956):

[Al-Mansur] was the first caliph to favor astrologers and to act on the basis of astrological prognostications. He had in his retinue the astrologer Nabakht the Zoroastrian, who converted to Islam upon his investigation and who is the progenitor of this family of the Nawbakhts. Also in his retinue were the astrologer Ibrahim al-Fazari, the author of an ode to the stars and other astronomical works, and the astrologer Ali ibn-Isa the Astrolabist.

[Al-Mansur] was the first to have books translated from foreign languages into Arabic, among them *Kalila wa-Dimna* and *Sindhind*. There were also translated for him books by Aristotle on logic and other subjects, the *Amlagest* by Ptolemy, the *Arithmetic* [by Nicmachus of Gerasa], the book by Euclid [on geometry], and other ancient books from classical Greek, Byzantine Greek, Pahlavi [Middle Persian], Neopersian, and Syriac. These [translated books] were published among the people, who examined them and devoted themselves to knowing them. (Gutas, 30–31)

By the end of the tenth century, hundreds of ancient Greek, Persian, and Sanskrit works on philosophy, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, astrology, geography, and other sciences had been translated into Arabic under the patronage of the Abbasids. Muslim (as well as Jewish and Christian) scholars studied these classics and built upon them, making such Greek learning distinctively their own in the Arabic language. Hence the need for new translations into Arabic abated by the end of the tenth century. Many of these ancient as well as new Arabic language classics were eventually translated into Latin and made their way into the medieval European curriculum. The pantheon of philosophers, polymaths, physicians, and others contains far too many personalities to be addressed here. I briefly address the four scholars mentioned above merely to illustrate that, building on the work of the ancients, scholars in the medieval Islamic world (Jews, Christians, and Muslims) made important advancements in all areas of science and learning.

The ninth-century mathematician al-Khwarazmi (c. 800–c. 847) played a major role in the introduction of “Hindu numerals” into the Islamic world. This numbering system was later adopted and modified in the West resulting in what are now known as “Arabic” numerals. Al-Khwarazmi also wrote an important mathematical text *Kitab al-mukhtasar fi hisab al-jabr wa l-muqabila* (*Compendium on Calculation by Transposition and Reduction*) in which he developed methods for solving quadratic equations in which words and letters were used to represent numerical values. In 1145, Robert of Ketton began his Latin translation of al-Khwarazmi’s *Compendium* (Liber Algebras et Almucabola) with the phrase *dixit Algorithmi*; that is, “Algorithmi says.” It is from Ketton’s transliteration of al-Khwarazmi’s title (*Algebras for al-jabr*; transposition) that we get our word *algebra*; from Ketton’s transliteration of his name (Algorithmi for al-Khwarazmi) that we get our term for the step-by-step process of working out mathematical problems, algorithm.

Al-Razi (865–925), who was known in the West as Rhazes, is most famous for his medical works but was also an accomplished alchemist, chemist, and philosopher. He was known as a pioneer in the fields of pediatrics, obstetrics, and ophthalmology. Theoretical diagnoses of illness and their treatments held little interest for him. Rather, he was a meticulous observational diagnostician
and clinician who served as head of hospitals in his hometown of Rayy in Iran as well as in the Abbasid capital, Baghdad. Al-Razi is said to have authored nearly two hundred books and treatises on scientific, medical, and philosophical topics. His *Kitab fi l-jadari wa l-hasba* (*The Book of Smallpox and Measles*) is the first detailed diagnostic and treatment regimen for both diseases, which carefully catalogues the differences in their symptoms. He also wrote a general medical handbook, *Kitab al-tibb al-Mansuri* (*The Mansuri Book of Medicine*). His most important medical work, *al-Hawi fi l-Tibb* (*The Comprehensive Book on Medicine*), is an encyclopedia of clinical medicine and certainly lived up to its title since it comprised more than twenty volumes. However, his general medical handbook was much more broadly influential because of its brevity and organization made it readily accessible to students and medical practitioners.

Al-Biruni (973–1048) was one of the most important scientists, mathematicians, astronomers, geographers, ethnographers, physicians of the medieval Islamic world. A true polymath, al-Biruni composed more than one hundred fifty books and treatises and is one of the most studied scholars in the Arabic scientific tradition. He has been a frequent recipient of praise for his breadth of expertise and pursuit of scientific knowledge down to the present. His *al-Qanun al-Masudi* (*The Canon of Masudi*) is a model synthesis of Greek, Indian, and Persian astronomy. Frequently compared to Ptolemy’s synthesis of Greek astronomy in his *Almagest*, al-Biruni’s *Canon* also serves as a history of Arabic astronomy down to his own day. The importance of al-Biruni’s enduring contributions to the science of astronomy is illustrated by the fact that an impact crater on the far side of the moon is called the al-Biruni Crater. Al-Biruni’s pursuit of knowledge moved well beyond the physical and natural sciences. His treatise based on his travels in India is a sympathetic depiction of Indian society and religion is largely free of the blistering polemics so characteristic of the age. His sensitivity and determination to describing his observations as objectively as possible has led modern scholars to call him the first anthropologist.

Al-Biruni’s contemporary Ibn Sina (980–1037), who was known in the West as Avicenna, had a tremendous influence on philosophy, theology, and medicine in the medieval Islamic world as well as in Europe. Ibn Sina’s proof for the existence of God, based on the distinction between possible and necessary existence, was equally influential among Jewish and Christian thinkers. The Jewish philosopher and physician, Moses Maimonides (d. 1204), a native of Muslim Spain (who relocated to Egypt in the wake of Almohad persecutions) read Ibn Sina’s work in Arabic and adapted it to his own theological writings. The Christian theologian, St. Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) studied it in Latin translation and incorporated it into his own systematic theology. Ibn Sina’s proof remains the starting point for many rational proofs for the existence of God to this day. I even remember learning a greatly simplified version of this proof as a child in Sunday school.

In addition to his major contributions to philosophy and theology, Ibn Sina is most famous for his comprehensive and systematic medical text, *al-Qanun fi l-tibb* (*The Canon of Medicine*) based in large part on the works of Galen (d. 203 C.E.) and his disciples in the medieval Islamic world. After all, when human beings are ill or injured, they tend to be more interested in their immediate physical health than the eternal fate of their souls. About a century after Ibn Sina’s death, Gerard of Cremona translated Ibn Sina’s *Canon* into Latin. In Europe, his *Canon* was a favorite of doctors and medical schools until the rise of
experimental medicine in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It was translated into Hebrew, was retranslated into Latin again in the early sixteenth century, and was the subject of countless commentaries in European and Islamic languages.

Although al-Khwarizmi, al-Razi, al-Biruni, and Ibn Sina were all Muslims and wrote their works in the Arabic language, each of them hailed from the Persianate world—what is now Iran, Afghanistan, and parts of Central Asia. Al-Khwarizmi hailed from Khwarizm, which roughly corresponds with modern-day Uzbekistan; al-Razi was born in Rayy, near modern Tehran; al-Biruni was born in Kath, a city in Khwarizm that no longer exists; and Ibn Sina was born in Bukhara, the modern capital of Uzbekistan. That such important scholars, writing in the Arabic language, were not Arabs illustrates the extent to which non-Arab peoples had been assimilated into the learned classes of the medieval Islamic world. In fact, as stated in volume one, by the tenth century, the Arabic language had become the preferred language of science and learning for nearly every ethnic and religious group under Muslim rule. Arabic served to unite the educated elites in the Islamic world in much the same way that Latin did in medieval Western Europe or English does in the modern world.

Astronomy

Given al-Mansur’s fascination with astrology, it should come as no surprise that we see advances in technology and methods designed to more effectively map and study the heavens. Early Arabic astronomers were influenced by Indian and Persian thought. In time they realized that Greek astronomy was far superior. One of the most important Greek texts on the development of astronomy in the medieval Islamic world was Ptolemy’s (83–161 C.E.) *Almagest*, which, as noted by al-Masudi above, was first translated under the auspices of al-Mansur himself. Ptolemy’s elaborate geocentric mathematical theories remained tremendously influential on Arabic astronomy down to the eventual replacement of the geocentric view with the heliocentric system. Under the auspices of Harun al-Rashid’s son, al-Ma’mun (813–833), programs of observation were organized in Baghdad and Damascus, which naturally resulted in enhanced prestige for the science throughout the realm, but also new translations of astronomical texts as well as the composition of original treatises in Arabic that sought to reconcile Ptolemy’s work with the collective observational and theoretical research conducted in Baghdad, Damascus, and elsewhere.

The science of astronomy was not merely an intellectual exercise. There were a number of very practical implications derived from its study. Some of the practical astronomy issues dealt with specific aspects of Islamic religious observance and practice; others addressed a wide range of more practical or secular day-to-day concerns. Because the Islamic calendar is a lunar calendar, each month begins immediately after sundown with the sighting of the new crescent moon. To sight the crescent moon one needs to know where to look in the sky, which varies based on celestial coordinates, issues of latitude and longitude, the brightness of the sky, season of the year, and so forth. One very important sighting of the new moon initiates the observance of Id al-Fitr; that is, the feast held to commemorate the end of the annual Ramadan Fast. Another practical concern was determining the direction (*qibla*) of Mecca for proper
observance of the five daily ritual prayers (see the “Religion” section). Detailed calculation methods and tables were developed to aide in determining the shortest arc along the great circle of the globe from Mecca to the locality in question. Obviously, such calculations required the precise geographical coordinates of Mecca as well as the locale. Related to the direction of prayer is determining the times of prayer, which required the development of timekeeping methods, the earliest known text on which was composed by al-Khwarizmi. While observing the heavens to sight the new crescent moon, determining the direction of Mecca, and keeping time had specific ritual implications, the science and technology necessary to make such determinations had significant applications in other areas of life. Such problems spurred renewed research and experimentation in the science and the art of constructing instruments such as astrolabes, quadrants, compasses, sextants, grid locators, surveying equipment, map making, and so forth.

Medicine

Medicine in the medieval Islamic world was based on Hellenistic medicine. As Ptolemy’s *Almagest* influenced astronomy, so did Galen’s (d. 203 C.E.) and other Greek medical treatises, which were translated into either Arabic or Syriac by Hunayn ibn Ishaq (808–873) and his students. By the end of this process, the Galenic model of the four bodily humors (blood, phlegm, yellow bile, black bile) in relation to the four elements (air, water, fire, earth) and the four qualities (hot, moist, cold, dry) had become the foundation of Arabic medicine. Health was defined as balance or equilibrium among these humors and qualities. Disease and sickness were caused by an imbalance. The goal of the physician was to aid his patients in maintaining balance and treatment of disease required the restoration of equilibrium. Hence, a great deal of theoretical discussion in the end tended to be superimposed on direct observation. A major exception to this approach was al-Razi mentioned above, who put forth a number of criticisms of the inherited medical wisdom based on his own keen and detailed observations of his patients. What we see then developing throughout the Middle Ages is the construction of new methods and practices built on the foundation of Galenic medicine.

The list of important and innovative physicians in the medieval Islamic world is far too long to address here. However, *Kitab al-manazir* (The Book of Optics) by Ibn al-Haytham (965–1039), who was known in the West as Alhazen, bears mention as the most important and influential Arabic treatise on optics. In it he rejected the traditional Hellenistic emission theory of optics and set forth what is known as the intromission theory of vision; that is, visual perception occurs when rays of light are reflected from objects into the eyes. He also developed numerous optical experiments on lenses and mirrors, as well as the refraction, reflection, and dispersion of light. Finally, as noted above, Ibn Sina’s *Canon* was a favorite medical manual of physicians and students down to the rise of experimental medicine in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He is also known for many of his contributions to the history of medicine, not the least of which were his diagnostic and experimental methods, his understanding of pharmacology, infectious diseases, as well as the benefits of quarantine in preventing their spread.
Military Implications

Maintaining military superiority over one’s enemies is necessary to retaining power as well as extending the borders of one’s domains. Medieval Muslim rulers were keen to adapt tactics and technologies that might assist them in achieving their goals. An early example of such adaptation is the incorporation of iron stirrups in the first Islamic century from Iran. After Muslim forces encountered Greek fire for the first time in their siege of Constantinople in the late seventh century, there was an understandable desire to learn its secrets and incorporate it into their arsenal as well. Siege warfare was little practiced in Arabia, but it too was a tactic that Muslim armies in time learned to employ. Military manuals include detailed plans for constructing siege engines, catapults, battering rams, and so forth. During the twelfth century we begin to see the use of the counterweight trebuchet in addition to the traction trebuchet, which had already been used quite effectively for centuries in the Islamic world.

Although the mechanics of siege warfare were vital to any army’s success, it was the cavalrymen, archers, and foot soldiers that were essential to bring victory as well as holding territory conquered. Such warriors required quality equipment and skilled smiths to fashion them, and it is in the foundries and smiths’ forges that we see important developments for improving the quality of steel from which to fashion such weapons. The fourteenth-century Egyptian alchemist, al-Jidalki (d. 1342), describes the technique for turning low-grade cast iron into steel via carbonization. According to al-Jidalki, after the cast iron is heated in the foundry to the point that it is like water:

They nourish it with glass, oil and alkali until light appears from it in the fire and it is purified of much of its blackness by intensive founding, night and day. They keep watching while it whirls for indications until they are sure of its suitability, whereupon they pour it out through channels so that it comes out like running water. Then they allow it to solidify in the shape of bars or in holes made of clay fashioned like crucibles. They take out of them refined steel in the shape of ostrich eggs, and they make swords from it, and helmets, lanceheads and all tools. (Hill, 217–218)

In the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, siege engines began to be made obsolete by the introduction of cannon, which could fire more rapidly. The early days of cannon were not entirely successful, especially when the cannon was defective, resulting in considerable loss of life (on the wrong side) as well as expense. In due course founding techniques were considerably improved, so too were the size, range, and accuracy of the weapon as can be seen in their Mehmed I’s successful use of them in his conquest of Constantinople in 1453, nearly eight centuries after the first Muslim siege of the city.

Further Reading


Global ties within the medieval Islamic world and between the Islamic world and its neighbors were extensive. By the tenth century, the Islamic world had become the primary transit zone for such ties—at least throughout Afro-Eurasia. We see these connections especially in the extensive travel networks throughout the Islamic world. The major impetuses for travel fell into four broad categories: (1) travel for the purposes of making the obligatory *hajj* and other pilgrimages; (2) travel in the pursuit of religious knowledge, particularly to study with leading scholars of the Qur’an, hadith, theology and so forth; (3) travel in the pursuit of mystical (Sufi) knowledge and experience; and (4) travel as part of the vast international trade networks of Muslim Africa and Asia (*see Sufism*). As Ross E. Dunn has so ably demonstrated, the famous fourteenth-century Moroccan traveler, Ibn Battuta (1304–1368), spent three decades crisscrossing the Islamic world under the umbrella of all four categories at various times. In part, Ibn Battuta was able to do this because of what Dunn called the *Pax Mongolica* that was established throughout much of the Islamic world and East Asia in the fourteenth century.

As we see below, earlier travelers such the tenth-century Syrian geographer, al-Muqaddasi (c. 945–c. 1000), the eleventh-century Persian traveler, Naser-e Khosraw (d. c. 1075), and the twelfth-century Andalusian traveler, Ibn Jubayr (1145–1217), also covered a great deal of territory. Like Ibn Battuta, each was an educated man who traveled extensively throughout the Abode of Islam for religious as well as scholarly purposes. It is difficult to ascertain whether their urge to travel was a result of fulfilling the ritual obligation to undertake the pilgrimage to Mecca or whether their desire to make the pilgrimage was rooted in their own wanderlust. Whatever their true motivations, al-Muqaddasi, Naser-e Khosraw, Ibn Jubayr, and Ibn Battuta began their travels with the expressed intent of making the pilgrimage, and each left for posterity a detailed record of his travels. As one might expect, their professions and interests color what they thought important to record from their travels throughout the region. That these men hailed from Syria, Iran, Spain, and Morocco, respectively, illustrates the extent to which they and many others benefited from and contributed to the establishment and strengthening of the far-flung religious, scholarly, and economic networks of the medieval Islamic world. Before we turn our attention to the reasons for travel it is important first to describe the methods of how people actually traveled when they chose to do so.

**Travel and Transportation**

Most modern forms of transportation require wheeled vehicles of some sort. The notable exceptions, of course, are traveling by foot, boat, or beasts of burden.
However, those who use beasts as their primary means of transportation usually employ them to pull wheeled buggies, carts, carriages, or wagons. Flat tires and broken axles essentially render these as well as cars, trucks, trains, bicycles, and motorcycles useless as modes of transportation. Air travel, too, would be impossible without the wheels necessary for planes to take off and land. (Pontoon planes, ski planes, and some helicopters are the exceptions here.) Compared to the medieval Islamic world, or any premodern era or region, modern modes of transportation are the epitome of ease, speed, and comfort.

Because wheeled transport had disappeared throughout much of the Middle East and North Africa prior to the Islamic conquests, the peoples of the medieval Islamic world traveled from one city to another on the back of a donkey or mule, as part of a camel caravan in desert regions, or by ship. Many could not afford to travel by any other means than by foot. Unlike the Romans who built extensive networks of paved roads and elaborate grid-like cities with wide throughways, medieval Islamic rulers had little use for such massive expenditures. Donkeys, mules, horses, and camels simply did not need paved roads to traverse the trade routes that crisscrossed the Islamic world and beyond. Medieval Muslim rulers did, however, devote a great deal of attention to the construction of bridges so that people, camels, horses, donkeys, and other animals could cross rivers and wadis that were either too deep or too swift to ford, especially during flood seasons. Baghdad, in particular, was famous for its pontoon bridges that spanned the Tigris River.

Although the camel caravans that traversed the Sahara between North Africa and the trading towns along the Niger River as well as across the Sahara from Morocco to Egypt played vitally important roles in the international trade networks of the Islamic world, merchants, traders, pilgrims, and others who hailed from Spain (e.g., Ibn Jubayr) or the port cities along the southern shores of the Mediterranean preferred to travel by ship whenever they could. The winds and waters of the Mediterranean were relatively calm, especially compared to the Indian Ocean where travel was much more dangerous. Of course, the Nile, Tigris, and Euphrates rivers were the primary highways and preferred means of travel in Egypt and Mesopotamia.

Whatever the means of transportation, travelers were always susceptible to raiders, brigands, and pirates. Consequently, only a fool would travel alone. In fact, it was considered bad form, even disgraceful, to allow a friend or relative to travel even short distances without a *rafiq*, or traveling companion. A famous Arabic proverb, “the companion is more important than the route taken” clarifies that the dangers, discomforts, and duration of travel in the medieval Islamic world necessitated the careful selection of a *rafiq* who was resourceful, trustworthy, and hopefully a pleasant conversationalist.

Because medieval merchants and travelers—like their counterparts in antiquity—required places to provision themselves and their beasts, hostelries or inns were constructed along trade networks, pilgrimage routes, in small towns, and major cities. Major trading cities often had dozens, even hundreds of them within their walls. *Fondaco*, the Arabic term for inn, is derived from the Greek word, *pandocheion*, that had been employed throughout the pre-Islamic Mediterranean world. Medieval European travelers and merchants used *fondaco*, a cognate derived from *funduq*. Terms such as *caravansarai* and *khan* were also used to describe inns and hostleries throughout the medieval Islamic world, often interchangeably.
In the eleventh century, the Persian traveler Naser-e Khosraw recorded that in Cairo, “there are no end of caravanserais [Persian, karavansaray], bath houses, and other public buildings—all property of the sultan” (Thackston, 45). Around 1150, the geographer al-Idrisi reported that there were 970 (!) funduqs in the Spanish port of Almería. Three decades later, Ibn Jubayr described the customs house in Damascus at the other end of the Mediterranean as “a khan prepared to accommodate the caravan” (Broadhurst, 317). In the tenth century, al-Muqaddasi observed that “taxes in Syria are light, except for those levied on the caravanserais, in which case they are absolutely oppressive” (Collins, 159). Whether in Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo, Almería, or elsewhere, funduqs, khans, and caravansaries were extremely important tax revenue producers for rulers throughout the medieval Islamic world.

Because of the importance of travel and trade to the international economies of the medieval Islamic world, Muslim rulers took it upon themselves to ensure that the trade routes that passed through their territories were well protected and dotted with secure inns for what they hoped would be many travelers and merchants. In the eleventh century, Nizam al-Mulk emphasizes the importance of such initiatives in his description of a just ruler as one who devotes his attention to that which advances civilization, such as the following:

constructing underground channels, digging main canals, building bridges across great waters, rehabilitating villages and farms, raising fortifications, building new towns, and erecting lofty buildings and magnificent dwellings; he will have inns [ribats] built on the highways and schools for those who seek knowledge; for which things he will be renowned forever, he will gather the fruit of his good works in the next world and blessings will be showered upon him. (Darke, 10)

Nizam al-Mulk advises the construction of inns (ribats) on the highways to facilitate trade in the realm, but also to protect merchants and travelers from brigands and highway robbers. It should be noted that though ribat can be used in lieu of funduq, khan, or caravansarai, by the later Middle Ages ribat tended to be used exclusively to describe a dwelling for mystics or a fortified retreat along the frontier for ghazi warriors (many of whom were mystics as well).

The nuances of terminology for inns and hostelries based on geography and chronology are beyond the scope of our discussion here. What is important for our purposes is that medieval travelers could expect to find a great deal of similarity among funduqs, khans, and caravansaries throughout the medieval Islamic world. Architecturally, they tended to be rectangular—even square—buildings with a solitary entrance. Inside the building was a central courtyard surrounded by porticos or stalls where travelers could refuel their beasts and store them and their goods overnight. They could also find food and lodging for themselves. Funduqs also provided charitable services such as indigent housing, soup kitchens, even medical care. Most funduqs in towns and cities were near a mosque. Those located on the overland travel routes between cities had a mosque built into the structure or nearby. Some funduqs in Cairo or in the ports of the Mediterranean served Jewish or Christian merchants and contained or were built near to synagogues and churches. In addition, there were opportunities for travelers, merchants, and pilgrims to worship at other altars, since funduqs often served as taverns and brothels as well.
Pilgrimages

The details of the obligatory annual *hajj* are discussed in the “Religion” section. Here we address other types of pilgrimages that drew Sunni and Shi‘i Muslims from throughout the medieval Islamic world. Veneration of the imams and visitation (*ziyara*) to their tombs were essential to Shi‘i piety. When these and other practices became part of the Shi‘i tradition is not entirely clear, but we do know that after the Shi‘i Buyids conquered Baghdad in 945, they encouraged the open and public performance of three public rituals that were fundamentally important to daily life in Shi‘i Islam—the commemoration of Ghadir Khumm, the commemoration of the martyrdom of Husayn ibn ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib, and visitation to the Shi‘i imams’ tombs (see Shi‘ism). The Ismaili Fatimids in Egypt (969–1171) encouraged the public performance of these rituals also.

Without a basic understanding of the role of the Shi‘i doctrine of the imamate, it is difficult to understand the importance and the meaning of the very public rituals of Shi‘i Islam that were part of daily life in the medieval Islamic world, especially in Iraq under the Buyids and in Egypt under the Fatimids. There are three basic doctrines that developed among the Shi‘is. First, the rightful caliph or imam had to be a lineal descendant of Muhammad, in particular through the line of ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib and Muhammad’s daughter, Fatima. The second is that the caliph or imam was not only the political head of the community, but also an infallible religious teacher—guaranteed to be without error in matters of faith and morals. Because of this emphasis on the religious and theological role of the head of the community, Shi‘i texts tend to use the title *imam* for this office more frequently than caliph (*Khalifa*) or commander of the believers (*Amir al-Mu’minin*).

Third, according to Shi‘i doctrine, all of the imams except the twelfth died as martyrs. Some were slain in battle, while others were poisoned or died in prison. The most dramatic martyrdom, of course, is that of Husayn in 680. Because all the imams are seen as the “sinless ones,” their suffering and martyrdom is understood to exemplify their willingness to voluntarily take on a portion of the suffering and punishment of mankind, which brings us to the third, and controversial, doctrine. That is, because of their suffering, mankind can be spared the severity of God’s justice. Moreover, the imams’ martyrdom qualifies them to serve as intercessors between the faithful and God himself. Such an understanding of redemptive suffering parallels the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for the sins of the world in Christian theology. However, unlike Christian theology, Islamic theology rejects the notion of original sin. Therefore, the suffering of the imams benefits the faithful only for the specific sins they have committed. Because Sunnis reject the Shi‘i doctrine of the imamate, they reject the idea that the Shi‘i imams play any redemptive role at all.

The faithful can benefit from the imams’ suffering and martyrdom by their willingness to become martyrs themselves, but also by visiting the tombs of the imams and weeping over them. There are reports of the faithful weeping over Husayn’s grave almost immediately after his tomb was constructed. In 850, the Abbasid Caliph al-Mutawakkil had the shrine destroyed to put an end to Shi‘i pilgrimages to it. His efforts proved unsuccessful as pilgrims continued to go to Karbala even though there was no shrine. The Buyid ruler Adud al-Dawla restored Husayn’s tomb at Karbala and Ali’s tomb at Najaf in 990.
Over time, elaborate rituals developed as part of the faithful’s visitation and public mourning at the imams’ tombs, whether at Husayn’s tomb in Karbala, Ali’s tomb in Najaf, or at the tombs of the imams buried in Baghdad, Samarra, Medina, or Mashhad in Iran. According to the thirteenth-century theologian Ta’usi (d. 1266), the faithful expressed their longing for the imams and their suffering as they cried over their graves, as follows:

Could I but be your ransom! Since the Lord of the future life takes pleasure in sorrow and since it serves to purify God’s servants—behold! we therefore don mourning attire and find delight in letting tears flow. We say to the eyes: stream in uninterrupted weeping forever! (Halm, 140)

The most elaborate of the lamentations is for Husayn, and the rituals of the Ashura festival date at least to the Buyid period. Sources indicate that the oldest Ashura ritual is for pilgrims to Husayn’s tomb to request a sip of water in commemoration of one of Husayn’s final acts prior to his martyrdom. Near the end of the battle, as Husayn pleaded for water for his infant son (whom he held in his arms), an arrow pierced the baby’s throat and killed him. Undeterred by his child’s death, Husayn continued to fight until he was finally slain. The elaborate passion plays and public processions where mourners beat and cut themselves in identification with Husayn’s suffering so common in modern Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon appear to date from the Safavid (1501–1722) and Qajar (1779–1925) periods in Iran, well after the period covered in this book.

Although visitation (ziyara) to the tombs of the imams did not constitute formal legal substitutes for making the obligatory annual pilgrimage (hajj), Shi’is considered their spiritual benefits and rewards to be greater than those of the hajj. This is clearly illustrated in a brief exchange in which a certain Shihab ibn Abd Rabbihi was asked how many obligatory annual pilgrimages he had made. When he replied that he had made the pilgrimage nineteen times, his interlocutor responded, “Should you complete twenty-one Pilgrimages, they will be counted for you as a ziyara to Husayn” (Meri, Cult of Saints, 141).

When Saladin deposed the Fatimids in 1171, state support for Ismaili Shiism and its rituals ended, the name of an Abbasid caliph was invoked in the Friday sermon for the first time in two centuries, and Fatimid institutions of learning were transformed into Sunni ones. Because Ismaili Shiism had never taken deep root in Egypt outside the ruling elite and a few others, it soon withered away. Although the Seljukid conquest of Baghdad in 1055 ended state sponsorship of Twelver Shiism in Iraq, this form of Shiism did not wither away at all in that region. After all, Iraq was the Shi’i Holy Land of sorts. Karbala and Najaf housed the tombs of Imam Husayn and Imam ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib, whereas Baghdad and Samarra housed the tombs of other imams as well. Pilgrimage to these shrines continued, though not as freely as had been the case under the Buyids.

**Other Pilgrimages**

In addition to the obligatory hajj, the praiseworthy ‘umra, and the distinctive Shi’i pilgrimages (ziyara; lit. visitation) to the tombs of the Shi’i imams, there
were countless local pilgrimages that became part of the fabric of daily life throughout the medieval Islamic world. The tombs of Muhammad’s companions, Sufis, saints, scholars, martyrs, virtuous rulers, even sacred objects such as copies of the Qur’an, or more mundane items that ostensibly belonged to Muhammad himself were venerated and visited by the faithful hoping to benefit from the *baraka* (divine blessing) they possessed.

Jerusalem and other sacred sites associated with pre-Islamic prophets and patriarchs in Syria, Egypt, and Iraq were especially popular destinations for pilgrims of all types. Understandably, Jerusalem and the Biblical Holy Land (the site of the ancient Jewish Temple and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre) held pride of place for Jews and Christians. However, Muslims considered Syria to be a holy land (*ard muqaddasa*) as well. Not only was Syria the home of Abraham, Moses, Joseph, David, Solomon, and Jesus, its most holy city, Jerusalem, was the destination of Muhammad’s night journey as well as the home of the al-Aqsa Mosque and the venerable Dome of the Rock.

An important subgenre of the merits (*fada’il*) of places literature is the pilgrimage guide or manual, which described important pilgrimage sites in a particular town or province of the medieval Islamic world. One such manual for Syria is Ibn al-Hawrani’s (d. 1592) *Guide to Pilgrimage Places*, which draws extensively on earlier sources such as al-Raba’i’s (d. 1052) *Merits of Syria and Damascus* and Ibn Asakir’s (d. 1176) *History of Damascus*. Like his predecessors, Ibn al-Hawrani praises the merits of Syria and its sacred history, including stories about more than 100 sacred sites in Damascus and Syria such as the location of Moses’ (Musa) tomb, the site where Jesus (Isa) will descend to earth at the end of time, the place where John the Baptist’s (Yahya ibn Zakariya) head was discovered, the location of the shrine of Husayn ibn Ali’s head, the tomb of Nur al-Din (d. 1174), even the presence of one of Muhammad’s sandals, which is buried in the southern wall above the *mihrab* of the Dar al-Hadith, near the Citadel of Damascus.

Ibn al-Hawrani emphasizes the importance of visiting the tombs of saints and other holy persons based on hadiths in which Muhammad is reported to have visited the graves of his companions. He concludes his *Guide to Pilgrimage Places* as follows, with a section on proper pilgrimage etiquette:

> It is customary practice to position oneself facing the face of the tomb’s inhabitant, to approach, and greet him. The pilgrim stands near the tomb, comporting himself, humbling himself, surrendering himself, bowing his head to the ground with dignity, God-inspired peace of mind, and awe, casting aside power and chieftainship. He should imagine himself as if he were looking at the tomb’s inhabitant and he at him. Then he should look with introspection to what God has granted to the one visited of loftiness, dignity and divine secrets and how God has made him a locus of sainthood, for secrets, closeness, obedience, and divine gnostic truths. (Meri, “Pilgrimage Guide,” 76)

Al-Hawrani further advises the pilgrim to read from the Qur’an and to devote himself to prayer and the remembrance of God. The purpose of these meditations and supplications is to focus the pilgrim’s attention on his sins (which prevent him from drawing close to God) and the virtues and spiritual blessing of the saint (which will be rewarded at the end of days).

It should be noted that some Sunni scholars denounced as heretical innovations any pilgrimage other than the obligatory and praiseworthy pilgrimages
to Mecca (hajj and 'umra). The famous Syrian scholar Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328) is representative of such opinion. Based on the practice of Muhammad, Ibn Taymiyya argued that it was permissible for the faithful to invoke God’s blessings on the deceased. However, he adamantly opposed the visitation of tombs for the purpose of petitioning a deceased person (or an object connected to him or her) to intercede with God on one’s behalf. As far as Ibn Taymiyya was concerned, such supplication was a form of polytheism. Moreover, based on a hadith attributed to Muhammad, Ibn Taymiyya also argued that the veneration of tombs was forbidden because Jews and Christians had originally instituted the practice. “It is for this reason that the Prophet . . . said in a [sound] tradition: ‘May God curse the Jews and Christians. They have taken the tombs of their prophets as places of prayer (lit. prostration). Such behaviour is to be warned against’ ” (Meri, Cult of Saints, 131).

Condemnation of religious practices and doctrines because of their real or alleged connections to Jews and/or Christians was standard practice in medieval Islamic polemics. Nevertheless, the Middle East and North Africa had been home to saints, ascetics, mendicants, and miracle workers (Jewish, Christian, and others) since antiquity. Holy men, with their divine blessing, special knowledge, and miracles were part and parcel of daily life in the pre-Islamic Mediterranean world centuries before Muhammad’s birth. Moreover, as evidenced by Ibn al-Hawrani’s Guide to Pilgrimages (and despite the objections of Ibn Taymiyya and his ilk), pilgrimage (ziyara) to the tombs and shrines of prophets, scholars, Sufis, saints, and even some virtuous rulers and others was “the very center and pivot of popular religious life” in the medieval Islamic world (Goitein, 188).

Further Reading
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Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258)

The second caliphal dynasty in Islamic history, the Abbasids overthrew the Umayyads in 750 and ruled primarily from Baghdad (est. 762) until the Mongol conquest of the city in 1258. The Abbasids claim to the caliphate is rooted in their decent from Muhammad’s paternal uncle, Abbas. The Abbasids had come to power by manipulating a Shi’i revolt against their predecessors, the Umayyad caliphs (661–750), in the late 740s, but once the Abbasids took power they began to follow the Sunni paradigm for the caliphate. In 945, Baghdad was sacked by the Buyids—a group of Shi’i soldiers of fortune from the region of Daylam on the southern shores of the Caspian Sea. From 945 onward, the Abbasid caliphs remained subordinate to a series of Muslim warlord regimes until 1258, when the invading Mongol armies sacked Baghdad and, for all intents and purposes, brought an end to the Abbasid caliphate. See also Shiism and Sunnis.

Further Reading

Abd al-Malik (c. 646–705)

Ruling from 695 to 705, Abd al-Malik was the fifth of the Umayyad caliphs to rule from Damascus. While Mu’awiyah ibn Abi Sufyan (r. 661–680) is credited with preserving the early Islamic Empire after the assassination of ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib during the first Civil War, Abd al-Malik is credited with establishing Arabic as the language of administration throughout the Empire, issuing a new coinage that explicitly asserts the dominance of Islam, and constructing the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, which is a vivid example that Islam and Muslim rule had replaced Christianity and Byzantine rule in Syria. See also Document 3.

Further Reading
Ablutions

Before one can actually perform the salat, he or she needs to perform a series of major or minor ablutions to enter into a state of ritual purity (tahara). Therefore, it was essential that medieval mosque complexes at the very minimum had access to clean water; some had simple water faucets, others had elaborate and ornate fountains, while still others even housed complete bathing facilities. The major ablution (ghusul) is required when one is in a state of major ritual impurity in which one cannot perform the salat nor should he or she enter a mosque or even touch a Qur’an. Activities that required a man or woman to perform a major ablution to be restored to a state of ritual purity include sexual intercourse and touching a human corpse. In addition, men must perform a major ablution after any emission of semen; women must do so after menstruation and after childbirth.

The major ablution requires that one bathe from head to foot, making sure that every part of one’s body is made wet. The minor ablution (wudu’) is less complete but is required after one has entered a state of minor ritual impurity from a range of unavoidable daily activities such as sleeping, relieving oneself, and passing gas. The minor ablution involves washing certain body parts with water in the following order: hands, mouth, nose, right forearm, left forearm, face, head, ears, right foot, left foot. Both the major and the minor ablution can be performed with sand or with a stone in those instances where one has no access to clean water or if one should not touch water for medical or other reasons.

Further Reading
**Abu Bakr (d. 634)**

Abu Bakr was a native of Mecca and a member of the Banu Quraysh. He was the first adult male convert to Islam, a close companion of Muhammad, made the *hijra* with Muhammad in 622, and hid in a cave with him as Muhammad’s Meccan opponents pursued them and their Bedouin guide. When his daughter, ‘Aisha bint Abi Bakr, was nine years old, Abu Bakr gave her to Muhammad to be his third wife. After Muhammad established himself in Medina, Abu Bakr continued to be one of Muhammad’s closest advisers until he died in ‘Aisha’s house in the summer of 632. While Muhammad’s body was being prepared for burial, a heated debate took place over who should succeed him as the leader of the new *umma*. In the end, Abu Bakr was acclaimed the leader and is known as the first of the *Rashidun* or rightly guided caliphs in the Sunni tradition (*see* Sunnis). The Shi‘i tradition rejects Abu Bakr and argues that Muhammad had in fact designated ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib to be his successor (*see* Shi‘ism).

Abu Bakr’s principal objective during his short reign (r. 632–634) was to subdue a rebellion in Arabia among the tribes who believed that their agreements with Muhammad died with him or who did not think that Abu Bakr was worthy of their allegiance. Abu Bakr and Muhammad’s companions obviously disagreed. For them, the tribes’ submission to Muhammad during his lifetime was equal to their submission to God; therefore, they did not have the option of seceding from the new political and religious community. Hence, the wars to subjugate the Arabic-speaking tribes of the peninsula are known as the *Ridda* Wars—or the Wars of Apostasy, although not all of those who were compelled to accept Islam and submit to Muslim political authority were actual apostates. That is, some had never been Muslims nor had they submitted to Muhammad’s authority during his lifetime.

**Further Reading**

**Afterlife. See Death and Afterlife**

**Agriculture**

The diet of even the lowliest peasant in the medieval Islamic world was generally varied and quite healthy, certainly far healthier than what most classes had access to in medieval Europe. The staple grains in most areas were wheat and in areas with more saline soil, barley. Sorghum was grown widely as well, but it appears that only the lower classes used it as a *food* crop for themselves and their animals. Rice could only be cultivated in those areas where there was an abundance of water, such as the southern shores of the Caspian Sea, in parts of Spain, in the Nile Delta and along the Nile in Egypt, the lower Euphrates in southern Iraq, even along the Jordan River near Beit Shean. In such
areas it competed with wheat and sorghum as a staple. However, in many other areas it was an imported luxury that only the wealthier could afford.

Along the Mediterranean coastlands, olive orchards were as thick on the ground as they had been in antiquity. Vineyards were cultivated as well; however, after the Islamic conquests, they gradually became less important to the local diet than they had been in late antiquity as more and more of the population converted to Islam and adopted the Islamic prohibition against the consumption of wine. Nevertheless, grapes continued to be used in Bilad al-Sham to produce raisins (zabib) and molasses (dibs), which were staples of the local diet, especially in the winter months. Ba‘labekk was famous for its molasses and Darayya (southeast of Damascus) for its grapes and raisins.

Some of the oasis settlements of Arabia as well as some of the settlements along the rivers in Iraq and Egypt cultivated vast date palm groves. A wide array of fruits and vegetables native to the region were cultivated along with others such as bananas, citrus, sugar cane, eggplants, watermelons, and mango trees that entered the Middle East from India and Africa in late antiquity or during the early Islamic period. Precisely how these foods spread westward across the Mediterranean to Spain is difficult to ascertain. There are numerous stories about rulers who encouraged the cultivation of exotic foods in their palace gardens and orchards. I mention but three examples here. ‘Abd al-Rahman I (r. 756–788), one of the few Umayyads to survive the Abbasid revolution, surrounded his palace in Spain with trees from around the world, including date palms and pomegranate trees ostensibly brought to Spain by men he had sent to Syria for the purpose of bringing back all sorts of seeds and plants to be grown in his garden.

The Abbasid caliph al-Ma‘mun ibn Harun al-Rashid (r. 813–833) is said to have brought sour orange trees from northeastern Iran to Rayy near modern Tehran. A century later, the Abbasid caliph al-Qahir (r. 932–934) reportedly had sour orange trees brought to Baghdad from India via Yemen. Whether or not rulers were the principal agents for the transfer of such foods from region to region, it is clear that the extensive overland and seaborne trade networks of the vast medieval Islamic world facilitated their transfer. Many foods likely began to be cultivated in new regions simply because a traveling merchant or scholar developed a taste for them in his travels and brought some plants or seeds home with him.

Essential to the flourishing cities and states of the medieval Islamic world were the sophisticated and varied irrigation technologies that made it possible to grow crops, such as sugar cane, bananas, mangos, rice, and cotton. These and other crops that originated in tropical or semitropical climes required intensive irrigation, especially during the summer months for the simple reason that in much of the region (as in southern California and the American southwest) it rained only during the winter months. Consequently, one of the major expenditures of any regime was for the construction and maintenance of irrigation technologies.

Dams were built to contain rainwater in low lands or to divert rivers and streams. Trenches and canals were dug to channel rainwater to above ground reservoirs as well as underground cisterns. Some canals were made of brick and stone, others were elaborate aqueducts, still others included pipes made of tile or lead. Underground aquifers were tapped by digging wells, creating new springs, and in some places (especially in parts of Iran and Afghanistan)
by carving tunnels that ran for miles through the bedrock. Each of these methods employed gravity to move water from higher ground to lower.

Whereas gravity-driven water transport requires little human labor beyond initial construction, raising water to higher ground is generally far more labor intensive than the routine maintenance of a trench, canal, aqueduct, or cistern. Lifting water from a well with a bucket on the end of a rope is hard work, and variations on this bucket and rope theme had been employed since antiquity. Pulling the rope through a pulley made the job much easier. So too did attaching a bucket to a pole with a weight on the other end (shadhuf) to counterbalance it.

The Archimedes Screw or Archimedes Snail, ostensibly invented by Archimedes (287–212 B.C.E.) himself, had been used since antiquity as well. An Archimedes Screw comprises a screw placed inside a cylinder. The lower end is placed in water and as the screw is turned water is raised to the top. Another important means of raising water was the water wheel, which had the labor-saving advantage of being powered by the current of the river on which it was built. None of this technology was really new, but it certainly was improved upon by the hydrologists of the medieval Islamic world.

Further Reading

‘Aisha bint Abi Bakr (d. c. 678)

‘Aisha bint Abi Bakr was the daughter of Muhammad’s close companion, Abu Bakr, the first caliph. She was betrothed to Muhammad at age 9 and is the only one of his wives who was not a widow when she married him, a virginal virtue of which she reminded her fellow wives often. She was also accused of adultery when she was 14 but exonerated by divine intervention with the revelation of Qur’an 24:11—at least according to the Sunni tradition (see Sunnis). It should be noted that Shi‘i commentators do not accept the Sunni interpretation of Qur’an 24:11 (see Shiism). Finally, because of ‘Aisha’s closeness to Muhammad, she is one of the most revered transmitters of hadiths or reports about Muhammad’s teachings and behavior. Despite being admired as a transmitter of hadiths about her husband, attitudes about ‘Aisha were ambivalent in the Middle Ages and remain so today in large part because she was one of the principal figures on the losing side in the first civil war that broke out in the wake of the assassination of the third caliph, Uthman, and the contested succession of Ali ibn Abi Talib.

Of all the women in battle in the early Islamic period, few are more memorable than ‘Aisha bint Abi Bakr. The best example of ‘Aisha’s opposition to Ali is her participation in the Battle of the Camel in 656. Her presence there can be viewed as an example of a woman inciting her clan’s men to victory. Rather than beating a tambourine, ‘Aisha was there in a closed litter atop her camel, around which the fiercest fighting occurred (hence the name of the battle). In the end, Ali’s forces were victorious that day. Two of ‘Aisha’s allies—Talha and al-Zubayr—were killed. ‘Aisha’s life was spared, but she spent the rest of her days at her home in Medina, quietly transmitting hadiths about her husband.

Because ‘Aisha was not the only woman present at the Battle of the Camel and because the sources indicate that there were other women at subsequent
battles as well, what offended later commentators was not so much the fact that women per se were present that day. Rather, they were offended that ‘Aisha—a wife of Muhammad—had inserted herself in the politics of succession and had violated the Qur’anic injunction that Muhammad’s wives should remain in their homes (33:28–34). As Denise A. Spellberg demonstrated, many later commentators used ‘Aisha’s involvement in the Battle of the Camel to argue that women should never participate in the community’s political life. Some accounts actually portray ‘Aisha on her deathbed acknowledging the error of her ways and expressing regret that she ever participated in the Battle of the Camel.

Further Reading

‘Ali ibn Abi Talib (d. 661)

‘Ali ibn Abi Talib’s father, Abu Talib, raised Muhammad after he was orphaned as a young boy. Hence Ali was Muhammad’s paternal cousin. Although Ali was a minor child when Muhammad received his first revelations, our sources record that he was one of the first to accept Muhammad’s preaching. He was one of Muhammad’s closest companions and confidants throughout his prophetic career. The partisans (shi’a) of Ali believe that Muhammad had designated Ali to succeed him as leader (imam) of the new Muslim community upon his death. The Shi’i doctrine of the imamate is based on the events of 18 Dhu l-Hijja A.H. 10 (March 16, 632 C.E.) (see Shiism).

According to the Islamic sources, Muhammad stopped at a place called Ghadir Khumm (Pool of Khumm) on his way back to Medina after he had made his final pilgrimage to Mecca. His followers gathered in a grove of trees to escape the suffocating heat and to perform the noon prayers. At the conclusion of the prayers, Muhammad raised Ali’s hand in front of the assembly and asked them if they recognized that he, Muhammad, had a claim on each of the believers that supersedes any claim they might have on themselves. They, of course, responded in the affirmative. He then took Ali’s hand again and said, “Of Whomsoever I am Lord [Mawla], then Ali is also his Lord. O God! Be Thou the supporter of whoever supports Ali and the enemy of whoever opposes him.” Umar ibn al-Khattab then said to Ali, “Congratulations, O son of Abu Talib! Now morning and evening [i.e., forever] you are the master of every believing man and woman” (Momen, 15).
Because the version cited above comes from Ibn Hanbal’s (d. 855) *Musnad*, a Sunni hadith collection, it is clear that the Sunni tradition does not deny that the events of Ghadir Khumm actually occurred (see Sunnis). Where they differ, and differ significantly, is on the interpretation of the event itself. According to Shi‘i doctrine, the above story proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that not only had Muhammad designated ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib and his descendants to succeed upon his death (which occurred only three months later on 13 Rabi‘ al-Awal A.H. June 8/11, 632 C.E.), but that he had bestowed his own political and religious authority on them as well. Although Sunnis afford Ali a tremendous amount of respect and prestige as an early convert, as Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law, and as the fourth of the *Rashidun* or rightly guided caliphs, they simply reject the Shi‘i interpretation of the events of Ghadir Khumm altogether.

As things turned out, Muhammad’s close companion and father-in-law, Abu Bakr (r. 632–634), became the first caliph. He was followed by two more companions, Umar ibn al-Khattab (r. 634–644) and Uthman ibn Affan (r. 644–656). After Uthman’s assassination, ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib (r. 656–661) became caliph/imam. However, the entirety of his caliphate/imamate was disrupted by the first civil war in Islamic history (656–661), ultimately ending in his assassination at the hands of a Khariji dissident.

Further Reading

**Buyids (945–1055)**

In 945, the Buyids, a group of Twelver Shi‘i soldiers of fortune from Daylam on the southern shores of the Caspian Sea, occupied Baghdad and placed the Abbasid caliphs under house arrest and ruled as the Abbasids’ deputies. Buyid control of Baghdad and much of modern Iraq and Iran continued until the Seljukids conquered Baghdad in 1055. The Buyid period in Iraq marks a period of revived public observances of Shiite ritual and practice (see Shiism). When precisely the veneration of the imams, visitation to their tombs, and other practices became part of the Shi‘i tradition is not entirely clear but we do know that after the Buyids conquered Baghdad in 945, they encouraged the open and public performance of three public rituals that were fundamentally important to daily life in Shi‘i Islam: the commemoration of Ghadir Khumm, the commemoration of the martyrdom of Husayn ibn ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib, and visitation to the Shi‘i imams’ tombs.

Further Reading
Calendar (Islamic)

The system for reckoning years from the birth of Jesus as A.D., Anno Domini (or more correctly Anni Domini Nostri Jesu Christi, meaning “In the Year of Our Lord Jesus Christ”) was instituted by the Roman Abbot Dionysius Exiguus in about 527 A.D. The calendar was further revised in a papal bull (edict) by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582. Consequently, the A.D. dating system is known as the Gregorian Christian calendar. Although C.E., Common Era, has recently come into fashion for some, and is used in this volume, the only thing truly common about the Common Era is that most modern countries now use the Gregorian Christian calendar.

The Islamic calendar is known as the hijri calendar, because it begins with the year in which Muhammad (c. 570–632) made his hijra or migration from Mecca to Medina (622). According to Islamic tradition, the hijri calendar was instituted in 638, by the second Rashidun caliph, Umar ibn al-Khattab (r. 634–644). Under this system, 01/01/01 A.H. was calculated as July 16, 622 A.D./C.E. Most Western scholars employ the abbreviation A.H., Anno Hejirae, to distinguish the hijri calendar from Gregorian calendar (A.D.; Anno Domini).

The Islamic calendar, like many other calendars, is based on a lunar year of 12 months totaling approximately 354 days, or about 11 days fewer than a solar year’s 365 days. To keep the lunar months in alignment with the four seasons, most users of lunar calendars periodically add an extra or 13th month. In fact, it was customary in seventh-century Arabia to insert a leap month every few years to ensure that the sacred months (in which pilgrimages to shrines took place, fighting was forbidden, and trade flourished) occurred roughly at the same time each year.

The Jewish tradition also follows a lunar calendar composed of 12 lunar months. However, because many Jewish holy days and festivals have their origins in the agricultural practices of Ancient Israel, they are tied to the seasons of the year as well as a particular Jewish month. Hence, a leap month—called the Second Adar—is added after the sixth Jewish month (Adar) in the following 19-year cycle: 3rd, 6th, 8th, 11th, 14th, 17th and 19th years. Thus, a particular holiday such as the Jewish New Year may vary by as many as 28 days from year to year, but it will always occur in the fall, and usually in September.

According to the biographical literature, during his last pilgrimage to Mecca Muhammad received a revelation forbidding the practice of inserting an extra month.

God ordained the months twelve in number when He created the heavens and the earth. Of these, four are sacred, according to the true Faith. Therefore, do not sin against yourselves by violating them. But you may fight against the idolaters in all these months, since they themselves fight against you in all of them. Know that God is with the righteous. The postponement of sacred months is a grossly impious practice, in which the unbelievers are misguided. They allow it one year and forbid it in the next, so that they may make up for the months which God has sanctified, thus making lawful what God has forbidden. Their foul acts seem fair to them: God does not guide the unbelievers. (Qur’an 9:36–37)

Some scholars have argued that this passage is speaking against the Quraysh leaders’ practice of manipulating the sacred months of the year for their own economic and political advantage; how this was done remains a mystery. Others
have argued that another reason for this may have been related to the fact that
the annual pilgrimage in and around Mecca had been held during the spring
season. That is, forbidding the practice of intercalation may have been done
specifically to ensure that the new Islamic pilgrimage would no longer coin-
cide with the Jewish Passover and Christian Easter holidays, which also oc-
curred in the spring season. In any case, one of the results of this prohibition is
that none of the Islamic religious holidays—including the Ramadan fast and
the annual pilgrimage—corresponds in any way to the seasons.

Reasons for this prohibition aside, there is no easy way to make the Islamic
lunar calendar match up with the Gregorian Christian solar calendar. Subtract-
ing 622 from the Gregorian year can provide a rough approximation of the Is-
lamic year in which an event occurred, especially for the first decades of Islamic
history. For example, the Caliph Umar conquered Jerusalem in the year 637
A.D./C.E. or 15 A.H (637 – 622 = 15). However, by the time we reach the Crusader
period, things are more complicated. The Franks conquered Jerusalem in the sum-
er of 1099 A.D./C.E. or 492 A.H. (1099 – 622 = 477 not 492); Saladin re-conquered
it in the summer of 1187 A.D./C.E. or 583 A.H. (1187 – 622 = 565 not 583).

One can calculate the rough equivalents between the Gregorian (C) and Is-
lamic (H) years with the following formulas:

\[ H \cdot \frac{32}{33} + 622 \cdot C \]
\[ (C - 622) \cdot \frac{32}{33} H \]

A few words of caution are necessary before using any formula or table to cal-
culate the exact Gregorian date for an Islamic date (or vice versa). Formulas
and tables can only provide imprecise estimates because the beginning of an
Islamic month varies from region to region depending on when the religious
scholars (‘ulama) first sighted the crescent moon. For example, the first day of
Ramadan 400 A.H. in Cairo may or may not be the same day of the week in
Baghdad, or Cordoba, or Delhi, or any other city.

The Islamic Months
1. Muharram
2. Safar
3. Rabi’ al-Awwal
4. Rabi’ al-Thani
5. Jumada l-Ula
6. Jumada l-Akhira
7. Rajab
8. Sha’ban
9. Ramadan
10. Shawwal
11. Dhu l-Qa’da
12. Dhu l-Hijja

Select Muslim Holidays
- Muharram 1 (Ras al-sana: The New Year) is the first day of the first month.
  It is celebrated throughout the Islamic world, though it is not a particularly
  religious holiday, nor was it much observed in the medieval Islamic world.
• Muharram 10 (‘Ashura: The Tenth) is the day on which many pious Muslims fast from dawn to sunset. For Shi‘i Muslims this day is of particular importance, as it commemorates the assassination of ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib’s son, Husayn ibn ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib (see Shi‘ism).

• Rabi‘ al-Awwal 12 (Mawlid al-nabi: The Prophet’s Birthday) is a holiday associated with festivities and exchanging of gifts. Often passages eulogizing Muhammad are read.

• Rajab 27 (Laylat al-isra‘ wa l-mi‘raj: The Night of Journey and Ascent) commemorates Muhammad’s night journey from Mecca to the Haram al-Sharif area in Jerusalem and his ascent to Heaven and return to Jerusalem, and then Mecca—all in one night. This night is traditionally celebrated by prayers.

• Sha‘ban 14 (Laylat al-barra‘a: Night of Remembrance) is, according to Muslim tradition, the night God approaches Earth to grant forgiveness for an individual’s sins.

• Ramadan (9th month of the Muslim year) is devoted to spiritual purification through the abstinence from food, drink, and physical pleasures from dawn until dusk.

• Ramadan 27 (Laylat al-qadar: Night of Power and Greatness) is considered a particularly holy time, as it is the night, by tradition, on which Muhammad received the first revelation.

• Shawwal 1 (‘Id al-fitr: The Feast of Fastbreaking; or The Lesser Feast) is the most joyous festival in the Islamic calendar and marks the end of abstinence during Ramadan.

• Dhu-l-Hijja 1–10: The period in which Muslims are to undertake a pilgrimage (hajj) to Mecca and its environs in imitation of Muhammad’s last pilgrimage.

• Dhu-l-Hijja 10 (‘Id al-adha: The Feast of Sacrifice; or The Greater Feast) is the high point of the pilgrimage and is celebrated by Muslims throughout the world even if not actually participating in the pilgrimage. It commemorates Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son (Qur’an 37:103–109). The Feast of Sacrifice is most often marked by the slaughtering of lambs and the distribution of meat to the needy.

• Dhu-l-Hijja 18 (Ghadir Khumm) is a Shi‘i festival commemorating the date when, according to the Shi‘is, Muhammad bestowed his own political and religious authority on ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib at a place called Ghadir Khumm on his way back to Medina after he had made his final pilgrimage to Mecca in 632 A.D./C.E. or 10 A.H.

Further Reading

Caliph

After Muhammad’s death, the early community (ummah) agreed on the need for a leader and selected Abu Bakr as Muhammad’s first successor. The earliest sources refer to the holders of this office by three titles: (1) Khalifat Rasul Allah (caliph—deputy or successor of the Messenger of God; Khalifat Allah
[God’s Deputy] was used as well); (2) Amir al-Mu’minin (commander of the believers); and (3) imam (religious leader). For all intents and purposes, these titles simply emphasize different aspects of the caliph’s political, military, and religious authority. Whatever the title, there was a general consensus about the basic responsibilities of the office: (1) the caliph should be the sole leader of the community, (2) all political power was to be invested in this one man, and (3) this office was to be a lifetime office.

Most of the major Muslim factions agreed with the above positions. The basic problem was related to the criteria for determining who was qualified to hold this office. Needless to say, there was and remains a great deal of diversity of opinion within the Muslim community on this issue. What began as a dispute over leadership of the community eventually developed into distinct religious and theological factions within the larger Islamic community, the most notable of which are known as Sunnis, Shi’is (see Shiism), and Kharijis.

Further Reading


Children

Childhood in the medieval Islamic world was generally defined as lasting from birth to the onset of puberty. In the absence of any physical signs of maturity, 14 to 15 were the generally accepted ages by which the age of majority (adulthood) was defined. Such a determination was important because, neither sexual segregation nor the requirements for women to wear the veil applied to prepubescent girls for the simple reason that girls and boys were not yet considered sexual beings in that they were physically unable to reproduce.

The four stages of childhood were generally defined as (1) from birth to teething; (2) from teething to about age 7, or the age of discernment; (3) from 7 to 14; and (4) the transitional phase from fourteen to the onset of puberty. Medieval treatises on marriage admonished parents to receive the births of boys with restrained joy, and to avoid demonstrating disappointment at the birth of girls. They also emphasized the importance of breastfeeding, which was the basic right of an infant for the first 2 years of its life.

Child mortality rates were high in the medieval Islamic world, as they were in all premodern societies. It was common for parents to lose one or more children in infancy or later to childhood diseases as was the case during outbreaks of plague (or Black Death), which hit the medieval Islamic world especially hard during the fourteenth century. Shortly after birth, it was customary to whisper in the child’s ear the call to prayer (adhan) and the Islamic statement of faith (shahada)—“There is no god but God; Muhammad is the Messenger of God.” Seven days later, when the child’s prospects for survival were more certain, a public feast was held during which the child was named, had some hair cut, and a sheep or goat was slaughtered to express gratitude for the child’s birth. The public nature of these ceremonies confirmed the father’s parentage and his responsibility to provide for the child.
Although children were able to discern between right and wrong, they were generally seen to have certain legal disabilities that parallel those who are mentally deficient. For example, children could not make binding contracts. Nor were they subject to the same punishments for criminal offenses as adults. In addition, most jurists argued that children were not required to fulfill the rituals of Islamic worship—prayer (salat), fasting (sawm) during Ramadan, paying alms (zakat), or making the pilgrimage (hajj). Rather, they should be taught these as part of their religious education in preparation for adulthood.

The marriage age for females tended to coincide with the onset of puberty, but it was common for prepubescent girls to be given in marriage as well. Although there is evidence of marriages being arranged between children, most males married after they had entered into adulthood and tended to be older than their brides. It was common for much older men to marry very young girls. In fact, when Muhammad was in his fifties, he contracted a marriage to his favorite wife, ‘Aisha bint Abu Bakr, when she was 9 years old (some accounts say that she was 6 or 7 years old).

Based on Muhammad’s example, the reverse occurred as well. His employer and first wife, Khadija (d. 619), was some 15 years his senior. It was she who initiated the marriage proposal, and Muhammad took no other wives as long as she was alive. Despite Khadija’s trust in Muhammad as a businessman and her steadfast moral support for him once he began to receive his revelations, it is possible that Muhammad’s monogamy may have been motivated by more than his deep affection for his wife. Although the specific details of their marriage contract remain a mystery, we do know that it was common for a woman of means to contract a marriage on the condition that her husband take no other wives.

One of the more famous examples of such a restriction in a marriage contract is the oath that wealthy widow, Umm Salamah, extracted from the youthful, Abu l-‘Abbas (who later became the first Abbasid caliph al-Saffah). Umm Salamah made him swear an oath that he would neither take another wife nor a concubine. Abu l-‘Abbas agreed to Umm Salamah’s terms and, by all appearances, he kept his vow even after he ascended to the caliphate, despite his aides’ advice and encouragement that he should partake of the abundantly rich variety of women at his beck and call.

Further Reading

Circumcision

The most famous example of circumcision in the Ancient Near East is the institution of male circumcision as the sign of God’s covenant with Abraham as described in Genesis:

Then God said to Abraham, “As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be a sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every
male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised. . . . My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.” (Genesis 17:9–14)

The early Christian community debated at length whether this physical sign of God’s covenant with Abraham should be required under the New Covenant or New Testament. In the end, the Church embraced St. Paul’s argument (made in many of his epistles) that “circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code” (Romans 2:29).

Despite the fact that circumcision is not mentioned in the Qur’an, classical poetry as well as the biographical literature (sira) on the life of Muhammad indicate that male and female circumcision were practiced in pre-Islamic Arabia. Male circumcision, understandably, was linked to Abraham. According to one account, female circumcision, too, had its origins in the Abraham story— that is, in Sarah’s animosity toward Hagar, the mother of Ishmael. After Sarah had sent Hagar away and called her back several times,

She swore to cut something off of her, and said to herself, “I shall cut off her nose, I shall cut off her ear—but no, that would deform her. I will circumcise her instead.” So she did that, and Hagar took a piece of cloth to wipe the blood away. For that reason women have been circumcised and have taken pieces of cloth [sanitary napkins?] down to today. (Brinner, 72)

In his famous anti-Christian polemic, “Contra Christianorum,” al-Jahiz (777–869) minced no words as to his opinion of the ritual and hygienic merits of male and female circumcision:

[T]he Christian is at heart, a foul and dirty creature. Why? Because he is uncircumcised, does not wash after intercourse and eats pig meat. His wife does not wash after intercourse, either, or even after menstruation and childbirth, which leaves her absolutely filthy. Furthermore she, too, is uncircumcised. (Colville, 79) (Emphasis added)

Four centuries later, the Damascene Shafi’i scholar al-Nawawi (d. 1233–1277), summarized the views on circumcision advocated by the various madhhabs (schools of Islamic jurisprudence) in a treatise on ritual purity (tahara), proclaiming that circumcision was obligatory for both men and women. Men had to cut off the full foreskin, and women simply had to cut a small part of the skin off. The ambiguity in the proscription for women left a good deal of latitude for how it was implemented.

Although there was general agreement on the procedure itself, there was little consensus as to timing. Some scholars advocated circumcision on the 7th or 8th day; others at around 7 years of age (when the boy began his formal education); others forbade it before 10 years of age. Still others argued in favor of circumcision even later as a right of passage to mark the onset of puberty and in preparation for adulthood and marriage. At whatever age it was performed, circumcision was understood as an essential act of Islamic ritual purification (tahara). In fact, a common colloquial term for the practice is tahara.

The circumcision of Muslim boys was very much a public affair. Those parents who could afford it, paraded their sons through neighborhood streets on
horseback, accompanied by family, friends, and other well-wishers. Less well-to-do parents often scheduled their son’s circumcision to coincide with a wedding procession to defray costs. When the child and his entourage had finished their procession, the local barber performed the operation.

Public celebrations and festivities did not accompany the circumcision of a girl. Rather, female circumcision was a private affair attended by the women of the family and the woman who performed the operation. In addition to ritual purity, some of the rationales for female circumcision included the preservation of chastity and the inhibition of sexual desire, but it was also thought to promote fertility and to ensure the birth of sons. Despite the admonitions of scholars, female circumcision was apparently not observed in much (possibly most) of the medieval Islamic world. However, in Egypt, where it had long been observed prior to the Islamic conquest, female circumcision was widely practiced among Muslims and Christians. Finally, despite the scholarly arguments in favor of it, female circumcision (unlike its male counterpart) had a decidedly shameful and secretive connotation attached to it. We see this clearly evidenced by the contemptuous and vulgar epithet, “son of a cutter of clitoris” (ibn muqattā’at al-buzur).

Further Reading

Clothing and Modesty

How modest dress was specifically defined in early Islamic history is yet another contested issue among historians because of the paucity of contemporary evidence as well as the allusive (and elusive) character of many Qur’anic passages. This issue is also vigorously debated among modern Muslims because of the implications that the practice of the early community has for Muslim women and men today. Fundamental to this discussion is the proper interpretation of the concept of modesty as well as the precise meaning of the Arabic words for veil or covering that are used in the Qur’an (*khimar*, pl. *khumur*; *hijab*, pl. *hujub*).

Enjoin believing men to turn their eyes away from temptation and to restrain their carnal desires. This will make their lives purer. God has knowledge of all their actions. Enjoin believing women to turn their eyes away from temptation and to preserve their chastity; to cover their adornments (except such as are normally displayed); to draw their veils [khumur] over their bosoms and not to reveal their finery except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands’ fathers, their sons, their step-sons, their brothers, their brothers’ sons, their sisters’ sons, their women-servants, and their slave-girls; male attendants lacking in natural vigour, and children who have no carnal knowledge of women. (Qur’an 24:30–31)
In modern Muslim countries and among Muslim communities in the West, the meaning of veiling is understood in a variety of ways. Some Muslims, especially in the West or among more Westernized communities in the Islamic world, argue that simply covering one’s bosom and dressing modestly (usually according to Western standards of modesty) meets the requirement. Others argue that, despite the admonition to “draw their veils [khumur] over their bosoms,” the subsequent admonition not to “reveal their finery except to their husbands, their fathers” requires not only modest dress, but also the use of a headscarf or shawl to cover one’s hair either partially or completely in the presence of all except kin, servants, slaves, and impotents. Others argue that the proper interpretation of this passage requires the complete covering of a woman’s body, hands, feet, hair, and face—even to the point of wearing gloves and a veil with sheer material where a woman’s eyes are covered so that she can see, but that nobody can see any part of her body, including her eyes.

Although many modern Americans understand the veil as a uniquely Islamic form of women’s dress, there is evidence that face veiling was practiced in some pre-Islamic Arabian towns as a sign of high social status. According to the biographical literature, Muhammad required his wives to cover their faces. This was in addition to the Qur’anic injunction that they should remain in their homes. In fact, one of the meanings of the phrase darabat al-hijab (She took the veil) is, “She became one of Muhammad’s wives.”

It remains unclear when precisely face veiling for women became part of broader Islamic practice. Nevertheless, we do know that seclusion and veiling were practiced as symbols of economic wealth and high social status before the advent of Islam in some parts of Arabia, among the urban upper classes in Byzantium, and in Sasanian Iran. It seems entirely plausible that as these areas and their populations were incorporated into the Islamic empire in the first Islamic centuries, the new Islamic order easily adapted this elite urban custom to the new Islamic standards of sexual morality and segregation of the sexes.

Finally, whatever the proper interpretation of Qur’anic passages on dress may be for the modern world, it is clear that the dress—especially the public dress—of women and men in early Islamic history as well as throughout much (though not all) of the medieval Islamic world was modest by any modern American standards and included shirts, undergarments, robes, wraps, cloaks, shawls, mantles as well various types of head covering.

Further Reading

Coinage. See Money and Coinage

Death and Afterlife

Muslim burial rituals are fairly simple and, if possible, should occur on the day the person died. First, the corpse is washed and its orifices plugged. It is then wrapped in a shroud in preparation for burial (coffins are not used). The ritual prayer (salat) is performed, followed by the recitation of funeral prayers (janaza). The shrouded corpse is then carried on a bier or kind of stretcher to the cemetery, where it is placed on its right side with its face toward Mecca in a relatively
shallow grave so that the deceased can hear the muezzin’s call to prayer. According to most Muslim scholars, cremation was not an acceptable practice because of the importance of the physical bodily resurrection of the dead at the end of time. Traditionally, it had also been unacceptable according to Jewish and Christian scholars for similar reasons.

Although the rather modest procedures for properly burying a corpse are important, it is the theology of death itself and the rewards and punishments in the afterlife that are of eternal consequence. One of the most common themes in the Qur’an is the necessity of belief in the One God and the Last Day (The Day of Judgment; or Day of Resurrection). The importance of this theme is made abundantly clear in the seventh chapter of the Qur’an, which describes an event that ostensibly occurred at the beginning of human time when God brought forth Adam’s descendants from the loins of his children and made them testify that He was their Lord so that on the Last Day they could not claim ignorance of His Oneness nor could they claim that they were blameless in their polytheism or idolatry because they had learned such false beliefs from their parents (Qur’an 7:171).

Of course, only God knows the moment when each individual will inevitably encounter the angel of death, known as ‘Izra’il. A common belief was that God determined the location of each person’s death by commanding an angel to put a speck of the soil from the territory where a person was destined to die into the semen in his or her mother’s womb. There are many stories told about people who for some unexplained reason felt compelled to visit a particular place, only to die once they arrived there. According to many scholars, once a person is in the grave, two angels (often referred to as Munkar and Nakir) arrive to conduct an interrogation about the content of his or her faith, after which they meet out rewards to the righteous and punishments to the wicked. As noted above, the grave needs to be shallow enough for the deceased to be able to hear the muezzin’s call to prayer; however, it also needs to be deep enough for the deceased to be able to sit up and answer the angels’ questions.

As the appointed time and location of one’s death is known only to God, so too is the exact moment when another angel, Israfil, will sound the trumpet announcing the resurrection of the dead and the ingathering of souls for the final Day of Judgment. However, there are certain events or signs that are expected to occur prior to the Last Day such as natural disasters, the sun rising in the west, a triple eclipse of the moon, and the arrival of Yajuj and Majuj (the Biblical Gog and Magog) to wreak havoc on the earth. Jesus will also return at the end of days to do battle with the Anti-Christ (al-Dajjal). After Jesus defeats the Anti-Christ, he will die for the first time (according to Qur’an 4:157, Jesus only appeared to die on the cross) and be buried in a tomb near Muhammad in Medina.
In addition, a messianic figure called the Mahdi will come and defeat God’s enemies, the world will be destroyed, and a new millennial age ushered in. Most Sunni scholars argue that the Mahdi is a member of Muhammad’s family; a minority position is that Jesus and the Mahdi are one and the same (see Sunnis). Twelver Shi‘is, of course, believe that Muhammad al-Mahdi—the Hidden Imam—is the Mahdi. Prior to the Day of Judgment, the physical resurrection of the dead will occur (see Shiism). The righteous and the wicked will then be summoned before God, their vices and virtues recited by angels who recorded them in special books, and God’s final judgment given. Essentially, God’s final judgment is a formal, ominous, and public vindication of the reward or punishment that He decreed for each person at the moment he or she died.

According to some Muslim scholars, the Final Judgment will occur in the Valley of Jehosephat to the east of Jerusalem (as it will in Judaism and Christianity) and the Ka‘ba will be transported from Mecca to witness it. The reward for the righteous and the punishment for the wicked also parallel those found in Judaism and Christianity. The righteous are rewarded with a garden (janna), while the wicked are condemned to the fire (nar). According to some commentators, the wicked will access the fire via Gehenna (Heb., gehinom; Ar., jahan-nam), Jerusalem’s garbage dump that used to smolder south of the city. Although the Qur’an speaks of two gardens “for those who fear to stand before God” (Qur’an 55:46) and “two more gardens” beyond them (Qur’an 55:62), some commentators expanded the number from four to seven gardens or “heavens” culminating in the “Garden of Eden.”

Whatever the specific number of gardens for the righteous or precise routes to the fire taken by the wicked, the Qur’an makes perfectly clear what is in store for those who obey God and His messenger and those who do not.

This is the Garden which the righteous have been promised. Therein shall flow rivers of water undefiled, and rivers of milk forever fresh; rivers of wine delectable to those that drink it, and rivers of clarified honey. They shall eat therein of every fruit and receive forgiveness from their Lord. Is this like the lot of those who shall abide in the Fire forever, and drink scalding water which will tear their bowels? (Qur’an 47:15)

Further Reading

**Education**

For the vast majority of Muslims, the Qur’an is the eternal uncreated speech of God, flawlessly recited to mankind by His messenger, Muhammad. It should come as no surprise then that the Qur’an was the fundamental building block of education in the medieval Islamic world. Nor should it come as a surprise that the medieval Islamic world was a world in which the written word was ubiquitous. In addition to pious and laudatory inscriptions on public buildings, coins, swords, textiles, carpets, ceramics, and lamps, one could find inscriptions, poetry, and belles-lettres with far less noble themes as well.

Despite the importance of the written word, it was the word that was committed to memory that was held in highest regard. One could not claim to
have studied the Qur’an, or any text for that matter, unless he had committed the text to memory. Therefore, beginning around the age of 6 or 7, children were taught to memorize the Qur’an (beginning with the shortest chapters, which are only a few lines) and to study the basics of Islamic beliefs and practices with their teachers. In addition, students learned the basics of Arabic grammar, for without a solid understanding of the Arabic language one could not truly understand the speech of God. Although paper was introduced to the Middle East during the early Islamic period and eventually made its way to Europe, it was only the wealthiest who could afford to waste it. Therefore, students did their lessons with a reed pen and ink on a washable tablet (usually made of wood). Very young boys and the mentally ill were generally discouraged from learning to write in a mosque because they “scribble on the walls and soil the floor, not bothering about urine and other kinds of dirt” (Buckley, 119).

In the early centuries of Islamic history, elementary education was a very informal affair where young children studied with their fathers, uncles, or brothers (and occasionally mothers, aunts, or sisters) at home and, as they matured, with local scholars in the mosque. More advanced students then moved on to study hadiths (statements attributed to or about Muhammad), which along with the Qur’an formed the basis of Islamic jurisprudence and theology. The primary place to study hadith in the early centuries of Islam was the mosque. Scholars also taught in their homes, which allowed them to offer hospitality to their students. It also made it easier for some scholars to charge for their services, despite the fact that it was considered bad form.

The education of boys received a great deal of attention in medieval treatises on education. Al-Shayzari (d. c. 1193) summarizes the sentiments of many in his Book of the Market Inspector. Based on a hadith attributed to Muhammad, all boys who have reached the age of 7 should be ordered to pray with the congregation in the mosque. “Teach your children to pray when they reach seven, and when they are ten, beat them if they neglect it” (Buckley, 119). According to al-Shayzari, teachers should employ corporal punishment with what he viewed as moderation:

The educator should beat them when they are ill-manered, use bad language, and do other things against Islamic law, such as playing with dice, [decorated] eggs, backgammon and all other kinds of gambling. He should not beat a boy with a stick so thick that it will break a bone, nor with one so thin that it will cause too much pain. Rather, the stick should be of middling size. The educator should use a wide strap and aim at the buttocks, the thighs and the lower part of the legs, because there is no fear of injury or harm happening to these places. (Buckley, 119–120)

Teachers should teach their charges to honor and obey their parents. They should avoid using their students for their own needs, for performing demeaning chores such as moving manure or stones; they should also avoid any appearance of impropriety with their students.

Of course, medieval Muslim scholars and educators were well aware of the sentiment that “all work and no play make little Muhammad a dull boy.” According to the extremely influential scholar, al-Ghazali (d. 1111 A.D.), “Prevention of the child from playing games and constant insistence on learning deadens his heart, blunts his sharpness of wit and burdens his life; he looks for a ruse to escape them (his studies) altogether” (Giladi, 58). The kinds of
games al-Ghazali mentions include, puppet theater, games with balls, toy animals, and toy birds on strings.

In a mosque, teachers generally sat on a mat and against a pillar facing the direction (qibla) of Mecca. Their students sat in a circle (halaqa) in front of them. Some early scholars thought the use of mats an inappropriate innovation and sat on the bare ground. More renowned scholars often sat on cushions or pillows, which elevated them to a place of honor above their students. As one might expect, the better or more popular teachers attracted larger circles of students than some of their lesser colleagues. In such situations, a teacher might sit on a bench so that his audience could hear him better.

Students intent on mastering the material were expected to faithfully copy out a teacher’s lectures, which generally consisted of the teacher dictating a text to which he added his own commentary as well as the commentaries of his teachers. This method of learning from a teacher, who learned from his teachers, who learned from his teachers, illustrates the fundamental importance that medieval Muslims placed on direct personal interaction between teacher and pupil. Once a scholar determined that his student had mastered a given text, he granted him (or her) an ijaza (diploma) certifying that he (or she) was now qualified to teach that particular text to others. In part because of this emphasis on the interpersonal, we find scholars and students traveling hundreds, even thousands of miles to study with the leading lights throughout the medieval Islamic world.

There were opportunities for girls to study, to earn ijazas, and to become learned enough that eminent scholars sought them out as teachers. This was especially the case among learned families who often made special efforts to ensure high-quality education in the Qur’an and hadith for their sons and daughters. Hadith transmission was the primary field in which women could make their mark as teachers of men. After all, one could hardly argue that women were inadequate to the task of transmitting hadith because ‘Aisha bint Abi Bakr, Muhammad’s favorite wife, was one of the most important hadith transmitters in early Islamic history. In addition, Muhammad is reported to have praised the women of Medina because of their desire for religious knowledge. “How splendid were the women of the ansar; shame did not prevent them from becoming learned in the faith” (Berkey, 161).

Understandably, religious education for girls tended to be strongest within scholarly families. However, despite ‘Aisha’s example and despite Muhammad’s praise for the women of Medina, educating girls and women was not universally supported. Opponents could even make their case by citing an apparently contradictory statement attributed to Muhammad. “It is said that a woman who learns [how to] write is like a snake given poison to drink” (Berkey, 161). Al-Shayzari warns against teaching women to write as well. “The educator must not teach a woman or a female slave how to write, because this makes a woman worse, and it is said that a woman learning to write is like a snake made more venomous by being given poison to drink” (Buckley, 120).

Nevertheless, it is clear that girls and women could be and were educated in the Qur’an and hadith, some very considerably. Although women did not enroll as students in formal classes, we do know that they did attend ad hoc lectures and study sessions in mosques, madrasas, and other public places. It should come as no surprise that some men did not approve of women’s public participation. The dyspeptic fourteenth-century scholar, Muhammad
Ibn al-Hajj (d. 1336), was appalled by the behavior of some women who informally audited lectures in his day:

[Consider] what some women do when people gather with a shaykh to hear [the recitation of] books. At that point women come, too, to hear the readings; the men sit in one place, the women facing them. It even happens at such times that some of the women are carried away by the situation; one will stand up, and sit down, and shout in a loud voice. [Moreover,] private parts of her body will appear; in her house, their exposure would be forbidden—how can it be allowed in a mosque, in the presence of men? (Berkey, 171–172)

The Arabic term translated here as “private parts of her body” (’awra) refers to “that which is indecent to reveal,” generally understood to mean anything other than a woman’s face and hands. Some extended the definition to include even these as well.

The relationship between travel and education is illustrated eloquently by a hadith in which Muhammad is reported to have told his followers that they should seek religious knowledge (talab al-‘ilm) even unto China; that is, to the ends of the earth. This desire to travel to study with the masters was often coupled with the obligation to undertake the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once if one is able. In addition to being the means for many to fulfill one of the Five Pillars of Islam, pilgrimage caravans from such distant places as Spain, West Africa, Central Asia, India and elsewhere functioned as informal traveling universities that continually added new scholars as they made their way to Mecca and back each year. As such, these pilgrimage caravans played a very important role in spreading new ideas and reinforcing old ones throughout the Islamic world.

Although the madrasa existed as early as the late-ninth century, by the late-eleventh century it had become much more prevalent throughout the Islamic world. Funded by pious endowments (made by private individuals and members of royal families), the madrasa was more than a mere change in venue from the mosque (or private residence) and its informal instruction. The better-endowed madrasas provided salaries for teachers and stipends for students. Many were built with apartments for students and teachers as well. One of Islam’s greatest medieval scholars, al-Ghazali (d. 1111), taught at Baghdad’s Nizamiyya madrasa, founded by the Seljukid wazir, Nizam al-Mulk (d. 1092).

Education in the medieval Islamic world, of course, was not limited to religious subjects—Qur’an, hadith, jurisprudence, theology, and so forth. Ancient Greek, Persian, and Sanskrit works on philosophy, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, geography, and other sciences were translated into Arabic between the eighth and tenth centuries under the patronage of the Abbasid caliphs. Muslim (as well as Jewish and Christian) scholars studied these classics and built upon them. Many of these ancient classics were eventually translated into Latin and made their way into the medieval European curriculum.

Further Reading
Entertainments

Common children’s entertainments in the medieval Islamic world included puppet theaters and see-saws as well as games played with balls, dolls, toy animals, and birds. Board games such as chess and backgammon were popular games among all sectors of society. So too were card games. Entertainments that involved tests of physical prowess were quite popular, including wrestling, races, polo, mock military competitions, and other displays of horsemanship—a sort of medieval rodeo.

Not all popular entertainments involved toys, puppets, or physical competitions. One of the most popular events at trade fairs in seventh-century Arabia was the poetry competition among the leading poets of the clans present. For to the best poet went not only a financial reward, but his entire clan benefited from the prestige of his poetic prowess. Arabic poetry performances continued to be extremely popular throughout the medieval Islamic world and remain so today, often selling out large auditoriums. Persian reemerged as a language of literature and administration in the tenth century. Public recitations of Ferdowsi’s (c. 940–1020) Shahnameh (Book of Kings)—one of the earliest and greatest examples of new Persian epic poetry—were quite popular throughout the Persian-speaking world. Turkish poetry began to become popular as well by 1400 after the rise of the Ottoman house in Anatolia and southeastern Europe.

It should come as no surprise that poetry often dealt with themes of honor, glory, and heroism among men, but also the beauty of one’s beloved, the passions of unrequited love, and the romantic benefits of wine. Among the ruling elites as well as among the wealthy classes, poetry performances were often accompanied by music and performed by singing girls, many of whom were slaves purchased expressly for their beauty, voices and dancing abilities.

Hunting in the medieval Islamic world was done for sport as well as for food. It was a favorite entertainment for the wealthy and a necessity for the diet of some of the less well-to-do. Given the specific regulations for butchering domesticated animals for them to be halal; that is, permitted according to shari’a or Islamic law, Muslim scholars devoted their attention to determining which game was permissible for consumption and when. Essentially, any wild animal killed by a hunter was considered halal, with the notable exception of pigs, which are forbidden under any circumstances. However, it is forbidden for pilgrims to eat game during the annual pilgrimage (hajj). Finally, whereas according to the Jewish tradition only fish with scales are considered kosher, all fish and seafood are permissible to Muslims at any time.

Hunting was a common theme in medieval Islamic literature, whether in poetry or in descriptions of a ruler’s fondness for spending time on his horse as he
and his companions pursued hares, partridges, quail, geese, and other small game with their hunting falcons and hounds. In his memoir, Usama ibn Muhqidh (1095–1188) includes a section about his father’s exploits as a hunter near the family estate at Shayzar in the mountains between Hama and the Syrian coast. Because his was a well-to-do family, they had broad access to land on which to hunt. In fact, Usama reports that in Shayzar “we had two hunting fields, one for partridges and hares, in the mountain to the south of town; and another for waterfowl, francolins, hares and gazelles, on the bank of the river in the cane fields to the west of town” (Hitti, 228).

Falcons and hawks are birds of prey that were essential to a successful hunt, so too were hunting hounds. In fact, Usama’s father used to dispatch some of his men to distant lands to purchase choice falcons as well as pigeons to feed them. He even sent some of his aides as far as Constantinople, the Byzantine capital, to purchase his falcons and hounds. Falcons and hawks were also purchased from locals who had set up trapping stations nearby to meet the demand for the birds. Although falcons and hawks were excellent hunters of small game and other birds, cheetahs were often used when hunting larger game such as gazelles, antelopes, deer, wild donkeys, and wild boar.

Falcons, hawks, hounds, cheetahs, and horses were a keeper’s livelihood as well as essential to his employer’s successful hunts. Hence, a great deal of care and attention was paid to a man’s hunting animals. In fact, it was common for a hunter to keep his birds of prey in his home. Usamah reports that his father even kept his prize cheetah in their house.

He had a special maid who served it. In one side of the courtyard she had a velvet quilt folded, with dry grass beneath. In the wall was an iron staple. After the hunt, the cheetah trainer would bring it to the door of the house in which its couching place lay, and leave it there. It would then enter the house and go to that place where its bed was spread and sleep. The maid would come and tie it to the staple fastened to the wall. (Hitti, 237)

Usamah also reports that gazelles, rams, goats, and fawns were born in the same courtyard, but that the cheetah so well behaved that it never touched them.

Further Reading

Fatimids (910–1171)

In the wake of a clandestine revolutionary movement among the Berbers of North Africa, Ubayd Allah al-Mahdi proclaimed himself the first Fatimid imam in 910. Despite the similarities between the methodology and rhetoric of the Fatimids and that of the Abbasids, the Fatimid imams belonged to the Isma‘ili branch of Shi‘i Islam, which was openly hostile to the Sunni Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad (see Shiism and Sunnis). In fact, the Fatimids’ intent had long been to use North Africa as a staging ground for their ultimate goal of conquering Baghdad and unseating the Abbasids. To that end, and after several failed attempts, Fatimid forces finally conquered Egypt in 969. Almost immediately, the
Fatimid general, Jawhar, began laying the foundations for the new palace city, al-Qahira (Cairo).

The Fatimids never were able to overthrow the Abbasid caliphs, but under their tutelage Egypt and its new capital became one of the wealthiest and most important cosmopolitan way stations for international trade and culture in the Mediterranean world, southwest Asia, and the Indian Ocean. Saladin brought an end to the Fatimid caliphate in 1171, but Cairo and Egypt continued to flourish under his leadership and that of his Ayyubid successors (1171–1250) and of the Mamluk Sultan (1250–1517).

Further Reading

Food

The diversity of fruits, vegetables, grains, and meats that were available in the medieval Islamic world is truly impressive. Markets throughout the medieval Islamic world were full of local fruits, vegetables, meats, and fish as well as preserved foods that had been brought from afar. Some of these were preserved by cooling as well as drying. The most common method of preservation, however, was to pickle them in vinegar and salt along with a range of condiments, including honey, sugar, lemon juice, olive oil, mustard, nuts, and all sorts of spices and herbs. Although any meat can be made into sausage, sausages made from mutton and semolina were preferred. Muhammad is said to have been particularly fond of milk, but given the difficulties of preserving fresh milk, it was converted into a wide variety of soft and hard cheeses.

In the countryside women generally ground the flour. In the cities, there were mills that ground flour for sale. Some urban marriage contracts have survived that specify that the bride (usually from a wealthy family) was to be exempt from grinding flour. Because only the wealthiest individuals could afford to have an oven built into their residences, foods prepared at home had to be taken to a local bake house to be cooked. In addition, there were shops, which sold breads, pastries, and sweetmeats, as well as restaurants where one could purchase all sorts of prepared dishes.

Islamic dietary laws are limited to but a few items, including blood, meat from animals that are not slaughtered properly, carrion, pork, and animals that have been consecrated to pagan gods. Although there are many similarities between Islamic and Jewish dietary laws, Islamic dietary laws are generally less restrictive
than Jewish ones. (Most Christian traditions abandoned Jewish dietary laws in their entirety.) A general rule of thumb is that nearly everything that is permissible (kosher) for Jews to eat is permissible (halal) for Muslims to eat. The major exception to this rule is that while wine is kosher and is absolutely essential to Jewish ritual and practice, it is explicitly forbidden in the Qur’an.

However, many things that are halal are not kosher. For example, all seafood is permissible (halal) for Muslims to eat; however, only fishes with scales are permissible (kosher) for Jews—shell fish, lobster, shrimp, and so forth are forbidden. In addition, certain meat dishes made with milk or yogurt are said to have been some of Muhammad’s favorites and hence are permissible for Muslims to eat. However, Jewish kosher regulations state that meat may not be cooked in or eaten with any milk product. An obvious example of a meat dish that is not kosher is the ubiquitous American cheeseburger washed down with a tall glass of milk.

Dietary regulations are more restrictive for pilgrims to Mecca as well. To remain in a state of ritual purity (tahara) during the pilgrimage, pilgrims must abstain from killing or eating game (though seafood is permissible) and of course from those foods and drinks that are always forbidden. It should be noted that though the Qur’an specifically forbids the above foods and drinks, the pragmatic side of most schools of Islamic law recognizes exigent circumstances when one might involuntarily or even forcibly be compelled to eat or drink forbidden things.

Although scholars generally extended the Qur’anic prohibition on wine to all alcoholic beverages, it is clear that there were a range of near beers and other “soft” or lightly fermented fruit drinks that could be commonly found throughout the medieval Islamic world. As such, a great deal of ink was spilled defining which types of drinks were in fact “soft” (lightly fermented) and permitted and which were “hard” (real intoxicants) and forbidden. As one might expect, water was an essential drink, though the quality of water was often determined by how much one was willing and or able to pay a water seller who carried water around in a jug on his back for sale in the market. The wealthiest even purchased snow from snow vendors who brought in snow from afar and kept it in storehouses. Fruit juices mixed with water were very common, including drinks made from lemons, oranges, apples, tamarinds, dates, grapes, and pomegranates.

Various coffees can be found throughout the modern Islamic world, and Arabica beans are a favorite in American coffee houses. However, coffee was only introduced to the Islamic world from Yemen and east Africa in the fifteenth century. There are several legends about who was the first to bring coffee beans to Yemen, and most of them revolve around one or more Sufis (Islamic mystics) who praised the drink as an inhibitor of sleep and an aide to mystical devotional rituals (see Sufism). Tea is ubiquitous in the modern Islamic world as well but was introduced from India even later, and often by European merchants. For example, it was a French merchant who had business dealings in East Asia who first introduced tea to Morocco around 1700. See also Document 11.

Further Reading
Geniza (Cairo)

According to Jewish custom, documents on which the personal name of God is written should not be destroyed. Hence, the Egyptian Jewish community placed such documents in a storeroom (geniza) in the Ibn Ezra synagogue in Fustat until they were supposed to be buried. Most of these documents were written in what is known as Judeo-Arabic, that is, Arabic written in the Hebrew script. The documents from this particular geniza were never buried and were eventually discovered quite by accident in the nineteenth century. These documents (most of which date from 1002 to 1266) are particularly useful for understanding daily life among greater Cairo’s Jewish community; however, as S.D. Goitein has so ably demonstrated, these documents can also be used to construct a very detailed picture of daily life in Egypt, the Mediterranean world, and beyond.

Further Reading

Harun al-Rashid (d. 809)

Harun al-Rashid (r. 786–809) was the son of the al-Mahdi (the third Abbasid caliph) and a former slave girl named al-Kharzuran. Harun al-Rahid’s reign and the life at his court at Baghdad are frequently hailed as one of the high points of medieval Islamic history. They are subject of many stories and legends. Many of the stories in the famous Thousand and One Nights are likely inspired by the world of his court. In addition to supporting the arts, education, culture, religion, and so forth, Harun was noted for his fulfillment of the religious obligation of jihad, especially against the Byzantines on the Syrian frontier. In the early 800s, Harun arranged for two of his sons, al-Amin and al-Ma’mun ibn Harun al-Rashid, to succeed him as caliph in succession. Not surprisingly, the succession was not orderly. In fact, the Abbasid caliphate never fully recovered from the civil war between al-Amin (r. 809–813) and al-Ma’mun (r. 813–833). By the 860s and 870s, many petty states had established themselves under Muslim rulers in North Africa and Spain to the west and in Iran and lands further east.

Kamal al-Din Bihzad. Harun al-Rashid at the barbers. Illustration from Khamsa or Quintet by Nizami, 1141–1209, Azarbaijani poet, produced in 1494, Safavid court at Herat, Afghanistan. The Art Archive/British Library.
Further Reading

**Hasan ibn ’Ali ibn Abi Talib (d. 669)**

Hasan was the eldest son of ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib and Fatima (Muhammad’s daughter) and second Shiite imam. According to Shi’i tradition, after Ali’s assassination in 661, the imamate then passed to Hasan (see Shiism). However, Hasan abdicated his claim to the caliphate in 661 and did not oppose Mu‘awiya ibn Abi Sufyan (r. 661–680), who established the Umayyad caliphate (661–750) with Damascus as its capital. Despite Hasan’s abdication, there remained a faction (shi’a) of Muslims who continued to argue that only someone from Muhammad’s house (in particular a descendant of Ali and Fatima) could legitimately lead the Muslim community. Hasan died in 669 under mysterious circumstances, possibly on the orders of Mu‘awiya. According to Shi’i belief, Ali, Hasan, his brother Husayn ibn ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib, and all the Shiite imams died as martyrs.

Further Reading

**Hijra**

Muhammad’s prophetic career can be divided into two roughly equal periods. The first took place in his hometown of Mecca from about 610 to 622. By 622, he had fallen out of favor with the leaders of Mecca and negotiated a move for himself and his followers to the oasis settlement of Medina approximately 250 miles to the north. This move from Mecca to Medina in 622 is referred to as his *hijra* (migration) and is of such importance to his prophetic career that the year 622 of the Gregorian calendar marks the year one of the Muslim calendar.

Further Reading

**Housing**

Housing in the medieval Islamic world included tents, mud huts, reed huts, single-story residences, multistoried tenements, and elaborate palaces. In the deserts of Arabia, Syria, Iraq, Iran, and North Africa tents predominated among the pastoral nomadic populations. These were generally made from the hair, wool, and leather of the nomads’ herds and flocks, whether sheep, goats, or camels. In the settled oases of the region, most homes were built from mud or reeds simply because wood and stone were rarely available in sufficient quantities to be practicable. Homes tended to be huts built of mud-bricks
in Muhammad’s hometown of seventh-century Mecca, whereas in other oases reed huts were more common. In the highlands of Yemen many of the residents lived in villages and towns made up of multistory tenement buildings.

In the major cities such as Damascus, Baghdad, and Cairo wood, stone, and brick were the preferred building materials in part because they were more readily available but also because they are far more durable than tents and mud or reed huts. Although some residents lived in single-story homes, many lived in multistoried apartment buildings. The tenth-century geographer, al-Muqaddasi, records that Fustat’s (Old Cairo’s) teeming population lived in four- and five-story tenements, which housed as many as 200 people. Medieval Muslim rulers also built elaborate stone palaces, mosques, madrasas, caravansaries, bathhouses, and hospitals. Depending on the locale, some of the stones and columns used in constructing such examples of monumental architecture were recycled from Pharaonic, Roman, and Sasanian ruins or from Christian churches and monasteries. Some of the buildings constructed during the Middle Ages still bear the graffiti and other inscriptions from earlier eras.

Typical of most housing at the time was a central courtyard or common area of some sort around which salons, bedrooms, and kitchens were constructed. Only the wealthy could afford indoor plumbing or ovens as part of their residences. Outhouses or outdoor latrine facilities of some sort were the order of the day. Men often simply urinated in a street or alley in a manner reminiscent of the Biblical euphemism for men as those “who pisseth against the wall” (I Samuel 25:22, 34). Public baths were essential to every city. If there was only one bathhouse in a town, certain days or parts of days were designated for women and others for men. Larger cities had women’s bathhouses, which were usually physically separate from the men’s bathhouses.

One’s home in the medieval Islamic world served as a sanctuary or refuge from the primarily male-dominated public world of the market and the mosque. Most men who were not part of the ruling classes or military spent much of the day outside the home working, studying, or at prayer in the mosque with other men. Women (especially respectable women) spent a great deal of their time at home with their children and other women. Women generally performed their ritual prayers at home. Literate women were usually educated at home, often by their fathers, uncles, brothers, or male cousins. If their mothers or other female relatives were educated, they often studied with them as well. Women who worked for a wage generally labored at home doing piecework as seamstresses, weaver, or making other handicrafts.

In addition to serving as a refuge from the outside world, the courtyard was a common area shared by the whole family (or families) who lived around it. Among rural and nomadic populations the courtyard might also serve as a corral for livestock. Women tended to prepare hot meals over a fire in such courtyards or in common neighborhood cooking areas. Meals that required an oven were prepared at home and then taken to a local bake house to be cooked. In the residences of the wealthy and the palaces of the ruling classes, courtyards were often quite elaborate. Many were equipped with fountains, gardens, and sophisticated canopies and trellises that allowed in light, but also provided a cooling shade from the often-blisterring sun.

The courtyard also served as the public space of the home where guests were welcomed and entertained. In addition to the courtyard there was often a salon that served the same purpose. In either case when male guests were
involved, the courtyard or the salon became extensions of the outside world in that such gatherings generally were male-only affairs, especially among the wealthy classes. Because hospitality and generosity were notable virtues throughout the Islamic world, food and beverages were served in such instances. In the medieval Islamic world, few things could ruin one’s reputation more than being known as stingy or inhospitable.

Because of the strict rules pertaining to sexual segregation every dwelling had an inviolable space (harem) that was separate from the rest of the house where the women retreated when male guests were present. In palaces and the homes of the wealthy this took the form of well-appointed women’s quarters or harems that only women, children, male kin, and eunuchs were allowed to enter. The women of less well-to-do families would retreat to a room or an area separated from the rest of the dwelling by a curtain or some sort of partition that served as a harem only when guest were present but was generally used for other purposes such as cooking, sewing, making handicrafts, study, or sleeping.

Whether one lived in a courtyard house or in a multistory tenement, a frequent concern was how best to encourage air exchange and cooling breezes in the often-stifling summer heat and at the same time preserve the sanctity and privacy of the home’s interior space. One common means of achieving ventilation and privacy is what is known as mashrabiyya—a wooden grill or grate that was used to cover windows or balconies. The grills or lattice work were usually made of turned wood that was joined together with carved blocks or spheres of wood to create intricate patterns. (In the homes of the very wealthy or for use in public buildings, the screen was occasionally made of metalwork.) Another means of ventilation was the wind catcher, or malqaf. A wind catcher functioned as a kind of reverse chimney/swamp cooler in that it was consisted of a shaft that rose above the building’s roof. The opening of the shaft was positioned to catch the prevailing winds of the region and force them down into the building, often flowing over pools of water or screens that were dampened with wet fabrics.

Although furnishings in the medieval Islamic world did include chairs with legs and beds with frames, it was far more common that homes were furnished with pillows, mattresses, and sofas. That is, domestic life in the medieval Islamic world was generally conducted rather close to the ground. Families did not sit in chairs around a dining room table at mealtime. Nor did they eat from individual plates. Rather, meals were served on large serving trays that were set on the floor or on a low stand. Guests then sat on a carpet, pillow, or very low seat around the serving tray and ate directly from it. They generally ate many dishes with their hands and flat breads; however, utensils (especially knives and spoons) were used for cutting meats and for eating soups (see Food).

Woodworkers and smiths did construct benches and chairs that were comparable in height to modern chairs and benches, but these were generally for use outside the home and generally were used to indicate the higher rank and status of the person (ruler, scholar, family patriarch, other person of high status) who sat on them in relation to those who were seated below him. Sitting on sofas, large pillows, pillows stacked on one another, or anything that might elevate a person over others could just as easily serve the same purpose of reflecting the hierarchy of status and rank.

The heights and kinds of the beds people slept on as well as the kinds of material used to make beds, pillows, and sofas were indications of status and
wealth also. Beds with legs and frames were sign of the highest status. Beds without them were a step down, sleeping on a mat or carpet a step further, and sleeping on the bare floor was for the poorest as well as for the mendicant Sufis, who considered themselves as God’s poor ones (fuqara’ Allah).

Further Reading

Husayn ibn ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib (d. 680)

According to Shi‘i tradition, after the assassination of ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib, the imamate then passed to his eldest son, Hasan ibn ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib (d. 669). However, Hasan abdicated his claim to the caliphate in 661 and did not oppose Mu‘awiya ibn Abi Sufyan (r. 661–680), who established the Umayyad caliphate (661–750) with Damascus as its capital. Despite Hasan’s abdication, there remained a faction (shi‘a) of Muslims who continued to argue that only someone from Muhammad’s house (in particular a descendant of Ali) could legitimately lead the Muslim community (see Shiism). Shortly after Yazid acceded to the caliphate (r. 680–683), Ali’s younger son, Husayn ibn ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib (the third imam), was persuaded to leave his home in the Hijaz and to travel to Kufa to lead a revolt and to take his rightful place at the head of the Muslim community. On 10 Muharram 61 (October 10, 680), Umayyad forces routed Husayn and seventy-two armed men (together with their women and children) at Karbala. The victors beheaded Husayn and his companions and put their heads on pikes as they marched to Kufa. The women and children were taken prisoner, including Husayn’s sole surviving son, Ali, who had been too ill to participate in the battle.

As was customary, Husayn’s head was sent to the caliph Yazid in Damascus as proof that Husayn was indeed dead. Some reports indicate that Yazid was saddened by the death of Muhammad’s grandson. Others suggest that he treated Husayn’s head with contempt as he poked at Husayn’s mouth with his cane, for which he was immediately taken to task by Abu Barzah al-Aslami, a companion of Muhammad.

Are you poking the mouth of al-Husayn with your cane? Take your cane away from his mouth. How often have I seen the Apostle of God kiss it! As for you, Yazid, you will come forward on the Day of Resurrection, and Ibn Ziyad will be your advocate. But this man will come forward on the Day of Resurrection, and Muhammad will be his advocate. (al-Tabari, 174)

Husayn’s head was returned to his dependants who buried it. But where? His head has a place of honor in the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. Another tradition says that it was buried in Ashkelon where the Fatimids built a shrine in 1098. During the Crusader period it was disinterred and moved to Cairo (1153) where it is venerated to this day at the Husayn Mosque. There are other traditions that state that Husayn’s head was interred in Medina, Kufa, Najaf, Karbala, Raqqa on the upper Euphrates, and even in distant Marv in Afghanistan.

With Husayn’s martyrdom, the imamate passed to his son, Ali, and then continued to be passed on from father to son as each imam designated his
successor. According to Shi‘i doctrine, all of the imams except the twelfth died as martyrs. Some were slain in battle, while others were poisoned or died in prison. The most dramatic martyrdom, of course, is that of Husayn. There are reports of the faithful weeping over Husayn’s grave almost immediately after his tomb was constructed. In 850, the Abbasid caliph al-Mutawakkil had the shrine destroyed to put an end to Shi‘i pilgrimages to it. His efforts proved unsuccessful as pilgrims continued to go to Karbala even though there was no shrine. The Buyid ruler Adud al-Dawla restored Husayn’s tomb at Karbala and Ali’s tomb at Najaf in 990.

Over time, elaborate rituals developed as part of the faithful’s visitation and public mourning at the imams’ tombs, whether at Husayn’s tomb in Karbala, Ali’s tomb in Najaf, or at the tombs of the imams buried in Baghdad, Samarra, Medina, or Mashhad in Iran. According to the thirteenth-century theologian Ta’usi (d. 1266), the faithful expressed their longing for the imams and their suffering as they cried over their graves.

Could I but be your ransom! Since the Lord of the future life takes pleasure in sorrow and since it serves to purify God’s servants—behold! we therefore don mourning attire and find delight in letting tears flow. We say to the eyes: stream in uninterrupted weeping forever! (Halm, 140)

The most elaborate of the lamentations is for Husayn, and the rituals of the Ashura festival date at least to the Buyid period. Sources indicate that the oldest Ashura ritual is for pilgrims to Husayn’s tomb to request a sip of water in commemoration of one of Husayn’s final acts prior to his martyrdom. Near the end of the battle, as Husayn pleaded for water for his infant son (whom he held in his arms), an arrow pierced the baby’s throat and killed him. Undaunted by his child’s death, Husayn continued to fight until he was finally slain. The elaborate passion plays and public processions where mourners beat and cut themselves in identification with Husayn’s suffering so common in modern Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon appear to date from the Safavid (1501–1722) and Qajar (1779–1925) periods in Iran, well after the period covered in this book.

Further Reading

Ibn Battuta (1304–1368/1377)

Ibn Battuta was a Berber born and raised in Tangier in what is today Morocco. Ibn Battuta was educated in the Maliki school (madhhab) of Islamic law (shari‘a). What began as the fulfillment of his religious obligation to undertake the pilgrimage to Mecca in 1325 turned into a nearly 30-year journey (1325–1354) throughout nearly the entire Islamic world covering some 73,000 miles (117,000 km), and even to China in the east and Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire.
Most of what we know of Ibn Battuta is from his *Rihla*, an account of his travels that he dictated to a scholar named Ibn Juzayy several years after his return. Ibn Battuta could usually draw on his training in Arabic language, Islamic law, and Sufism to gain access to the scholarly, economic, and political elites of most of the regions to which he travelled. Some of Ibn Battuta’s contemporaries, including the famous north African scholar Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), viewed him as a purveyor of fanciful tall tales and as an incompetent scholarly poseur. However, as Ross Dunn beautifully demonstrated, Ibn Battuta’s detailed account of his travels is a tremendously valuable source for understanding the complex societies that comprised the Islamic world in the fourteenth century.

**Further Reading**


**Ibn Jubayr (1145–1217)**

Ibn Jubayr was a geographer, traveler, and poet from al-Andalus. He is most famous for his detailed account of his travels (1183–1185) that he undertook in conjunction with his performance of the obligation to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca. After booking passage on a Genoese vessel, Ibn Jubayr departed from his home in Granada in February 1183, sailed across the Mediterranean to the port of Alexandria in Egypt, and traveled down the Nile to Cairo and eventually to the Egyptian Red Sea port of Aydhab. He then crossed the Red Sea with his fellow pilgrims to the west Arabian port of Jiddah on his way to Mecca. He arrived in Mecca in September 1183, where he waited until the annual pilgrimage commenced in mid-March 1184. After undertaking the pilgrimage, Ibn Jubayr then traveled northeast across the Arabian Peninsula to Baghdad and up the Tigris to Mosul. He then traveled west to Aleppo in northern Syria and south to Damascus where he spent four months (July to October 1184).

He then traveled to the port of Acre, which he departed in October 1184, and sailed westward across the Mediterranean. After a number of detours along the way, he finally reached his home in Granada in May 1185. Although Ibn Jubayr’s avoidance of Jerusalem may simply have been a case of his desire to reach home after an already long and arduous trip, it may have had more to do with the fact that in 1184, Jerusalem was still the capital of the Crusader kingdom. The invocation with which Ibn Jubayr begins his brief description of Acre leaves no doubt as to his sentiments towards the Crusaders, “May God destroy (the Christians in) it and restore it (to the Muslims)” (Broadhurst, 318). Unfortunately for Ibn Jubayr’s point of view, because the Crusaders controlled every major port city along the Syrian coast at the time, he had little choice but to either depart from a Crusader port or make the long overland trek to the port of Alexandria. Ibn Jubayr travelled to the East two more times (1189–1191 and 1217). Unfortunately for us, he did not leave an account of these trips. Ibn Jubayr’s account of his travels is quite detailed and was well known in the centuries after its completion. In fact, his descriptions served as the basis of some of Ibn Battuta’s
description of his travels to the same places in the fourteenth century. Ibn Jubayr died in Egypt during his final journey to the east.

Further Reading

Iman/Imamate. See Caliph and Shiism

Jihad

Jihad is an Arabic noun that conveys the idea of struggle or striving. In the Qur’an jihad is often used as part of the phrase, jihad fi sabil Allah (striving in the path of God). Although most Muslim scholars regarded jihad as obligatory on all able-bodied Muslims, some even referred to it as a sixth pillar of Islam. As such, jihad in its various forms is essential to understanding daily life in the medieval Islamic world. The principal textual authorities for the Islamic doctrine of jihad are the Qur’an and the hadiths, or statements attributed to Muhammad about the subject. Hence, the doctrine of jihad is rooted in the life and practice of Muhammad and the early Islamic community in Medina.

The principal Qur’anic material on jihad is in the ninth chapter, which speaks of jihad as offensive warfare against idolaters, polytheists, and infidels (Qur’an 9:5), but also as defensive warfare against those who fight against Muhammad, his followers, and right religion in general (Qur’an 9:13–14). Although Jews and Christians are lumped in the category of polytheists at times—and hence are fair game—other passages in the Qur’an speak favorably of those among the Jews and Christians who shall see paradise (Qur’an 9:29–30). Finally, the Qur’an also informs us that the rewards awaiting those who strive in the path of God include “gardens watered by running streams, in which they shall abide forever” (Qur’an 9:87–88). In addition to these and other Qur’anic passages, Muslim scholars also appealed to a host of statements attributed to Muhammad that extolled the merits of jihad against the enemies of right religion (however defined) and the rewards that awaited those engaged in it.

Because Muhammad found himself at war with the Meccans and others after his hijra to Medina, it is easy to see the relevance of these and other statements to his immediate situations. After Muhammad’s death, his followers used these texts and others like them to form the basis for an ideology of jihad in the medieval Islamic world. They inspired many of the faithful during the Islamic conquests of the seventh century even

as others were undoubtedly inspired merely by booty and glory in battle. Once the frontiers of the new Islamic empire were more or less stabilized, from Spain in the west to the Indus River in the east, the caliphs maintained an expansionist jihad ideology by leading or ordering raids along the Syrian Byzantine frontier. Many caliphs and sultans strengthened their own religious *bona fides* by leading raids themselves. The Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid (r. 786–809) is one of the most famous to have done so.

As Islamic scholars honed their understanding of right religion, they divided the world into two broad spheres—the Abode of Islam (*dar al-Islam*; literally, the Abode of Surrender or the Abode of Submission) and the Abode of War (*dar al-harb*)—in an effort to clarify the role of jihad and warfare in Islam. The Abode of Islam comprised those territories under Islamic political domination. The Abode of War was everywhere else. Now this division of the world into two spheres did not mean that all Muslims were at all times engaged in a state of open warfare against the Abode of War. Formal truces did exist. Moreover, for purely practical reasons of inertia, military capability, and political calculation, expansion of the borders of Islam waxed and waned over time.

Nevertheless, throughout the Middle Ages Muslim armies did what all armies are supposed to do—they fought. At times they engaged in jihad to expand the borders of the Islamic world in Central Asia, India, Africa, Anatolia, and Europe. At other times Muslim armies went to war against other Muslim armies within the Islamic world to implement a particular vision of proper Islamic religion and government. This was the case in the civil wars that plagued the early Muslim community during the *Rashidun* (632–661) and the *Umayyad* caliphates (661–750). We see this also in the Abbasid Revolution in the late 740s that established the *Abbasid caliphate*, which endured until the Mongols sacked Baghdad in 1258. The Almoravids (1062–1147) and the Almohads (1130–1269) represent two major revivalist movements that employed the ideologies of jihad against what they viewed as corrupt Muslim regimes in North Africa and Spain, and against the Christian monarchs in Spain as well.

Whether the motivation for the jihads fought throughout the medieval Islamic world met medieval Muslim scholars’ standards for religious purity in every instance is beyond our ken. We do know, however, that some of those ostensibly engaged in jihad against the external enemies of Islam and internal schismatics and heretics (however defined) were little more than bandits, thugs, and soldiers of fortune—at least they are portrayed as such by many of the Muslim scholars and historians who wrote the extant sources.

In contrast to these modes of thought and action, some Muslims, especially followers of the mystical (Sufi) traditions and other more piety-minded scholars, argued that there were two types of jihad (see *Sufism*). For them, the greater jihad was that internal struggle within oneself against temptation and evil. This greater jihad is also known as the jihad of the tongue or the jihad of the pen; that is, the jihad of piety and persuasion. According to this position, military jihad was the lesser jihad, or the jihad of the sword. But it was the military vision of jihad that predominated throughout the medieval Islamic world.

**Further Reading**


Kharijis

The Kharijites (also known as Kharijites) get their name from the events of the Battle of Siffin between ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib and Mu’awiyah ibn Abi Sufyan in 656, from which they withdrew over their interpretation of how the dispute should be resolved. Hence they are known as “seceders” or Khawarij (sing. Kharij). This group disagreed with the Sunni and the Shi’i positions on the caliphate/imamate (see Shiism and Sunnis). They were purists in that their principal criteria for leadership of the community was piety—unlike the Shi’i position, genealogy did not matter to them, and unlike the Sunni position, nor did the practical consideration of maintaining the unity of the community. For the Kharijis, moral purity was far more important than temporal political unity.

Further Reading

Mamluk Sultanate

The Mamluk Sultanate dates to 1250 when the Ayyubid sultan of Egypt, Turanshah, was assassinated by some of the Mamluk units loyal to his father, Salih Ayyub, who had died in 1249. Over then next decade competing factions among the various Mamluk regiments violently sorted out their differences. In 1260, the Mamluk Sultanate defeated the Mongols at Ayn Jalut in Palestine, absorbed the remaining Ayyubid holdings in Syria. Sultan Baybars (r. 1260–1277) aggressively pursued a remarkably effective, multifaceted foreign policy to achieve his goals of fending off renewed Mongol incursions and removing the Franks from Syria. He cultivated good relations with the Golden Horde branch of the Mongol empire in Russia, which controlled the reservoir for the regime’s new Mamluk recruits and also served as a counter to the Mongol Il-Khans in Iraq and Iran with whom the Golden Horde and the Mamluks were frequently at war.

He concluded a commercial treaty with Genoa, whose merchants held a near monopoly on trade in the Black Sea. The treaty supplied the Mamluk Sultanate with new recruits who could no longer be transported by land through Il-Khan territory, but it had the added benefit of strengthening the Genoese in their competition with the Venetians. In addition, he established a commercial treaty with the Byzantine Empire, which controlled access from the Black Sea to Alexandria via Constantinople. It too had an added benefit for the Mamluk Sultanate in that it served as a counter to the Papacy’s efforts to support the Franks in Palestine. In the end, the Mamluks were able to drive the Franks from Acre in 1291, thus ending nearly two centuries of Frankish presence in the Near East. By the end of the twelfth century the Il-Khans had converted to Islam and by the 1320s were no longer a major threat to the Mamluk regime in Syria and Egypt.

Further Reading

al-Ma’mun ibn Harun al-Rashid (d. 833)

Al-Ma’mun (r. 813–833), the seventh Abbasid caliph, was a son of Harun al-Rashid (r. 786–809), al-Ma’mun was engaged in a 4-year civil war with his brother, al-Amin (r. 809–813). After al-Amin’s murder, al-Ma’mun acceded to the caliphate. Al-Ma’mun is most famous for his contributions to learning; namely, his patronage of the translation of classical Greek scientific and philosophical texts into Arabic.

Further Reading

al-Mansur (d. 775)

al-Mansur (r. 754–775) was the second Abbasid caliph. He is responsible for consolidating Abbasid authority in the wake of the success of the Abbasid revolution and the regime of his predecessor, Saffah (r. 749–754). al-Mansur determined that the movement’s consolidation phase required the establishment of a new palace city in more stable surroundings. al-Mansur searched along the Tigris River for the ideal location, and in 762 he settled on the site of the ancient Persian village of Baghdad. Part of his effort to consolidate Abbasid authority, al-Mansur pursued a policy of integrating Muslims of Persians and other ethnic backgrounds into his regime. He was also responsible for initiating the famous translation movement of classical Greek learning: mathematics, science, medicine, philosophy, and so forth.

Further Reading

Modesty. See Clothing and Modesty

Money and Coinage

Medieval Islamic rulers minted three types of coins. For the most part a gold coin was called a dinar, a silver coin was called a dirham, and a base metal coin (usually copper) was generally called a fals. There were other regional (even slang) names for the coins, but dinar, dirham, and fals were the customary terms used throughout the medieval Islamic world. Despite the common vocabulary, it would be a gross exaggeration to assert that a dirham minted under Abd al-Malik in the late seventh century had much in common with dihrams minted in eleventh-century Cairo, twelfth-century Damascus, or thirteenth-century Nishapur. Basically, the only thing they had in common was that they were (generally) all made from the same type of metal. However, unless one actually has the opportunity to examine a specific dinar (or dirham or fals), there is no way to know the quality of the metal used, the weight of the individual coin, or its value relative to other coins in circulation at the time. Because at any given time one could find merchants from Damascus, Baghdad,
Cairo, Cordoba, Isfahan, Tashkent, Bukhara, Delhi, Constantinople, and a host of other Afro-Eurasian cities in the markets of the medieval Islamic world, one of the most important men in any market was the sayrafi, usually translated as money-changer. But his job entailed far more than simply making change; it was also to determine the precise value of a coin, especially foreign coins that traveling merchants needed to exchange for Islamic issues.

The standard way for a sayrafi to determine the value of a coin was to measure its bullion content by weighing the coin itself. Because weighing individual coins was a rather tedious and time-consuming affair, it was standard practice for coins to be bought and sold in purses that were sealed by a government assaying office or a local merchant with the exact weight indicated on the outside. It should be noted that though the seal on a purse might indicate that its value was 76 dinars, it did not necessarily follow that the purse held 76 gold coins. It could very well contain 80 dinars, some of which were worn, gouged, cut, nicked, and so forth, reducing the purse’s total weight (and hence its value) by four dinars.

Further Reading

**Mu’awiyah ibn Abi Sufyan (d. 680)**

Mu’awiyah ibn Abi Sufyan (r. 661–680) was the son of Abu Sufyan, the leader of the Abd Shams clan, most of which had rejected Muhammad’s prophetic mission. It was only after Muhammad’s conquest of Mecca in 630 that Mu’awiyah, Abu Sufyan, and other members of the clan submitted to Muhammad. Mu‘awiyah then served as one of Muhammad’s scribes. Shortly after the conquest of Syria, Umar ibn al-Khattab appointed Mu‘awiyah governor of Syria, a position he held until he consolidated his control over the lands of Islam in the wake of the assassination of the fourth Rashidun caliph, ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib (656–661).

Mu’awiyah moved the capital of the Islamic empire to Damascus, continued raiding along the Byzantine frontier, and renewed the expansion to North Africa in the west and Iran to the east. The importance of Mu‘awiyah’s role in holding the new Islamic empire together cannot be overstated. Near the end of his reign Mu‘awiyah arranged for the succession of his son, Yazid, which marked the establishment of the first hereditary dynasty in Islamic history.

Further Reading

**al-Muqaddasi (c. 945–c. 1000)**

The details of al-Muqaddasi’s life are fairly sketchy. Most of what we know about him is derived from his pioneering work in the fields of physical, economic, political, and human geography: *The Best Divisions for Knowledge of the
Regions: Ahsan al-taqasim fi ma’rifat al-aqalim. We do know that he undertook the pilgrimage in 966 and spent the next 20 years traveling. As he criss-crossed the Islamic world from Morocco to the frontiers of Sind, he made the pilgrimage two more times—in 977 and 987. He is careful to record material praising the merits (fada’il) of each province and is fond of detailed descriptions of their topography and climate as well as the agricultural produce, manufactured goods, and items imported to and exported from their markets. As a native of Jerusalem (Bayt al-Muqaddas or Bayt al-Maqdis; hence the nisba al-Muqaddasi), his descriptions of his hometown and province and the province of Syria are especially detailed. See also Documents 6 and 7.

Further Reading

Naser-e Khosraw (fl. eleventh century)

The particulars of Naser-e Khosraw’s life are fairly scanty. We do know that in the fall of 1045 he had a dream that convinced him that he was on the wrong path. He left his career as a civil administrator in Khurasan and undertook a personal quest for truth, which involved making the pilgrimage to Mecca. His conversion to Ismaili Shiism probably coincided with his desire to undertake the pilgrimage for although he eventually made it to Mecca, he took a circuitous route to the Hijaz. He avoided most of the major cities of his day (including Damascus) but visited many Ismaili outposts along his journey through Iran, Syria, Egypt and back home. Of particular concern for our purposes are his sojourns in Cairo, the capital of the Ismaili Fatimid caliphate, and Jerusalem, which was nominally under Fatimid control at the time of his visit. In addition, Naser-e Khosraw’s civil administrator’s eye for detail resulted in an account full of meticulous descriptions of the markets, civil infrastructure, and public ceremonies he observed during his seven-year trip. See also Document 8.

Further Reading

Nizam al-Mulk (d. 1092)

Nizam al-Mulk served as the chief minister for two of the greatest Seljukid Sultans, Alp Arslan (r. 1063–1073) and his son, Malikshah (r. 1073–1092). Nizam al-Mulk is probably most famous for his Book of Government or Rules for Kings, a lengthy treatise that is essentially a handbook for how to rule justly and to maintain order in the realm, which is a recasting of the ancient Persian theory of kingship with an Islamic veneer. Hence scholars, refer to it as Perso-Islamic kingship. Nizam al-Mulk was murdered in 1092 by the Ismaili Assassins, who were the bane of the Seljukids and many other regimes in the Middle Ages. See also Document 9.

Further Reading
**Rashidun Caliphs**

According to the Sunni tradition, the first four caliphs or successors of Muhammad—Abu Bakr, Umar ibn al-Khattab, Uthman ibn Affan, and ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib—were the rightly guided (rashidun) caliphs. All four men belonged to the Meccan tribe of Quraysh, were early converts, and were close companions of Muhammad. The Sunnis consider the period of their rule (632–661) to be a golden age, when the caliphs were consciously guided by Muhammad’s practices.

**Further Reading**


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**Saladin (d. 1193)**

In 1169, Saladin participated in the conquest of Egypt on behalf of his patron, Nur ad-Din Zengid, ruler of Syria. Two years later, Saladin was finally able to bring an end to the Fatimid caliphate in Cairo. Not surprisingly, as Saladin consolidated his control over Egypt, his relations with his patron, Nur al-Din, worsened. The inevitable clash between the two men was avoided when Nur al-Din died of a heart attack while playing polo in 1174. Saladin then spent the next decade consolidating his control over Nur al-Din’s former lands in Syria.

Under Saladin’s leadership, Egypt and Syria were ruled as a family confederation, with members of his extended family administering various provinces throughout the realm. Saladin is most famous for having dealt the Franks a decisive defeat at the Battle of Hattin in 1187 and retaking Jerusalem shortly thereafter. Named after Saladin’s father, Ayyub (Job), the Ayyubid family confederation (1174–1260) ruled Syria and Egypt from Saladin’s death in 1193 until the Egyptian branch of the family was overthrown in 1250 by some of its Mamluks. Ten years later, the Mamluk Sultanate defeated the Mongols at Ayn Jalut in Palestine, absorbed the Ayyubid holdings in Syria.
Compared to the Torah (especially Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy), the Qur’an contains very little legal material. Qur’anic commandments, prohibitions, and punishments are quite specific; however, they do not even come close to covering the many possibilities Muslims might encounter in seventh-century Arabia, let alone the cosmopolitan centers of the Muslim empires in the centuries to come. If the early Muslim community was to determine God’s will in every aspect of life after the divine revelations ceased with Muhammad’s death, it needed to find authoritative guidance outside the text of the Qur’an itself. Initially, this was found in the practice or tradition (sunna) of the early community. Because the early community (especially the early community in Medina) was seen to be the best community by virtue of its first-hand encounter with the messenger of God, its example could be used to answer questions that were not specifically addressed in the Qur’an.

Although assertion of Muhammad’s infallibility is nowhere to be found in the Qur’an, by the late eighth century a doctrine had developed that Muhammad and all the prophets had been protected by God from gross moral error (masum). One of the most important early legal scholars, Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi‘i (d. 820), argued that because of Muhammad’s moral perfection, his sunna was the only reliable guide to right conduct apart from the Qur’an. According to al-Shafi‘i, because Muhammad’s teachings and example were necessarily preserved from error, all Muslims could confidently rely upon his sunna for guidance. Of course, this assertion only begs the question—what was Muhammad’s sunna? According to al-Shafi‘i, Muhammad’s sunna could be found in those hadiths (reports about what Muhammad said or did) that were determined to be authentic.

Not surprisingly, as the sunna of the early community and Muhammad came to be seen as authoritative, many hadiths were put into circulation that purported to be the words of Muhammad but were in fact made up of whole cloth for political and sectarian purposes. In response to these fabrications, scholars devised a methodology for determining which hadiths were authentic and which were fabrications. Scholars began to argue that only those hadiths that were transmitted by an unbroken chain (isnad) of reliable transmitters reaching back to Muhammad himself could be deemed authentic.

Scholars were well aware that it was just as easy to fabricate an isnad as it was to fabricate a hadith. Nevertheless, by the end of the ninth century there had emerged a general consensus about which hadiths were authentic. By the same time, the followers of a given teacher began to refer to themselves as a madhab, another Arabic word conveying the idea of pathway. Madhab is generally translated as “school of law,” in the sense of a “school of legal thought.” By the eleventh century, there remained only four Sunni madhhabes to speak of (Hanafi, Hanbali, Maliki, Shafi‘i). Each was named after the scholar whose
teaching the madhhab ostensibly followed, though none had actually founded a formal school in his lifetime.

The science of working out the shari’a can be divided into two basic categories: legal theory (usul al-fiqh, the roots of jurisprudence) and the practical application of the theory (furu al-fiqh, branches of jurisprudence). Because knowledge of the Qur’an and the sunna of Muhammad were essential to the sciences of jurisprudence, and because proper jurisprudence was essential to determining what it meant to “obey God and His messenger,” the entire religious educational system of the period was based on memorizing the Qur’an as well as thousands of these hadiths along with their isnads.

Scholars employed (at least in theory) a five-step process to determine whether a given practice was acceptable.

1. If the Qur’an specifically commanded or prohibited something, there really was nothing to discuss; God had spoken.
2. If the Qur’an addressed an issue, but without specific guidance, scholars turned to the sunna of Muhammad for clarification of the Qur’anic commandment. For example, Muslims are admonished repeatedly in the Qur’an to pray; however, it is only because of the sunna of Muhammad that Muslims know that they are required to pray five times per day, to perform specific ablutions and in which order, and to perform certain prostrations and in which order.
3. Since Muhammad is understood to have been preserved from gross moral error, if an authentic hadith spoke specifically to an issue not addressed in the Qur’an, Muslims could be assured that if they followed the admonition of that hadith, they would be acting in obedience to God.
4. When neither the Qur’an nor the sunna addressed an issue, scholars argued that they had to employ their reason to extrapolate the proper response based on the principles set forth in the Qur’an and the sunna as a whole. Since most aspects of life are in this category, and since this category is most open to interpretation, it is to this category that the scholars devoted most of their energies and their arguments. In fact, they developed a range of classifications of reasoning which could be employed in this enterprise. Not surprisingly, scholars did not always agree on which methods of reasoning (if any) were legitimate.
5. Sunni scholars used the principle of consensus (ijma) to determine whether a doctrine or decision was legitimate in these instances. This principle of consensus is rooted in a hadith in which Muhammad is purported to have said that his community would never agree upon an error. In practical terms, Sunni scholars identified the community as themselves, since whenever there was no Sunni scholar of good repute holding a contrary position on a particular issue, the problem was generally considered settled.

Modern Western scholars tend to be skeptical about the authenticity of even the hadiths in the authoritative collections. Often, they are skeptical about when or even if the methodology described above was actually employed or whether it was simply used after the fact to legitimate practices and decisions that were really rooted in Arabian tribal custom or in the local practice of Medina, Kufa, Basra, Damascus, Baghdad, or elsewhere. In any case, it is clear that the formal positions of the shari’a reflect the life of the towns and cities in the medieval
Islamic world, for it is in the urban centers that the scholars were studying the religious sciences and articulating the details of the *shari'a* in response to the questions that arose in the urban environments in which they lived.

Moreover, it was in the urban centers that there were actual judges (*qadis*) and the mechanisms to enforce judges' decisions. In the countryside and among the pastoral nomadic groups, the at times arcane details of the *shari'a* tended to take a back seat to local custom. In these circumstances, a person was helpless to contest a violation of *shari'a* because there was no judge to hear his or her case nor was there anyone to enforce it. If there was an Islamic “scholar” there, he most likely was an ill-educated preacher who was not well versed in the intricate details of Islamic jurisprudence.

Whether or not the methodology of jurisprudence described here was actually employed consistently or even at all is difficult to ascertain. However, the fact that it (or some other methodology ostensibly based on the authoritative scriptures of Islam) was supposed to be employed illustrates the importance that Muslims attached to following the dictates of the Qur'an and the teachings of Muhammad in their daily lives. In short, the *shari'a* in all its manifestations gives us insight into daily life and practice in the medieval Islamic world because it was understood to comprise the entire body of duties and obligations incumbent on all believers covering every imaginable aspect of daily life. It is that straight path by which medieval Muslims believed they could (and modern Muslims believe they can) obey God and His messenger.

**Further Reading**


**Shiism**

There are two basic doctrines that developed among the Shi‘is. First, the rightful caliph or imam had to be a lineal descendant of Muhammad, in particular through the line of ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib and Muhammad’s daughter, Fatima. The second, and more controversial, is that the caliph or imam was not only the political head of the community, but an infallible religious teacher—guaranteed to be without error in matters of faith and morals. Because of this emphasis on the religious and theological role of the head of the community, Shi‘i texts tend to use the title imam for this office more frequently than caliph (*Khalifah*) or commander of the believers (*Amir al-Mu‘minin*). The Twelver and the Sevener Shi‘is agree on these two doctrines; where they disagree is over the identity of the seventh imam.

The Shi‘i doctrine of the imamate is based on the events of 18 Dhu l-Hijja A.H. 10 (March 16, 632 A.D./C.E.). According to the biographical literature, Muhammad stopped at a place called Ghadir Khumm (Pool of Khumm) on his way back to Medina after he had made his final pilgrimage to Mecca. His followers gathered in a grove of trees to escape the suffocating heat and to perform the noon prayers. At the conclusion of the prayers, Muhammad raised Ali’s hand in front of the assembly and asked them if they recognized that he, Muhammad,
Shiite martyrs fallen in battle being decapitated by the enemy in the presence of their wives. Scene from the schism within Islam (7th c.). Safavid fresco, 17th century. SEF/Art Resource.

had a claim on each of the believers that supersedes any claim they might have on themselves. They, of course, responded in the affirmative. He then took Ali’s hand again and said, “Of Whomsoever I am Lord [Mawla], then Ali is also his Lord. O God! Be Thou the supporter of whoever supports Ali and the enemy of whoever opposes him.” **Umar ibn al-Khattab** then said to Ali, “Congratulations, O son of Abu Talib! Now morning and evening [i.e., forever] you are the master of every believing man and woman” (Momen, 15).

Because the version cited above comes from Ibn Hanbal’s (d. 855) *Musnad*, a Sunni hadith collection, it is clear that the Sunni tradition does not deny that the events of Ghadir Khumm actually occurred. Where they differ, and differ significantly, is on the interpretation of the event itself. According to Shi’i doctrine, the above story proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that not only had Muhammad designated ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib and his descendants to succeed him upon his death (which occurred only 3 months later on 13 Rabi’ al-Awal A.H. 11/8 June 632 A.D./C.E.), but also that he had bestowed his own political and religious authority on them as well. Although **Sunnis** afford Ali a tremendous amount of respect and prestige as an early convert, as Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law, and as the fourth of the **Rashidun** or rightly guided caliphs, they simply reject the Shi’i interpretation of the events of Ghadir Khumm altogether.

As things turned out, Muhammad’s close companion and father-in-law, **Abu Bakr** (r. 632–634), became the first caliph. He was followed by two more
companions, Umar ibn al-Khattab (r. 634–644) and Uthman ibn Affan (r. 644–656). After Uthman’s assassination, ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib (r. 656–661) became caliph/imam. However, the entirety of his caliphate/imamate was disrupted by the first civil war in Islamic history (656–661), ultimately ending in his assassination at the hands of a Khariji dissident. Based on the Shi‘i interpretation of the events of Ghadir Khumm, Ali was the first legitimate caliph or imam; the first three caliphs—Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman—were usurpers.

According to Shi‘i tradition, the imamate then passed to Ali’s eldest son, Hasan ibn ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib (d. 669). However, Hasan abdicated his claim to the caliphate in 661 and did not oppose Mu‘awiya ibn Abi Sufyan (r. 661–680), who established the Umayyad caliphate (661–750) with Damascus as its capital. Despite Hasan’s abdication, there remained a faction (shi‘a) of Muslims who continued to argue that only someone from Muhammad’s house (in particular a descendant of Ali) could legitimately lead the Muslim community. Shortly after Yazid acceded to the caliphate (r. 680–683), Ali’s younger son, Husayn ibn ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib (the third imam), was persuaded to leave his home in the Hijaz and to travel to Kufa to lead a revolt and to take his rightful place at the head of the Muslim community. On 10 Muharram 61 (October 10, 680), Umayyad forces routed Husayn and seventy-two armed men (together with their women and children) at Karbala. The victors beheaded Husayn and his companions and put their heads on pikes as they marched to Kufa. The women and children were taken prisoner, including Husayn’s sole surviving son, Ali, who had been too ill to participate in the battle.

As was customary, Husayn’s head was sent to the caliph Yazid in Damascus as proof that Husayn was indeed dead. Some reports indicate that Yazid was saddened by the death of Muhammad’s grandson. Others suggest that he treated Husayn’s head with contempt as he poked at Husayn’s mouth with his cane, for which he was immediately taken to task by Abu Barzah al-Aslami, a companion of Muhammad.

Are you poking the mouth of al-Husayn with your cane? Take your cane away from his mouth. How often have I seen the Apostle of God kiss it! As for you, Yazid, you will come forward on the Day of Resurrection, and Ibn Ziyad will be your advocate. But this man will come forward on the Day of Resurrection, and Muhammad will be his advocate. (al-Tabari, 174)

Husayn’s head was returned to his dependants who buried it. But where? His head has a place of honor in the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. Another tradition says that it was buried in Ashkelon where the Fatimids built a shrine in 1098. During the Crusader period it was disinterred and moved to Cairo (1153) where it is venerated to this day at the Husayn Mosque. There are other traditions that state that Husayn’s head was interred in Medina, Kufa, Najaf, Karbala, Raqqa on the upper Euphrates, and even in distant Merv in Afghanistan.

With Husayn’s martyrdom, the imamate passed to his son, Ali, and then continued to be passed on from father to son as each imam designated his successor. The most important imam after ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib is Ja‘far al-Sadiq (d. 765), the sixth imam. He was renowned for his piety and learning, and many of those who studied at his feet went on to be learned scholars and jurists. Ja‘far designated his son, Isma‘il (d. 754), to succeed him as the seventh imam upon his death. However, because Isma‘il died before his father did, the question of
who should succeed Ja’far was contested. One faction contended that the
imamate had passed to Isma’il’s son, Muhammad. This faction came to be called
Seveners or Ismailis.

The other faction argued that the imamate should continue through Isma’il’s
brother, Musa (d. 799), whom they consider to be the seventh imam. The mem-
bers of this faction (known as Twelvers or Imamis) believe that when the elev-
enth imam, Hasan al-Askari died in 873 or 874, he was succeeded by his son,
Muhammad, as the twelfth imam. Moreover, the Twelvers believe that Mu-
hammad did not die; rather, he went into occultation; that is, he was and still
is present in some hidden form, and that at the appointed time (which of course
we cannot know) he will return as the Mahdi (or Messiah). See “Twelver Shi’i
Imams” in Appendix under Medieval Islamic Caliphs.

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Sufism—Islamic Mysticism

Islamic mystics were called Sufis because of their habit of wearing wool
(suf). The Arabic term for mysticism (tasawwuf) is derived from suf as well. The
development of Sufism, like the development of shari’a, is rooted in the search
for the proper understanding of right religion. At the risk of oversimplifica-
tion, the shari’a-minded vision of the religious scholars and jurists described
above defined Islam as a “religion of law” based on the meticulous study of
the Qur’an and hadith. The Sufi-minded vision of the mystics and ascetics
defined Islam as a “religion of the heart” based on the individual’s direct en-
counter with and knowledge of God. In other words, the shari’a-minded and
the Sufi-minded sought to answer the question of how knowledge is defined—
knowledge about God based on what he has revealed of himself through his
prophets and messengers; and knowledge of God based on one’s direct mysti-
cal experience.

In his The Sufi Orders in Islam, J. Spencer Trimingham divided the develop-
ment of Sufism into three broad periods. During the first period, what Trim-
ingham calls the “golden age of mysticism” or khanaqah (lodge) period, Sufism
was an intellectually and emotionally aristocratic movement. It was character-
ized by an ad hoc master-disciple (murshid-murid) relationship in which mas-
ters guided their disciples on a personal quest to experience God directly. Early
Sufis often lived itinerant lives, but by the tenth century we begin to see
the establishment of informal lodges (khanaqahs) and convents (zawiyas) where
masters and disciples pursued mystical union (wahda) with God.

During the second period (c. 1100–1400) Sufi rituals and practices came to be
characterized by more formal and clearly defined devotional “paths” or “ways”
(tariqas). Consequently, the emphasis was less on the individual’s surrender to God and more on his surrender to a specific rule. It was at the beginning of this “tariqa period” that al-Ghazali (d. 1111) composed his magnum opus, *The Revivification of the Religious Sciences*. The third period (c. 1400–1800) is beyond the chronological scope of this book. But it is worth noting that during the fifteenth century Sufism became an even more organized mass popular movement. Whatever the period or method, the goal of the Sufi remained the same—to know the ecstasy of the direct experience and knowledge of God.

There are separate Arabic words to define the types of knowledge that concern us here. The cognitive or “head” knowledge of the shari’a-minded religious scholars is known as *‘ilm*. The affective or “heart” knowledge of the Sufi-minded mystics is known as *ma’rifah*, or gnosis. Hence, one who knows about God based on the study of revelation and religious texts (Qur’an, hadith, *fiqh*, etc.) is known as an *‘alim* (pl. *‘ulama’*). One who has direct experience or knowledge of God is known as an *‘arif*. Of course, it would be incorrect to imagine that the shari’a-minded and Sufi-minded visions of Islam were mutually exclusive. Rather, they should be seen as emphases, even tendencies, along a broad spectrum of religious experience and practice in the medieval Islamic world.

Nevertheless, it should come as no surprise that extremes of the spectrum did exist. Some religious scholars condemned the more ecstatic mystical strains of Islam as departures from the true faith as defined by the commandments and prohibitions of shari’a. Some Sufis gave them reason to be suspicious by arguing that shari’a constrained, even inhibited, their superior existential knowledge of God. The most famous of these is the Sufi icon, al-Hallaj (857–922). Originally from Tus in Iran, al-Hallaj moved to Basra in his early twenties. It was in Basra and Baghdad that he made his mark as a popular ascetic and preacher.

Al-Hallaj’s declarations of his burning love of and his claims of mystical union with God ignited popular passions as well as scholarly ire. He is most famous for a brief statement he made one day in Baghdad to the great Sufi master, al-Junayd (d. 910).

It is related that Hallaj met Junayd one day, and said to him, “I am the Truth [*ana al-haqq*].” “No,” Junayd answered him, “it is by means of the Truth that you are! What gibbet will you stain with your blood!” (Massignon, *The Passion of al-Hallaj*, 1:127)

By claiming one of God’s titles (*al-haqq*; “The Truth” or “The Ultimate Reality”) as his own, al-Hallaj was claiming to be God; that is, that he had no other “I” than God. Many of his opponents viewed his claims as blasphemous. At best, they viewed him as a vile charlatan.
In 913, al-Hallaj was arrested. He remained in a Baghdad prison for 9 years where he preached to his fellow prisoners and is said to have healed the sick as well as performed other wonders. In the end, al-Hallaj’s supporters within the Abbasid house were unable to protect him. In March 922, he was executed on charges of blasphemy. His modern biographer, Louis Massignon, described his execution before a great crowd near the Khurasan Gate in Baghdad.

Al-Halladj, with a crown on his head was beaten, half-killed, and exposed, still alive, on a gibbet (salib). While rioters set fire to the shops, friends and enemies questioned him as he hung on the gibbet and traditions related some of his replies. The caliph’s warrant for his decapitation did not arrive until nightfall, and in fact his final execution was postponed until the next day. During the night there spread accounts of wonders and supernatural happenings. In the morning . . . those who had signed his condemnation . . . cried out: “It is for Islam; let his blood be on our heads.” Al-Halladj’s head fell, his body was sprinkled with oil and burned and the ashes thrown into the Tigris from the top of a minaret (27 March 922). Witnesses reported that the last words of the tortured man were: “All that matters for the ec-static is that the Unique should reduce him to Unity.” (Massignon, “al-Halladj”)

Al-Hallaj’s execution may have curtailed some of the excesses of the Sufis, but his life and teachings continued to inspire Sufis for generations. Based on the teachings of al-Hallaj, al-Junayd, and many other early Sufis, Kalabadhi (d. 995) argued in the late-tenth century that Sufism conforms to the strictest standards of orthodoxy and is in no way heretical. According to Kalabadhi’s translator, A. J. Arberry, Kalabadhi’s *The Doctrine of the Sufis* blazed “a path which was subsequently to be followed by the Sufi who was the greatest theologian of all: Ghazali (d. 1111), whose *The Revivification of the Religious Sciences* finally reconciled scholastic and mystic” (Arberry, xiv). Hence, it would be a mistake to argue that Sufis were necessarily anti-intellectual or antinomian as some of their critics charged; rather, the Sufi attitude toward the intellect was that it “is an instrument of servanthood, not a means of approaching lordship” (Arberry, 51). That is, though the intellect is sufficient for determining what human beings, as God’s servants, must perform in submission (*islam*) to God (for example, *shari’a*), it is insufficient as a guide to existential or mystical knowledge (*ma’rifa*) of God.

In his chapter titled “Their Doctrine of the Gnosis of God,” Kalabadhi argued that “no man knows God, save he who possesses an intellect, for the intellect is the instrument by means of which man knows whatever he may know; nevertheless, he cannot know God of himself” (Arberry, 54–55). In the same chapter, Kalabadhi illustrates the inadequacies of the intellect with a poem by al-Hallaj:

Whoso seeks God, and takes the intellect for guide,  
God drives him forth, in vain distraction to abide;  
With wild confusion He confounds his inmost heart,  
So that distraught, he cries, “I know not if Thou art.” (Arberry, 52)

He appeals to al-Hallaj again as he argues that human beings can only know God if God chooses to reveal himself to them:

God made us to know Himself through Himself, and guided us to the knowledge of Himself through Himself, so that the attestation of gnosis arose out of gnosis through gnosis, after he who possessed gnosis had been taught gnosis by Him Who is the object of gnosis. (Arberry, 54)
Of course, unless one is mystically inclined, statements such as this are impenetrably obtuse, even nonsensical. Moreover, as evidenced by al-Hallaj’s fate, they were far too fuzzy and malleable for the tastes of many of the shari’a-minded religious scholars.

Further Reading

Sunnis

The Sunnis represent the majority of Muslims in the premodern and modern worlds. The name Sunni is derived from the formal title of this group—ahl al-sunna wa l-jama’a (people of tradition and community consensus). Obviously, every faction in early Islamic history believed that it was the true representatives of the “people of tradition and community consensus.” The theological and political faction called Sunni emerged in the context of the early centuries of Islamic history.

As the community sorted out what it viewed were the criteria for leadership of the community, the Sunni position became based on pragmatic considerations of leadership and accommodation to the realities of who actually held the office rather than the Shi’i position that argued for lineal descent from the line of ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib (see Shiism). At the risk of oversimplification, one of the highest values of the Sunni community was the maintenance of the broad unity of the umma. As such, the general position that developed among Sunni theorists was that the caliph needed only to be good enough politically to do the job and maintain the unity of the entire community. Hence, the Sunnis are often referred to as “caliphal loyalists.”

Further Reading

Umar ibn al-Khattab (d. 644)

Umar ibn al-Khattab was a close confidant of Muhammad and the second of the Rashidun caliphs (r. 634–644) according to the Sunni tradition. According to the Shi’i tradition, ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib (r. 656–661) was Muhammad’s rightful
successor (see Shiism). The first wave of major expansion of the Islamic empire—Syria, Iraq, Iran, Egypt—occurred during his caliphate. Umar was stabbed by a disgruntled slave and on his death bed appointed a committee (shura) to select his successor. The committee selected Uthman ibn Affan (r. 644–656). See also Document 2.

Further Reading

Umayyad Caliphate (661–750)

The first Umayyad caliph was the third Rashidun caliph, Uthman ibn Affan (644–656), who was assassinated by Egyptian rebels. Uthman was succeeded by Muhammad’s paternal cousin and son-in-law, ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib (656–661), who was also assassinated, this time by a Khariji dissident. In the wake of Ali’s assassination the governor of Syria, Mu’awiyah ibn Abi Sufyan (a kinsman of Uthman), consolidated his control over the lands of Islam. His son Yazid’s succession marks the establishment of the first hereditary dynasty: the Umayyad caliphate that ruled from Damascus. With the conclusion of the first civil war (656–661) and Mu’awiyah’s consolidation of his position in Syria, Islamic expansion was renewed—in Iran, Central Asia, and Sind to the east as well as in North Africa and Spain in the west.

Further Reading

Uthman ibn Affan (d. 656)

Uthman ibn Affan was close confidant of Muhammad and the third of the Rashidun caliphs (r. 644–656) according to the Sunni tradition. According to the Shi’i tradition, ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib (r. 656–661) was Muhammad’s rightful successor (see Shiism).
Uthman belonged to the powerful Umayyad clan, which had long played the leading role in Mecca and which was among Muhammad’s strongest opponents. Uthman was one of the few members of this clan to embrace Muhammad’s mission, one of the first converts, and after his conversion married two of Muhammad’s daughters—Rukayya and Umm Kulthum. The committee that Umar appointed on his deathbed selected Uthman as his successor. The Islamic tradition records that under Uthman’s leadership, the text of the Qur’an was standardized. The tradition divides Uthman’s caliphate into 6 years of good rule followed by 6 years of bad rule. Many of the principal complaints were based on his appointment of fellow Umayyad clan members to high positions in his administration. In the end, a group of rebels from Egypt assassinated Uthman. ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib’s (r. 656–661) succession to the caliphate was fraught with discord—fitna—also known as the first civil war.

Further Reading

Warfare
The year after his arrival in Medina, Muhammad engaged in a number of small-scale raids (razzia) against Meccan caravans, most of which were unsuccessful. The purpose of these raids appears to have been to obtain booty for the emigrants to Medina, but also to annoy, even provoke a fight with, his enemies in Mecca for their rejection of him and his message. The Islamic historiographical tradition records that Muhammad participated in at least twenty-seven campaigns and deputized at least fifty-nine others during the last 10 years of his life. It is no wonder that Muhammad’s earliest biographers refer to this period as “the raids” (al-maghazi). Obviously, his strategy was successful because by the time he died in 632 Muhammad had subjected Medina, Mecca, the Hijaz, and much of Arabia to his political and religious authority. It should be noted that women occasionally took up arms themselves in seventh-century Arabia. However, they much more often served as the moral voice of the tribe, beating tambourines and drums to incite their men to battle. We also see them serving as battlefield nurses, caring for the dead and wounded.

Whether in relatively minor raids, in pitched battles among archers, infantry, cavalry, or when one side laid siege to another, combatants generally were outfitted with similar body armor and weapons. The sources employ a range of vocabulary to describe military equipment, which included coats of mail, helmets, shields, swords, spears, lances, knives, iron maces, bows, arrows, and (after being on the receiving end of it during the naval siege of Constantinople in the 670s) Greek fire, also known as liquid fire (naft). Of course, because each person was expected to provision himself, only the wealthiest were outfitted completely. For example, despite its critical role as body armor, only a small percentage of soldiers could actually afford a coat of mail given the great
expense and craftsmanship involved in producing one. In fact, seven decades after Muhammad’s death (704), the province of Khurasan in northeastern Iran had a military force of some fifty-thousand men, but only 350 coats of mail.

Helmets were crucial for protection as well. Many were constructed with pieces of mail or other fabric that hung down from the back to protect the neck. There is even the occasional mention of helmets with nose guards. It should come as no surprise that some fought without helmets for reasons of expense. Swords were the principal weapons employed at that time. They were straight, hilted, and carried on straps around the shoulder or waist. The earliest evidence of curved swords or scimitars is from the ninth century and among the soldiers in Khurasan. A great deal is made of swords in early Arabic literature; the best swords came from India, followed by those made in Yemen and Syria after the Indian fashion. Given the number of stories of severed legs, arms, hands, and heads, these swords appear to have been put to use effectively. Very few early Islamic swords have actually survived, but those that have correspond to the descriptions in our sources as about forty inches in length, 2½ to 3 inches in width, and 3 pounds in weight.

Most battles were fought among infantry and archers, in part because of the general paucity of horses. However, it is clear that horses were critically important to those who had them. Because of their scarcity and importance, horses tended to be led to battle and only mounted when hostilities broke out. Horses were outfitted with some sort of protection as well, but it is not clear what it was at this early stage. We do know that in the Umayyad period (661–750) a heavy felt armor was widely used, but there is no evidence that horses were outfitted with mail or any other sort of metallic armor until the tenth century along the Byzantine frontier (by Byzantine and Muslim forces), and even then it was quite rare. Given the scarcity of coats of mail among soldiers, one can assume that it was even more expensive to outfit one’s horse in such a fashion at that early date.

In the process of the early Islamic conquests, Muslim armies captured far more horses than were available to them in Arabia. They also adopted new equipment as a result of their encounters. One of the principal innovations borrowed from the Persians in the late seventh century was the iron stirrup. Leather loop stirrups were not unknown in Arabia, and mounted archers were very effective even without the benefit of stirrups at all. In any case, as Hugh N. Kennedy argued, the adoption of the iron stirrup in the late seventh century “gave the mounted warrior greater stability and encouraged the widespread use of the mounted archer and the replacement of infantry by cavalry as the dominant force on the battlefield by the early third/ninth century” (Kennedy, 173).

The early Muslim armies laid siege to cities and even took refuge behind fortifications such as the trench dug by Muhammad at Medina in 627. However, during the conquest period as well as during the Umayyad and early Abbasid caliphates, many preferred to fight in the open and found that fighting from behind walls was too restrictive. Others even deemed it dishonorable to seek refuge behind walls. When the early Muslim armies actually deployed siege engines and other techniques of siege warfare, it tended to be against non-Muslim fortresses along the frontiers, though there were two major sieges of Baghdad in the ninth century during the civil war between Harun al-Rashid’s (r. 786–809) two sons, al-Amin ibn Harun al-Rashid (r. 809–813) and al-Ma’mun ibn Harun al-Rashid (r. 813–833).
By the early ninth century, cavalry had replaced infantry as the dominant force on the battlefield in the Islamic world. Infantry units continued to be used and used effectively, but it was the mounted archer that was now and would continue to be the core of any effective fighting force. Also, by the early ninth century the Mamluk institution was established as a means of recruiting and training elite cavalry units, largely comprising mounted archers who had been enslaved as young boys and raised to the profession of arms. Although there is evidence that some Mamluks of Iranian origin were employed in the late Umayyad and early Abbasid periods, the Abbasid caliph al-Mu’tasim (r. 833–842) is credited with establishing the first effective Mamluk corps with the encouragement of his brother al-Ma’mun (r. 813–833). Al-Mu’tasim’s predominantly Turkish Mamluk troops represent a major change in the Abbasid military structure. No longer would the military be made up largely of men who could trace their lineage to the Arabian Peninsula. Rather, it would increasingly be the preserve of ethnic minorities such as Turks, Berbers, Armenians, Daylamis, and others recruited from the fringes of the empire. Al-Mu’tasim even built a new city—Samarra—to house his new troops. Located some 80 miles north of Baghdad on the Tigris, Samarra served as the Abbasid capital to the late ninth century.

Although the preferred route for developing Mamluk regiments was to purchase boys and to train them in barracks apart from the rest of society in the sciences of horsemanship, warfare, and religion, some adults were incorporated into Mamluk regiments, especially during the early years of the institution. According to Islamic law, a free person could only be enslaved if he was a non-Muslim and resided outside the Abode of Islam; that is, in the Abode of War. Hence, military slaves were recruited from peoples who lived on the fringes of the Abode of Islam—sub-Saharan Africans, Eastern Europeans, Greeks, Armenians, Circassians, Indians, and so forth. However, the preferred practice was to purchase boys from the slave markets along the Central Asian frontier north of the Oxus River. Although these boys were generally referred to as Turks, many were not actually ethnic Turks in the modern sense of the word. Nevertheless, the term *turk* functioned as a kind of shorthand for anyone who was a pastoral nomad from the Central Asian steppe, and it was this steppe that served as a vast military reservoir for many of the regimes in the medieval Islamic world.

From the outset, purchasing Turkish boys had at least three advantages for their ustadh. First, given the high rates of infant mortality in the prevaccination age of the medieval Islamic world, to purchase children at a younger age was simply a bad investment. However, once a boy had reached 10 to 12 years of age, had survived his childhood diseases, and had built up considerable immunities, he was very likely to live a relatively long and healthy life. Second, because these boys were taken from their homes and families at such young ages, they were still quite amenable to the kind of training designed to produce an elite force of mounted warriors with a high level of esprit de corps and intense loyalty to their ustadh. Finally, it was widely believed at the time that Turks were by nature tough and loyal, but also superior horsemen and archers. Therefore, because the goal was to produce elite mounted warriors, purchasing Turkish boys who already were quite skilled in horsemanship and archery by the time they were 10 to 12 years old was a pragmatic policy and saved an ustadh considerable effort and expense with respect to basic training in the necessary skills.
One of the clear strengths of the Mamluk system was that it produced superb cavalry forces that were intensely loyal to one another as well as to their ustadh. This strength also proved to be a weakness, in large part because the loyalty that Mamluks felt toward their ustadh did not always transfer to their sons upon their death. Although it was the ustadh who made the Mamluks, in many fundamental ways it was the Mamluks who made the son. An early and dramatic example of this was when some of the Abbasid Turkish troops assassinated the Abbasid Caliph al-Mutawakkil in December 861 because they felt that their positions of privilege under al-Mutawakkil’s father (al-Mu’tasim) were threatened.

The ethnic shift within the Abbasid army that began under al-Mu’tasim’s largely Turkish Mamluk experiment in the early ninth century moved into high gear in the late tenth century as free Muslim Turkish pastoral nomadic warriors (Turkomans) migrated into the eastern territories of the caliphate. Some of the Turkomans migrated to the northwest and pursued their nomadic raiding practices along the Byzantine frontier. For the Byzantines, these Turkomans were nothing but bandits and genuinely threatened their territory and subjects. The Turkomans, on the other hand, legitimated their raiding and pillaging in eastern and central Anatolia as the righteous work of holy warriors (ghazis) engaged in jihad against the Byzantines. After all, from the Turkomans’ point of view, they were merely striving in the path of God (jihad fi sabil Allah) against the preferred infidel enemy of Islam since the days of Mu’awiyah in the midseventh century. Things came to a head in 1071 as the Byzantine emperor Romanus Diogenes (r. 1068–1071) led several Byzantine columns eastward to deal with this Turkish menace once and for all. Already on campaign in Syria, the Seljukid Sultan Alp Arslan turned his forces north to come to the aid of his fellow Turkomans and fellow Muslims. A pitched battle between the two sides took place at Manzikert, near Lake Van, in the summer of 1071. Alp Arslan’s forces were victorious, and Romanus Diogenes was taken captive. He was ultimately ransomed and deposed. The Battle of Manzikert marks the beginnings of the process by which Anatolia became Turkey.

In 1095, Pope Urban II preached a sermon in Clermont, France, in which he called on the interminably feuding nobility of Western Europe to turn their energies to the cause of Christ and his Church. Urban was by no means the first to call on them to use their military skills in aide of their Byzantine Christian brothers who, since the Battle of Manzikert, were increasingly threatened by Muslim Turkish marauders in eastern and central Anatolia. In fact, Pope Gregory VII had proposed that he himself lead a force of some fifty-thousand men to liberate their Eastern brethren in 1074. More important, however, Urban called on the Frankish nobility to take up the cross of Christ and make an armed pilgrimage to Jerusalem to redeem their Lord’s patrimony, which had been stolen by the infidel Saracens some four centuries earlier. By the summer of 1099, Jerusalem was in the hands of the Crusaders. Unfortunately for Pope Urban II, he died shortly after Jerusalem was taken, but before word reached Western Europe.

Although the styles of weapons varied according to region and time period, the warriors of the Crusader era generally employed many of the same types of weapons used during the first Islamic centuries: coats of mail, helmets, shields, swords, spears, lances, knives, iron maces, lassos, bows, arrows, and naft (or Greek fire). Although the Fatimid navy in Egypt was able to acquit itself
fairly well in the early twelfth century, there was essentially no naval resistance to the Franks from Syria. A century later, however, Saladin’s navy proved essential to his victory at Ashkelon. In the end, what distinguished the Muslim forces from the Franks during the Crusader era was the absolutely crucial role of Muslim cavalry forces (freeborn and Mamluk regiments) and the Muslims’ improved techniques of siege warfare. Moreover, the changed international political realities in the wake of the establishment of the Mamluk Sultanate and the Mongol defeat at Ayn Jalut allowed Baybars (r. 1260–1277) and his successors to pursue a more active policy of extirpation of the Franks in contrast to the more accommodationist policies of their Ayyubid predecessors. In the end, the Mamluks were able to drive the Franks from Acre in 1291, thus ending nearly two centuries of Frankish presence in the Near East.

Further Reading

Women

Few themes in Islamic history cut against the grain of modern American social and cultural values than the role and status of women and men in the Qur’an. In traditional Islamic thought, concepts that modern Americans take for granted—individual liberty, individual choice, personal fulfillment—necessarily lead to moral chaos because they are not informed by the admonitions and guidance of God’s revelation to mankind in the Qur’an. Although the Qur’an has very little material that may be considered legal in nature, the bulk of the legal material in the Qur’an deals with the proper role and status of women and men in the family and in society as a whole.

Although the specific status of women in pre-Islamic Arabia and early Islamic history remains a mystery, it is clear that prior to the coming of Islam patrilineal and matrilineal kinship systems did exist. It is also clear that during this transitional period some women played a variety of very important public roles including those of caravan merchants (Khadija, Muhammad’s first wife), religious leaders, warriors, battlefield nurses (Fatima, Muhammad and Khadija’s daughter), and even instigators of rebellions (‘Aisha bint Abi Bakr, Muhammad’s third and favorite wife).
In principle, at least, the role and status of women and men in Islamic thought are governed by three concepts that if not explicitly stated in the Qur’an, are certainly implied therein. The first principle is embodied in the shahada—the simple two-part creedal declaration that is at the very center of Islamic belief, ritual, and worship. “There is no god but God; Muhammad is the messenger of God (la ilaha illa’llah; Muhammadun rasul Allah).” Each man and each woman is personally responsible for making this declaration (shahada) and submitting (Islam) to the one God and acknowledging Muhammad as His messenger.

Those who surrender themselves to God and accept the true Faith; who are devout, sincere, patient, humble, charitable and chaste; who fast and are ever mindful of God—on these, both men and women, God will bestow forgiveness and a rich reward. It is not for true believers—men or women—to take their choice in their affairs if God and His apostle decree otherwise. He that disobeys God and His apostle strays far indeed. (Qur’an 33:35–36) (Emphasis added)

The second principle is that though the Qur’an condemns many of the practices of seventh-century Mecca and Medina including idolatry, polytheism, gambling, drinking wine, the abuse of the poor by the rich, and female infanticide, it accepts the patrilineal kinship system of Arabia and many of its values as the natural order of things. “Men have authority over women because God has made the one superior to the other” (Qur’an 4:34a). The third principle—that a man must provide for every member of his household (wives, children, servants, and slaves) from his own resources—is closely connected to the second, “because they [men] spend their wealth to maintain them [women]” (Qur’an 4:34b).

Although every man and woman is morally responsible before God for his or her beliefs and actions (and despite modern interpretations, polemics, and protestations to the contrary), medieval commentators interpreted the Qur’an as uncompromisingly patriarchal in its description of proper relations between men and women. Of course, the principle that women are subordinate to men was not unique to seventh-century Arabia. It was extremely common throughout the Ancient Near East and the Mediterranean world as a whole. Although this principle is taken for granted in the Qur’an, many of the modifications to existing practices set forth in the Qur’an do represent what we might call improvements in women’s status. Nevertheless, even this improved status can be jarring to many modern Americans whose conceptions of family and individual rights differ considerably from those of the Qur’an.

One of the most important elements of the system of patrilineal kinship is paternal certainty, for without it the entire system would fall apart. According to this structure, female chastity before marriage and fidelity in marriage are essential in guaranteeing paternal certainty. Sexual activity by a woman outside of marriage was not a matter of individual choice, but a violation of family honor and the Qur’anic sexual ethic that embraced it: “The adulterer and the adulteress shall each be given a hundred lashes. Let no pity for them cause you to disobey God, if you truly believe in God and the Last Day” (Qur’an 24:2–5). In theory, the Qur’anic requirements of chastity and fidelity applied equally to men and women; however, the physical consequences of sexual activity by a man outside of marriage were less readily apparent and the punishments less strictly enforced. In short, the reason that women were the guardians of the purity and honor of a kin’s lineage was related to basic biology. That is,
though a child’s mother’s identity was known to her and the midwives who helped deliver the child, the identity of the father could rarely be attested to by outside eyewitness testimony. As shari‘a developed, the Qur‘anic punishment of lashing was changed to death by stoning, a punishment that parallels the Biblical practice of execution for all sorts of illicit sexual intercourse described in Leviticus 20 and Deuteronomy 22.

Related to female chastity is the issue of modesty. One practice designed to ensure female chastity was the requirement that women be segregated from men who were not part of their households. Modern Americans ordinarily distinguish between private and public space, or a person’s private and his or her public life. Although this division between private and public is applicable to the medieval Islamic world, a more accurate distinction would be between appropriate behavior among one’s kin and appropriate behavior among those outside of one’s kin group. For example, in what we would call the private space of a home, segregation of the sexes could consist of women’s actual physical separation from men when unrelated men were guests in the common area of the home. In such instances, women might be segregated in the women’s quarters of a dwelling or they could be separated from men who were not their kin by appropriate female dress (see Clothing and Modesty).

However, neither type of segregation was necessary among men who were close relatives. Segregation of the sexes did not apply to prepubescent girls and boys for the simple reason that they were not considered sexual beings because they were physically unable to reproduce. Likewise, many of these restrictions on women were not applied as strictly to widows or to women whose children were adults. Such women had far greater freedom of activity, especially in the public sphere, for reasons of biology and perceived sexuality. Thus, postmenopausal women were no longer considered to be sexual beings because they could no longer bear children. As such, they were no longer viewed as sources of illicit temptation for men, nor could they produce illegitimate offspring, which would bring shame to their families.

According to the Qur’an, Muhammad’s wives were specifically commanded to remain in their homes and to separate themselves from men. They were, however, given the option of divorce before they were required to accept these requirements (Qur’an 33:28–34). Although some scholars argued that seclusion should be applied to women in general on the principle that all Muslim women should follow the practice of the “Mothers of the Believers,” it never became an absolute practice in Islamic history. In fact, such universal cloistering of women was nearly impossible for all but the wealthiest of families in the towns and cities. Less wealthy families as well as rural and pastoral communities generally needed the labor of their male and their female kin.

Muhammad’s third and favorite wife, ‘Aisha (one of the “Mothers of the Believers”), certainly did not confine herself to her house. In fact, she was a major player on the losing side in the First Civil War, especially in the Battle of the Camel (656), which is so named because of her presence there on her camel. For this reason, she has been held up as a model for those who argue that women should be able to take part in public life, but more often as an example of the disasters that will befall the community when women become involved in politics.

Nevertheless, the principle of modesty and separation of the sexes was observed in the public sphere; that is, essentially everywhere outside of the home
and apart from one’s kin. In the most prominent of public spaces, the market, this separation of the sexes consisted of the physical separation of women from men by means of modest dress. This practice was especially important in larger oasis settlements and towns and later in major urban centers where the residents were not all close kin and where the likelihood that women would encounter strangers was a virtual certainty.

Fundamental to family life in any society are the conditions under which new families are established in marriage, how they are dissolved in divorce, and how property should be disposed of in divorce settlements or the event of a family member’s death. The Qur’an addresses each of these issues explicitly. In pre-Islamic Arabia, when a man wanted to marry, he paid a dowry, or bride price, to the father or male guardian of the girl or woman to whom he was betrothed, in part as compensation for the loss of her value as a laborer in her father’s or male guardian’s household.

According to the Qur’an, this bride price became her property that she would bring into the marriage, not the property of her male guardian (Qur’an 4:4; 4:20). Because a man was supposed to provide for every member of his household from his own resources, the husband was to have no recourse to this wealth. It became the wife’s property solely to dispense with as she saw fit. She could, of course, give a part of it to her husband, but he could not lawfully take it away from her on his own.

Despite the fact that marriage under the Qur’anic scenario described above became a contract between a man and a woman (not between a man and a woman’s male guardian), most marriages resulted from some sort of arrangement between families. After all, each family had a vested interest in the prestige and economic status of the other as well as the success of the union. Unlike in the American ideal of marital bliss, where many believe one’s spouse should be one’s best friend and soul mate, the purpose of marriage in the Qur’an and the medieval Islamic world was the procreation of children and the strengthening of ties between two extended families. In principle, the man or the woman was able to decline a proposed match, but rarely was there an opportunity for such an arrangement to be initiated on the basis of mutual affection or common interests and certainly not after a period of courtship as in the American ideal of the institution.

Another way in which marriage differs from the modern American model is that according to the Qur’an, a man may take up to four wives at the same time, with the proviso that he treat each wife fairly in order to avoid injustice (Qur’an 4:3). Whether a man took one wife or as many as four, it is clear from the Qur’an that in return for his protection and provision, he was owed obedience. If a wife was not obedient, her husband was allowed to chastise her and even to beat her into submission.

Good women are obedient. They guard their unseen parts because God has guarded them. As for those from whom you fear disobedience, admonish them and send them to beds apart and beat them. Then if they obey you, take no further action against them. (Qur’an 4:35)

Not surprisingly, this passage often produces embarrassment among some modern Muslims, especially in the West, where women and men (at least according to the laws in most Western countries) are supposed to be equals in a
marriage relationship. However, according to the Qur’anic worldview, “men have authority over women because God has made the one superior to the other, and because they spend their wealth to maintain them” (Qur’an 4:34)

Men of the wealthy classes were able to afford slaves as well as wives. According to shari’a, in exchange for his maintenance and support, the head of the household had the right to obedience as well as sexual relations with his female slave(s). Although a concubine was in no position to refuse her owner’s advances, the possibility of winning his affection prior to the onset of a sexual relationship did exist—as many poems attest. Moreover, according to shari’a, a concubine did have certain legal protections not afforded to a wife. Once a concubine bore a child she was henceforth classified as an umm walad (mother of a child).

Unlike the American slave system, the child of a free Muslim man and a slave woman received the status of the father not the mother. That is, the child was a legally free Muslim and bore no stigma of illegitimacy. Initially, such offspring tended to be seen as inferior (though not illegitimate) largely because their mothers were not of Arabian stock. However, as the importance of Arabian purity began to be contested vigorously in the eighth and ninth centuries, this sense of inferiority waned considerably. In fact, the mothers of many of the caliphs and sultans in Islamic history were umm walads (e.g., Khayzuran, mother of the famous Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid [r. 786–809]). In addition, once a slave woman had borne a child, she could not be put out of the house, she could legally expect maintenance and support, and she had to be granted her freedom upon the death of her owner. A wife on the other hand could bear her husband as many children as physically possible and he could divorce her without cause.

The Qur’anic procedures under which a man can divorce his wife are fairly simple—he merely needs to say three times that he is divorcing her and the marriage is dissolved. “Divorce may be pronounced twice, and then a woman must be retained in honour or allowed to go with kindness” (Qur’an 2:229a). The woman does, however, have certain rights and protections should her husband decide to divorce her. Because the property with which she entered the marriage was supposed to remain in her possession throughout the marriage, whatever property she had at the time of the divorce remained hers to do with as she saw fit (Qur’an 2:229b). A man also owed his wife three months’ maintenance after the divorce for the purpose of determining whether she was pregnant (Qur’an 2:226–228). In general, the practice came to be that if a woman was pregnant, her husband was required to support her until the delivery of their child. In addition, he was required to support mother and child until the child was weaned (generally around age 2).

As shari’a developed, provisions were made for women to seek a divorce as well. However, it was much more difficult for a woman to divorce her husband, and the procedure required the services of a court. Legitimate causes for divorce included the husband having some sort of disgusting disease, his intolerable cruelty, and/or his abandonment—ranging from 10 to 90 years depending on which madhhab a woman followed. Needless to say, few women lived long enough to be granted a divorce on the grounds of abandonment in those courts where the husband had to have been gone missing for 90 years.

According to American law, one’s right to dispose of one’s wealth (after estate taxes and outstanding debts have been paid) is entirely discretionary. According
to the Qur’an, the bulk of one’s estate must go to specified heirs; only about one-third is discretionary. Moreover, the specific percentage of one’s wealth owed to female heirs is less than that owed to males.

God has thus enjoined you concerning your children: A male shall inherit twice as much as a female. If there be more than two girls, they shall have two-thirds of the inheritance; but if there be one only, she shall inherit the half. (Qur’an 4:11)

Whatever the division of wealth, the reason that females received a smaller percentage of an inheritance than did males is straightforward. Because a man was obligated to provide for every member of his household from his own resources, he simply needed more resources than did a woman, whose maintenance was the responsibility of her male guardian, whether husband, brother, uncle, or cousin.

The preceding discussion of the role and status of women and men in Islamic thought has focused on how things were supposed to be according to the Qur’an and its medieval interpreters. In the medieval Islamic world, as in any society, there were disparities between the ideal and the real in daily life. However, a few general comments about how this ideal was applied in nonurban settings are in order. In the countryside and especially among the pastoral nomadic populations, local custom usually outweighed the dictates of shari’ a on these issues, even though they are set forth clearly in the Qur’an.

If a bride price was paid to a guardian or inheritance rights were withheld or divorce protections were not honored, to whom could a woman appeal? Moreover, if a woman decided to contest these issues, her brothers and other male relatives could always coerce her by refusing to find her a husband, much less a suitable one. Faced with the choice of never marrying or worse, most women in such circumstances likely chose to forgo their marriage and inheritance rights, if in fact they knew they had them at all.

In a major city, however, a woman—especially an educated upper-class woman—could appeal to a court and have confidence that a judge would rule in her favor. Moreover, she could trust that the judge would not only seek to, but also have the authority and means to enforce his ruling with the backing of the ruler who had appointed him judge, even in the face of possible opposition from her husband or other relatives. As expected, surviving court records that include women as litigants tend to be women who lived in major cities.

One of the very important ways that we see the activities of women, especially elite women, reflected in the surviving court records is as endowers of religious and educational institutions as well as charities for pilgrims and the destitute. In the eighth century, Harun al-Rashid’s mother, the concubine Khayzuran, purchased Muhammad’s traditional birthplace in Mecca and transformed it into the sacred Mosque of the Nativity. She also endowed a drinking fountain in Mecca, endowed a water pool in Ramle in Palestine, as well as a channel west of the city of Anbar in Iraq. Harun al-Rashid’s wife, his cousin Zubayda, funded the renovation of Muhammad’s mosque in Ta’if near Mecca. But she is most famous for her charitable concern for pilgrims’ basic comforts and water needs. She endowed wells, rest areas, and caravanserais along the well-traveled pilgrimage route between Kufa and Mecca, which came to be known as the Zubayda Road. In the Hijaz, she funded the Mushshash Spring in Mecca and a water complex on the Plain of Arafat, which bears her name as
well—the Spring of Zubayda. Five centuries later, Ayyubid princesses vied with their kinsmen in endowing religious architecture as part of the Ayyubid campaign of jihad against the Franks and Shi‘is. During the Ayyubid period (1174–1260), some 160 mosques, madrasas (religious colleges; lit. place of study), and other religious monuments were established in Damascus alone, more than the combined total established during the century prior to and after their rule. Women attached to the Ayyubid house endowed twenty six of these monuments (16 percent), and half of all royal patrons were women.

Further Reading
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1. Excerpts from the Qur’an

The Qur’an, for the vast majority of Muslims, is the eternal uncreated speech of God flawlessly communicated to humankind through His messenger, Muhammad. The revelations Muhammad received and recited to the people of Mecca (c. 610–622) and Medina (622–632) are referred to as al-Kitab (The Scripture or The Book) as well as al-Qur’an (The Recitation). The traditional Muslim account places the compilation of the Qur’an into a single manuscript during the reign of the third caliph, or leader of the Muslim community after Muhammad, Uthman ibn Affan (r. 644–656), some two decades after Muhammad’s passing. Because according to Muslim dogma, the Qur’an represents God’s speech and not Muhammad’s human teachings, it is believed to be without error. Therefore, for the believer, the veracity of the Qur’anic text cannot be called into question. Translations, of course, are another matter because, according to Muslim dogma, because God chose to reveal himself in Arabic, the true meaning of the Qur’an is simply untranslatable into another language. Therefore, Muslims generally refer to translations of the Qur’an as interpretations of or commentaries on the Arabic text. There are many English translations of the Qur’an, some more felicitous than others. I have chosen to use N. J. Dawood, trans., The Koran, fifth revised edition (New York: Penguin Books, 1995) primarily because it is affordable and available in nearly every major bookstore.

The Qur’an can be a rather difficult read for newcomers accustomed to the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament for two basic reasons. First, the Qur’an does not contain much sustained narrative material. Second, the Qur’an’s 114 chapters are not arranged in chronological order; rather, they are generally arranged according to length, with the longer chapters first and the shorter chapters at the end. The principal exception to this ordering is the first chapter, which is quite short. Chapter 2 is by far the lengthiest chapter in the entire book. Each chapter (sura) of the Qur’an has a title that is derived from some word, phrase, or theme found in the chapter itself. Consequently, Muslims have traditionally cited the Qur’an by chapter title rather than by chapter number. Every chapter except chapter 9, begins with the same phrase, “In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Beneficent.” Below are chapters 1, 96, and 112 in their entirety; and excerpts from the much longer chapter 9.
Chapter 1. al-Fatiha (The Opening)
The first chapter of the Qur’an is called the Fatiha because it is the opening or the first chapter. It is recited daily as part of the five daily ritual prayers (salat). The final two lines are traditionally understood to refer to Jews and Christians, respectively.

In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful.
Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Universe, 
The Compassionate, the Merciful, 
Sovereign of the Day of Judgment!
You alone we worship; and to You alone we turn for help.
Guide us the straight path,
The path of those whom You have favored,
Not of those who have incurred Your wrath [i.e., Jews],
Nor of those who have gone astray [i.e., Christians].

Chapter 112. al-Ikhlas (True Belief)
In addition to reciting the Fatiha during ritual prayer Muslims are expected to recite additional passages as well. Although it is appropriate to recite any passage from the Qur’an, chapter 112 is a favorite because it is believed to succinctly capture the essence of Islamic monotheism and explicitly argues against the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, which the Qur’an and Islamic dogma views as polytheism. Hence its title “True Belief.”

Say: Allah is One!
Allah is eternal!
He begot none, nor was He begotten.
None is equal to Him.

Chapter 96. al-Alaq (The Clot)
The verses of chapter 96 are traditionally understood to be the very first verses revealed to Muhammad in his home town of Mecca ca. 610.

Recite in the name of your Lord who created—created man from clots of blood.
Recite! Your Lord is the Most Bountiful One, who by the pen taught man what he did not know.
Indeed, man transgresses in thinking himself his own master: for to your Lord all things return.
Observe them and who rebukes Our servant when he prays.
Think: does he follow the right guidance or enjoin true piety?
Think: if he denies the Truth and pays no heed, does he not realize that God observes all?
No. Let him desist, or We will drag him by the forelock, his lying, sinful forelock.
Then let him call his helpmates. We will call the guards of Hell.
No, never obey him! Prostrate yourself and come nearer.

Chapter 9. al-Tawba (Repentance); Verses 5–6, 29–31, 111
Chapter 9 includes the principal Qur’anic material on warfare and jihad and is the only chapter of the Qur’an’s 114 chapters that does not begin with the
phrase, “In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Beneficent.” Muslim commentators generally date this chapter to the end of Muhammad’s career in Medina after his military conquests gave him control over Mecca, Medina, and most of Arabia.

When the sacred months are over slay the idolaters wherever you find them. Arrest them, besiege them, and lie in ambush everywhere for them. If they repent and take to prayer and render the alms levy, allow them to go their way. Allah is forgiving and merciful . . . (9:5–6)

Fight against such of those to whom the Scriptures were given [Jews and Christians] as believe in neither Allah nor the Last Day, who do not forbid what Allah and His apostle have forbidden, and do not embrace the true Faith, until they pay the jizya [protection money] out of hand and are utterly subdued. The Jews say Ezra is the son of Allah, while the Christians say the Messiah is the son of God. Such are their assertions, by which they imitate the infidels of old. Allah confound them! How perverse they are! They make of their clerics and their monks, and of the Messiah, the son of Mary, Lords besides Allah; though they were ordered to serve Allah only. There is no god but Him. Exalted be He above those they deify besides Him! . . . (9:29–31)

Allah has purchased from the faithful their lives and worldly goods, and in return has promised them the Garden. They will fight for the cause of God, they will slay and be slain. Such is the true promise which He has made them in the Torah, the Gospel and the Qur’an. And who is more true to his pledge than God? Rejoice then in the bargain you have made. That is the supreme triumph. (9:111)


2. The Pact of Umar (c. 637)

According to Islamic sources, after Jerusalem fell to the Muslim forces in 636 to 637, Umar ibn al-Khattab, the second Rashidun caliph (r. 632–644), issued a guarantee of security for the conquered city and the remaining territories in Syria. There are numerous versions of this so-called Pact of Umar. The version reproduced here is preserved in al-Tabari’s (d. 923) The Chronicle of Prophets and Kings. al-Tabari begins his account with several reports in which a Jew predicts to Umar at al-Jabiya (a town in the modern Golan Heights) that he would not return to his home country (Medina) until God had granted him victory over Jerusalem. According to al-Tabari’s account, after Umar took control of Jerusalem, he issued the terms of protection. al-Tabari tells us that the letter was written and prepared in 636 to 637, and that Khalid ibn al-Walid, Amr ibn al-As, Abd al-Rahman ibn Awf, and Mu’awiya ibn Abu Sufyan—major figures in the early history of Islamic Syria—attested to it. Not surprisingly, there has been dispute among modern scholars as to whether Umar established a pact of protection as described below. However, what can be said with certainty is that by al-Tabari’s day in the ninth century, it was accepted within the Islamic historiographical tradition that he had. In any case, this pact (and similar versions) along with the so-called jizya verse (Qur’an 9:29) served as the legal basis for relations between the Muslim ruling authorities and their non-Muslim subjects (namely Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians) in Islamic law.
In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.

This is the assurance of safety which the servant of God, Umar, the Commander of the Faithful, has granted to the people of Jerusalem. He has given them an assurance of safety for themselves, for their property, their churches, their crosses, the sick and the healthy of the city, and for all the rituals that belong to their religion. Their churches will not be inhabited by Muslims and will not be destroyed. Neither they, nor the land on which they stand, nor their cross, nor their property will be damaged. They will not be forcibly converted. No Jew will live with them in Jerusalem. The people of Jerusalem must pay the poll tax [jizya] like the people of the other cities, and they must expel the Byzantines and the robbers. As for those who will leave the city, their lives and property will be safe until they reach their place of safety; and as for those who remain, they will be safe. They will have to pay the poll tax [jizya] like the people of Jerusalem. Those of the people of Jerusalem who want to leave with the Byzantines, take their property, and abandon their churches and their crosses will be safe until they reach their place of safety. Those villagers who were in Jerusalem before the killing of so-and-so may remain in the city if they wish, but they must pay the poll tax [jizya] like the people of Jerusalem. Those who wish may go with the Byzantines, and those who wish may return to their families. Nothing will be taken from them before their harvest is reaped. If they pay the poll tax [jizya] according to their obligations, then the contents of this letter are under the covenant of God, are the responsibility of His Prophet, of the caliphs, and of the faithful.

al-Tabari also includes the following letter that Umar ostensibly sent to Lydda (Lod in modern Israel). According to al-Tabari, Umar sent this same letter to the remaining provinces of Palestine as well.

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.

This is what the servant of God, Umar, the Commander of the Faithful, awarded to the people of Lydda and to all the people of Palestine who are in the same category. He gave them an assurance of safety for themselves, for their property, their churches, their crosses, their sick and their healthy and all their rites. Their churches will not be inhabited by the Muslims and will not be destroyed. Neither their churches, nor the land where they stand, nor their rituals, nor their crosses, nor their property will be damaged. They will not be forcibly converted, and none of them will be harmed. The people of Lydda and those of the people of Palestine who are in the same category must pay the poll tax [jizya] like the people of the Syrian cities. The same conditions, in their entirety apply to them if they leave (Lydda).


3. al-Ya’qubi’s Ninth-Century Description of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem

The ninth-century historian and geographer, Yaqubi (d. 897), records that for political reasons, the Umayyad caliph Abd al-Malik (r. 685–705) prohibited the pilgrimage to Mecca, which was controlled by Abd Allah ibn Zubayr who claimed the caliphate for himself. When people protested that it was a religious duty to make the pilgrimage to Mecca, Abd al-Malik responded by citing a hadith to justify his policy. He then built the Dome of the Rock as an alternative pilgrimage site.
“Hath not Ibn Shihâb az-Zuhri told you how the Apostle of Allah did say: ‘Men shall journey to but three Masjids (mosques, namely), Al Masjid Haram (at Makkah), my Masjid (at Madinah), and the Masjid of the Holy City (which is Jerusalem)?’ So this last is now appointed for you (as a place of worship) in lieu of the Masjid al-Haram (of Makkah). And this Rock (the Sakhrah of Jerusalem), of which it is reported that upon it the Apostle of Allah set his foot when he ascended into heaven, shall be unto you in the place of the Ka’abah.” Then Abd al-Malik built above the Sakhrah a Dome, and hung it around with curtains of brocade, and he instituted doorkeepers for the same, and the people took the custom of circumambulating the Rock (as-Sakhrah of Jerusalem), even as they had paced round the Ka’abah (at Makkah), and the usage continued thus all the days of the dynasty of the Omayyads.


4. al-Ya’qubi’s Description of Baghdad in the Ninth Century

Al-Ya’qubi was one of the most important early historians and geographers of the medieval Islamic world. He was born in Baghdad, served the Tahirid regime in Khurasan as a young man, traveled widely throughout the Islamic world, and later in his life settled in Egypt, where he composed his Kitab al-Buldan (Book of Countries), a detailed geographical work based on his travels. The excerpt below is from al-Ya’qubi’s introductory comments about Baghdad (est. 762), the capital of the Abbasid caliphate. As can be seen from al-Ya’qubi’s effusive description of his hometown, Baghdad was a thriving cosmopolitan center of trade, culture, religion, politics, and so forth in the ninth century.

I begin with Iraq only because it is the center of this world, the navel of the earth, and I mention Baghdad first because it is the center of Iraq, the greatest city, which has no peer in the east or the west of the world in extent, size, prosperity, abundance of water, or health of climate, and because it is inhabited by all kinds of people, town-dwellers and country-dwellers. To it they come from all countries, far and near, and people from every side have preferred Baghdad to their own homelands. There is no country, the peoples of which have not their own quarter and their own trading and financial arrangements. In it there is gathered that which does not exist in any other city in the world. On its flanks flow two great rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates, and thus goods and foodstuffs come to it by land and by water with the greatest ease, so that every kind of merchandise is completely available, from east and west, from Muslim and non-Muslim lands. Goods are brought from India, Sind, China, Tibet, the lands of the Turks, the Daylam, the Khazars, the Ethiopians, and others to such an extent that the products of the countries are more plentiful in Baghdad than in the countries from which they come. The can be procured so readily and so certainly that it is as if all the good things of the world are sent there, all the treasures of the earth assembled there, and all the blessings of creation perfected there.

Furthermore, Baghdad is the city of the Hashimites [the Abbasid caliphs], the home of their reign, the seat of their sovereignty, where no one appeared before them and no kings but they have dwelt. Also my own forbears have lived there, and one of them was governor of the city.

Its name is famous, and its fame widespread. Iraq is indeed the center of the world. . . . The weather is temperate, the soil is rich, the water is sweet, the trees are
thriving, the fruit luscious, the seeds are fertile, good things are abundant, and springs are easily found. Because of the temperate weather and rich soil and sweet water, the character of the inhabitants is good, their faces bright, and their minds untrammeled. The people excel in knowledge, understanding, letters, manners, insight, discernment, skill in commerce and crafts, cleverness in every argument, proficiency in every calling, and master of every craft. There in none more learned than their scholars, better informed than their traditionists, more cogent than their theologians, more perspicuous than their grammarians, more accurate than their readers, more skillful than their physicians, more melodious than their singers, more delicate than their craftsmen, more literate than their scribes, more lucid that their logicians, more devoted than their worshippers, more pious than their ascetics, more juridical than their judges, more eloquent than their preachers, more poetical than their poets, and more reckless than their rakes.


5. al-Jahiz’s Ninth-Century Essay on the Turks

In his essay on the Turks, al-Jahiz (d. 869) begins by commending the foresight of the Abbasid caliphs for establishing the Mamluk system in the early ninth century. More specifically, he extols the racial or ethnic superiority of Turks in the fields of horsemanship, warfare, archery, courage, and so forth. Although such an approach is largely rejected today, it was quite common in the medieval Islamic world to categorize various peoples according to their inherent racial qualities and talents. Al-Jahiz concludes his essay by stating that the Turks are to warfare what the Greeks are to philosophy and the Chinese to craftsmanship. Of course, al-Jahiz is engaging in a bit of hyperbole here, but his essay conveys very eloquently the dominant sentiment in his day that there is no better horseman than a Turk.

The Khawarij relies upon his lances, but the Turks are as good with their lances as the Khawarij; and if a thousand Turkish horsemen charge and discharge a thousand arrows all at once, they prostrate a thousand men; and there is no other army which can charge as well. The Khawarij and Bedouins, however, are of little account, as far as the department of mounted archers goes. But the Turk can shoot beasts as far as the department of mounted archers goes. But the Turk can shoot beasts and birds, targets on spears and human beings, quarry crouching on the ground, figures set up and birds on the wing. And while he shoots, he will let his beast go at full gallop backwards or forwards, right or left, up or down hill. And he can shoot ten arrows before the Khariji can put one arrow on his bow-string. And he can ride his horse with a downward sweep from a mountain or down below inside a ravine at a greater speed than Khariji can accomplish on level ground. And the Turk has four eyes, two in front and two at the back of his head. The Khariji fails in following up a war, the Khurasani in beginning it. . . . . But if the Khawarij retreat, they retreat for good, and never think of returning to the fray after retreat, save on a very few occasions. As for the Turks, they do not wheel like the Khurasanis; and if they do turn their backs, they are to be feared as much as deadly poison and sudden death; for their arrows his the mark as much when they are retreating as when they are advancing. And one cannot be sure of not being caught by their lasso or having one’s horses caught and
their riders seized in the same motion . . . And sometimes they cast their lasso with some other design; and if they do not take their victim with them, he is made to think in his ignorance that it is only the stupidity of the Turk and his own sagacity . . .

Turks are nomads, dwellers in the wilderness and owners of beasts. . . . Whereas they do not busy themselves with industry and merchandise and medicine and agriculture and engineering and forestry and architecture and irrigation and the raising of crops, but all their interest is in raids and incursions and hunting and riding and the fights of warriors and seeking for plunder and subduing countries, and their energy is turned in that direction and fitted for such exercises and limited and adapted accordingly, they have made themselves completely masters of that department, and learned all that is to be learned in it; and so it has for them taken the place of industry and merchandise and become their delight and their boast and the subject of their discourse by day and night. Accordingly they occupy in war the position that the Greeks occupy in science and Chinese in art.


6. al-Muqaddasi’s Tenth-Century Description of the Aksâ Mosque in Jerusalem

Most of what we know about al-Muqaddasi is derived from his pioneering work in the fields of physical, economic, political, and human geography—*The Best Divisions for Knowledge of the Regions* (*Ahsan al-taqasim fi ma‘rifat al-aqalim*)—based on some 20 years of travel throughout the Islamic world. As a native of Jerusalem (*Bayt al-Muqaddas* or *Bayt al-Maqdis*; hence the *nisba* al-Muqaddasi), his descriptions of his hometown and Greater Syria (*bilad al-sham*) are especially detailed. The excerpts below are descriptions of the two major examples of monumental religious architecture in his hometown: the Aksâ Mosque and the Dome of the Rock. Both buildings are situated on what Muslims refer to as the Noble Sanctuary (*al-Haram al-Sharif*). Because this is the site of the ancient Jewish temple, it is known as the Temple Mount in the Jewish and Christian traditions. Le Strange’s translation of al-Muqaddasi’s text was published in 1890, hence his transliteration of Arabic titles and names differs slightly from current transliteration conventions.

The Masjid al-Aksâ (the Further Mosque with the Haram Area) lies at the south-eastern corner of the Holy City. The stones of the foundations of the Haram Area wall, which were laid by David, are ten ells, or a little less, in length. They are chiseled (or *drafted*), finely faced, and jointed, and of the hardest material. On these the Khalif Abd al-Malik [r. 685–705] subsequently built, using smaller but well-shaped stones, and battlements are added above. This mosque is even more beautiful than that of Damascus, for during the building of it they had for a rival as a comparison the great Church (of the Holy Sepulchre) belonging to the Christians at Jerusalem, and they built this to be even more magnificent than that other. But in the days of the Abbasids occurred the earthquakes, which threw down most of the Main-building (al-Mughatta, which is the Aksâ Mosque); all, in fact except that portion which is round the Mihrâb. Now when the Khalif of that day (who was al-Mahdi [r. 775–785])
obtained news of this, he inquired and learned that the sum at that time in the treasury would in no wise suffice to restore the mosque. So he wrote to the governors of the provinces, and to all the commanders, that each should undertake the building of a colonnade. The order was carried out, and the edifice rose firmer and more substantial than ever it had been in former times. The more ancient portion remained, even like a beauty spot, in the midst of the new, and it extends as far as the limit of the marble columns; for beyond, where the columns are of concrete, the later building commences.

The Main-building of the Aksâ Mosque has twenty-six doors. The door opposite to the Mihrâb is called the Great Brazen Gate; it is plated with brass gilt, and is so heavy that only a man strong of shoulder and of arm can turn it on its hinges. To the right hand of the (great Gate) are seven large doors, the midst covered with gilt plates; and after the same manner there are seven doors to the left. And further, on the eastern side (of the Aksâ), are eleven doors unornamented. Over the first-mentioned doors, fifteen in number, is a colonnade supported on marble pillars, lately erected by Abd Allah ibn Tahir [governor of Khurasan 828–844].

On the right-hand side of the Court (that is along the West Wall of the Haram Area) are colonnades supported by marble pillars and pilasters; and on the back (or North Wall of the Haram Area) are colonnades vaulted in stone. The centre part of the Main-building (of the Aksâ) is covered by a mighty roof, high pitched and gable-wise, over which rises a magnificent dome. The ceilings everywhere—except those of the colonnades at the back (along the North Wall of the Haram Area)—are covered with lead sheets; but in these (northern) colonnades the ceilings are made of mosaics studded-in.

On the left (or east side of the Haram Area) there are no colonnades. The Main-building of the (Aksâ) Mosque does not come up the Eastern Wall of the Haram Area, the building here, as it is said, never having been completed. Of the reason for this they give two accounts. The one is, that the Khalif ‘Omar [r. 634–644] commanded the people to erect a building “in the western part of the Area, as a place of prayer for the Muslims;” and so they left this space (which is towards the south-eastern angle) unoccupied, in order not to go counter to his injunction. The other reason given is, that it was not found possible to extend the Main-building of the (Aksâ) Mosque as far as the south-east angle of the Area Wall, lest the (great) Mihrâb, in the centre-place at the end of the Mosque should not then have stood opposite the Rock under the Dome; and such a case was repugnant to them. But Allah alone knows the truth.


7. al-Muqaddasi’s Tenth-Century Explanation of the Construction of Jerusalem’s Dome of the Rock

Writing a century after Yaqubi (d. 897) (see Document 3), Al-Muqaddasi (d. c. 1000) provides a different explanation for the construction of the Dome of the Rock. He reports a conversation with his paternal uncle who told him that Abd al-Malik constructed the Dome of the Rock as an architectural expression of Muslim supremacy over the majority Christian
population of Syria. Whether as an alternative pilgrimage site (al-Ya’qubi) or to demonstrate Islamic superiority (al-Muqaddasi), each explanation indicates that Abd al-Malik constructed the Dome of the Rock as an expression of his political and religious authority over Muslims and Christians alike.

Now one day I said, speaking to my father’s brother, “O my uncle, verily it was not well of the Khalif al-Walîd [r. 705–715] to expend so much of the wealth of the Muslims on the Mosque at Damascus. Had he expended the same on making roads, or for caravanserais, or in the restoration of the Frontier Fortresses, it would have been more fitting and more excellent of him.” But my uncle said to me in answer, “O my little son, thou hast not understanding! Verily al-Walîd was right, and he was prompted to a worthy work. For he beheld Syria to be a country that had long been occupied by the Christians, and he noted herein the beautiful churches still belonging to them, so enchantingly fair, and so renowned for their splendour, even as are the Kumâmah (the Church of the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem), and the churches of Lydda and Edessa. So he sought too build for the Muslims a mosque that should prevent their regarding these, and that should be unique and a wonder to the world. An in like manner is it now evident how the Khalif Abd al-Malik, noting the greatness of the Dome of the (Holy Sepulchre called) al-Kumâmah and its magnificence, was moved lest it should dazzle the minds of the Muslims, and hence erected above the Rock, the Dome which now is seen there?”

The Court (of the Haram Area) is paved in all parts; in its centre rises a Platform, like that in the Mosque at Medina, to which, from all four sides, ascend broad flights of steps. On this Platform stand four Domes. Of these, the Dome of the Chain, the Dome of the Ascension, and the Dome of the Prophet are of small size. Their domes are covered with sheet-lead, and are supported on marble pillars, being without walls.

In the centre of the Platform is the Dome of the Rock, which rises above an octagonal building having four gates, one opposite to each of the flights of steps leading up from the Court. These four are the Kiblah (or southern) Gate; the Gate of (the Angel) Israfi l (to the east), the Gate al-Sûr (or of the Trumpet), to the north; and the Women’s Gate (Bâb al-Nisâ), which last opens towards the west. All these are adorned with gold, and closing each of them is a beautiful door of cedar-wood finely worked in patterns. These last were sent hither by command of the mother of the Khalif al-Muqtadir-billah [r. 908–932]. Over each of the gates is a porch of marble, wrought with cedar-wood, with brass-work without; and in this porch, likewise, are doors, but these are unornamented.

Within the building are three concentric colonnades, with columns of the most beautiful marble, polished, that can be seen, and above is a low vaulting. Inside these (colonnades) is the central hall over the Rock; it is circular, not octagonal, and is surrounded by columns of polished marble supporting circular arches. Built above these, and rising high into the air, is the drum, in which are large windows; and over the drum is the Dome. The Dome, from the floor up to the pinnacle, which rises into the air, is in height 100 ells. From afar off you may perceive on the summit of the Dome the beautiful pinnacle (set thereon), the size of which is a fathom and a span. The Dome, externally, is completely covered with brass plates gilt, while the building itself, its floor, and its walls, and the drum, both within and without, are ornamented with
marble and mosaics, after the manner that we shall describe when speaking of
the Mosque of Damascus. The Cupola of the Dome is built in three sections;
the inner is of ornamental panels. Next come iron beams interlaced, set in free,
so that the wind may not cause the Cupola to shift; and the third casing is of
wood, on which are fixed the outer plates. Up through the middle of the Cu-
pola goes a passage-way, by which a workman may ascend to the pinnacle for
aught that may be wanting, or in order to repair the structure. At the dawn,
when the light of the sun first strikes on the Cupola, and the Drum reflects his
rays, then is this edifice a marvelous sight to behold, and one such that in all
Islam I have never seen the equal; neither have I heard tell of aught built in
pagan times that could rival in grace the Dome of the Rock.

Source: Le Strange, Guy, trans. Palestine under the Moslems: A Description of Syria and the

8. Naser-e Khosraw’s Description of the City of
New Cairo in the Eleventh Century

Almost immediately after his conquest of Egypt in 969, the Fatimid gen-
eral, Jawhar, began laying the foundations for the new Fatimid palace city,
al-Qahira (Cairo). There are a number of legends about the founding of
the city and the etymology of its name. According to one, Jawhar had
staked out the perimeter of the city with wooden stakes and ropes with
bells on them but wanted to wait to break ground until the astrologers
determined the most propitious time. When a crow lit on one of the ropes,
the workmen took the sound of the ringing bells as the signal to begin
their work. Although the astrologers determined that Mars (al-Qahir, the
Ruler) was in the ascendant—a bad sign—work commenced nevertheless.
Another legend relates that the Fatimid Imam al-Mu‘izz had instructed
Jawhar before he left North Africa to build a new walled city and call it al-
Qahira, for it would rule the world. According to yet another legend, the
city was first called al-Mansuriyya (the Victorious; the name of the Fatimid
capital in North Africa), but al-Mu‘izz changed it to al-Qahira after his ar-
rival 4 years later. Whatever the truth of these stories, Jawhar built the
new Fatimid capital on a sandy plain north of Fustat [known as Old Cairo]
where it was protected on the east by the Muqattam Hills and on the
west by a canal (khali‘j) running along the east bank of the Nile.

Under Fatimid tutelage Egypt and its new capital became one of the wealth-
liest and most important cosmopolitan way stations for international trade and
culture in the Mediterranean world, southwest Asia, and the Indian Ocean.
The description of Cairo below is that of the Persian Ismaili traveler, Naser-e
Khosraw (d. 1088). By the time Naser-e Khosraw visited the city in 1047, the
Fatimid capital had grown considerably since Jawhar laid its foundations some
eight decades earlier. Saladin brought an end to the Fatimid caliphate in 1171,
but Cairo and Egypt continued to flourish under his leadership and that of his
Ayyubid successors (1171–1250) and of the Mamluk Sultans (1250–1517).

The city of New Cairo has five gates . . . There is no wall, but the buildings
are even stronger and higher than ramparts, and every house and building is
itself a fortress. Most of the buildings are five stories tall, although some are six. Drinking water is from the Nile, and water carriers transport water by camel. The closer the well is to the river, the sweeter the well water; it becomes more brackish the farther you get from the Nile. Old and New Cairo are said to have fifty thousand camels belonging to water carriers. The water carriers who port water on their backs are separate: they have brass cups and jugs and go into the narrow lanes where a camel cannot pass.

In the midst of the houses in the city are gardens and orchards watered by wells. In the sultan’s harem are the most beautiful gardens imaginable. Waterwheels have been constructed to irrigate these gardens. There are trees planted and pleasure parks built even on the roofs. At the time I was there, a house on a lot twenty by twelve ells was being rented for fifteen dinars a month. The house was four stories tall, three of which were rented out. The tenant wanted to take the topmost floor also for an additional five dinars, but the landlord would not give it to him, saying that he might want to go there sometimes, although, during the year we were there, he did not come twice. . . . All the houses of Cairo are built separate one from another, so that no one’s trees or outbuildings are against anyone else’s walls. Thus, whenever anyone needs to, he can open the walls of his house and add on, since it causes no detriment to anyone else.

Going west outside the city, you find a large canal called al-Khalij (Canal), which was built by the father of the present sultan, who has three hundred villages on his private property along the canal. The canal was cut from Old to New Cairo, where it turns and runs past the sultan’s palace. Two kiosks are built at the head of the canal, one called Lulu (Pearl) and the other Jawhara (Jewel).

Cairo has four cathedral mosques where men pray on Fridays. One of these is called al-Azhar, another al-Nur, another the Mosque of al-Hakem, and the fourth the Mosque of al-Mo’ezz. This last mosque is outside the city on the banks of the Nile. When you face the qibla in Egypt, you have to turn toward the ascent of Aries. The distance between Old and New Cairo is less than a mile, Old Cairo being to the south and New Cairo to the north. The Nile flows through Old Cairo and reaches New Cairo, and the orchards and outbuildings of the two cities overlap. During the summer, when the plain and lowlands are inundated, only the sultan’s garden, which is on a promontory and consequently not flooded, remains dry.


9. Excerpts from Nizam al-Mulk’s Book of Government or Rules for Kings (Eleventh Century)

Nizam al-Mulk (d. 1092) served as the chief minister for two of the greatest Seljukid Sultans, Alp Arslan (r. 1063–1073) and his son, Malikshah (r. 1073–1092). Nizam al-Mulk was murdered in 1092 by the Ismaili Assassins who were the bane of the Seljukids and many other regimes in the middle ages. Although the Seljukids conquered the Middle East as Turkomans (that is, as free Muslim Turkish pastoral nomads), they soon sought to establish themselves as rulers of the settled agrarian world of Iran and Iraq. To do this, they adopted the trappings of Perso-Islamic
kingship employed by the Abbasid caliphs in Baghdad and later by the Abbasids’ Buyid overlords. Nizam al-Mulk (d. 1092), articulates this theory of kingship in his Book of Government or Rules for Kings. Composed at the behest of Malikshah (r. 1073–1092), the first chapter is titled “On the Turn of Fortune’s Wheel and in Praise of the Master of the World—May God Confirm His Sovereignty.” The opening paragraphs outline a vision of kingship in which God in His wisdom chooses the sultan to rule on His behalf. The sultan’s duty is to provide justice and maintain order in society. If he does, he and his kingdom will prosper. If he does not, he will lose God’s favor, be replaced by another, and the cycle begins anew.

The rest of Nizam al-Mulk’s lengthy treatise is essentially a handbook for how to rule justly and to maintain order in the realm. According to Nizam al-Mulk, the upright administration of a just ruler necessarily results in prosperity among the agrarian peasants and among the traders in the towns and cities. Such prosperity also results in a full treasury with which the sultan can pay his soldiers, who are absolutely essential to protecting his throne against interlopers as well as maintaining order and economic prosperity in the realm so that his subjects “may live their lives in constant security and ever wish for his reign to continue.” Although others had articulated similar theories of kingship based on the ancient Persian model, including the Abbasids and the Buyids, Nizam al-Mulk’s iteration is one of the most influential and would continue to be used to legitimate regimes for centuries after its composition.

In every age and time God (be He exalted) chooses one member of the human race and, having adorned and endowed him with kingly virtues, entrusts him with the interests of the world and the well-being of His servants; He charges that person to close the doors of corruption, confusion and discord, and He imparts to him such dignity and majesty in the eyes and hearts of men, that under his just rule they may live their lives in constant security and ever wish for his reign to continue.

Whenever—God be our refuge!—there occurs any disobedience or disregard of divine laws on the part of His servants, or any failure in devotion and attention to the commands of The Truth (be He exalted), and He wishes to chasten them and make them taste the retribution for their deeds—may God not deal us such a fate, and keep us far from such a calamity!—verily the wrath of The Truth overtakes those people and He forsakes them for the vileness of their disobedience; anarchy rears its head in their midst, opposing swords are drawn, blood is shed, and whoever has the stronger hand does whatever he wishes, until those sinners are all destroyed in tumults and bloodshed, and the world becomes free and clear of them; and through the wickedness of such sinners may innocent persons too perish in the tumults; just as, by analogy, when a reed-bed catches fire every dry particle is burned also, because it is near to that which is dry.

Then by divine decree one human being acquires some prosperity and power, and according to his deserts The Truth bestows good fortune upon him and gives him wit and wisdom. . . . He selects ministers and their functionaries from among the people, and giving a rank and post to each, he relies upon them for the efficient conduct of affairs spiritual and temporal. If his subjects tread the path of obedience and busy themselves with their tasks he
will keep them untroubled by hardships, so that they may pass their time at ease in the shadow of his justice. If one of his officers or ministers commits any impropriety or oppression, he will only keep him at his post provided that he responds to correction, advice or punishment, and wakes up from the sleep of negligence; if he fails to mend his ways, he will retain him no longer, but change him for someone who is deserving. . . .

Further he will bring to pass that which concerns the advance of civilization, such as constructing underground channels, digging main canals, building bridges across great waters, rehabilitating villages and farms, raising fortifications, building new towns, and erecting lofty buildings and magnificent dwellings; he will have inns built on the highways and schools for those who seek knowledge; for which things he will be renowned for ever; he will gather the fruit of this good works in the next world and blessings will be showered upon him.


10. Excerpts from al-Shayzari’s The Book of the Islamic Market Inspector (Twelfth Century)

One of the most important officials of any Islamic administration was the muhtasib (public censor or market inspector) whose job it was to ensure the honesty and trustworthiness of the markets that were essential to the economic prosperity of the medieval Islamic world. Handbooks such as al-Shayzari’s (d. 1193) twelfth-century The Book of the Islamic Market Inspector included prescriptions for the enforcement of public morality in the very public space of the marketplace as defined by Islamic law, including the moral and economic regulation of every profession one might find in a market: bakers, confectioners, sausage makers, money changers, slave traders, livestock traders, smiths, grain sellers, baths and their attendants, physicians, teachers, and so forth. The text below is excerpted from al-Shayzari’s chapter titled “Supervision of the Markets and Roads.”

The markets must be situated on an elevated and spacious site as they were in Ancient Rome. If the market is not paved, there should be a pavement on either side of it for the people to walk on in winter. Nobody is permitted to bring a shop bench from the roofed passageway into the main thoroughfare as this obstructs passers-by. The muhtasib must remove and forbid this because of the harm it may do people. The people of every trade should be allotted a special market for which their trade is known, as this is more economically sound for them and will bring them better business. The muhtasib should also segregate the shops of those whose trade requires the lighting of fires, like bakers and cooks, from the perfumers and cloth merchants due to their dissimilarity and the possibility of damage.

When the muhtasib is unable to understand the people’s occupations, to each trade he may appoint an arif who is a virtuous fellow tradesman, is experienced in their trade, aware of their swindles and frauds, is well known for his trustworthiness and reliability and who will oversee their affairs and acquaint
the *muhtasib* with what they are doing. The *arif* must inform the *muhtasib* of all the commodities and merchandise brought into their market and the current prices, as well as other matters of which the *muhtasib* ought to be aware. It is related that the Prophet said: “Over every trade seek the assistance of a virtuous fellow tradesman.”

The *muhtasib* is not permitted to set the prices of merchandise over the heads of its owners nor to oblige them to sell it at a fixed price. This is because during the time of the Prophet prices rose and the people said to him: “O Prophet, set the prices for us.” But the Prophet replied: “God is the one who sets prices. I wish to meet God and want nobody to demand that I commit a transgression against a person or money.”

If the *muhtasib* comes across someone who is hoarding a certain foodstuff, that is, buying it when prices are low and waiting until they rise so that the food becomes more expensive, he should compel him to sell it. This is because monopolizing is unlawful and it is a duty to prevent what is unlawful. The Prophet said: “He who brings in merchandise is blessed, and he who monopolizes it is cursed.”

It is not permitted to meet a caravan, that is, for people to go outside the town and meet it as it approaches, telling them that the market is slow and thus buying cheaply from them. The Prophet forbade the meeting of a caravan and forbade selling merchandise until it is taken to the market. If the *muhtasib* finds anyone intending to do this, he should chastise and prevent him.


### 11. Medieval Islamic Recipes

Rather than dividing meals into discrete courses as modern Americans tend to do, in the medieval Islamic world more than one dish (for example, a lamb dish and a chicken dish) would be served at the table at the same time. It was customary that a dish of dates would be present with which to begin the meal. A fruit salad of some type often was eaten to conclude the meal. I have included four recipes here—a lamb recipe (*Ibrahimiya*), a chicken recipe (*Shaljamiya*), a cold dish recipe (*Bahinjan mahshi*), and a date dish recipe (*Rutab mu’assal*). Because specific quantities are rarely given in medieval Arabic cookbooks, one must do some guessing, especially with respect to spices and condiments. Essentially, the cook is advised to season to taste, “God willing” (the formula with which many recipes conclude). The recipes below are taken from David Waines, *In a Caliph’s Kitchen* (London: Riad el-Rayyes Books, 1989). As the title indicates, these are dishes that would be found in the kitchens of the caliphs and other elites of medieval Islamic society. Waines recreates the medieval recipes into specific Western measurements in quantities sufficient to feed four.

1. **Ibrahimiya**—made with lamb (named after the eight-century gourmand, Ibrahim ibn al-Mahdi, the brother of Harun al-Rashid) Cut the meat into medium sized pieces, and place in a casserole with water to cover, salt to
taste, and boil until the juices are given off. Throw in a bag of stout cotton containing coriander, ginger, pepper, all ground fine, then add some pieces of cinnamon bark and mastic. Cut up two or three onions very small and throw in. Mince red meat and make into kabobs as usual, and add. When the ingredients are cooked, remove the bag of seasonings. Add to the broth the juice of sweet old grapes or, if unprocurable, of fresh grapes, squeezing in the hand without skinning, or else distilled vinegar. The juice is strained then sweet almonds are chopped fine and moistened in water, the grape juice is poured on them, and the mixture is sweetened slightly with white sugar, so as not to be too sour. Leave over the fire an hour to settle. Wipe the sides of the casserole with a clean cloth and sprinkle with rose water. When settled, remove. (Waines, 33)

2. **Shaljamiya**—made with chicken and turnips (*shaljam*, hence the name, *shaljamiya*) Take the breasts of chicken or other fowl, cut into thin slices and place in a pot with a lot of oil adding water to cover. Remove the scum. Throw in chick peas and olive oil and the white of onion and when cooked, sprinkle on top with pepper and cumin. Next take the turnip and, boil it until cooked and then mash it so that no hard bits remain in it. Strain in a sieve and place in the pot. Then take shelled almonds and put in a stone mortar adding to it a piece of cheese and Bray very fine. Break over this the whites of five eggs and pound until it becomes very soft. Put this mixture over the turnip and if there is milk in it, put in a bit of nard and leave on the fire to settle. Serve it with mustard. (Waines, 35)

3. **Badhinjan mahshi**—cold dish made with eggplant Take the eggplant and stew it. Cut it up into small pieces after stewing. Next take a serving dish and put into it vinegar, white sugar and crushed almonds, saffron, caraway and cinnamon. Then take the eggplant and the fried onion and put them in the dish. Pour oil over it and serve, God willing. (Waines, 37)

4. **Rutab mu’assal**—“Honeyed Dates” Take freshly gathered dates and lay in the shade and air for a day. Then remove the stones and stuff with peeled almonds. For every ten *ratl* of dates take two *ugiya* of honey. Boil over the fire with two *ugiya* of rose water and half a dirham of saffron, then throw in the dates, stirring for an hour. Remove and allow to cool. When cold, sprinkle with fine-ground sugar scented with musk, camphor and hyacinth. Put into glass preserving jars, sprinkling on top some of the scented ground sugar. Cover until the weather is cold and chafing dishes are brought in (Waines, 39)

**Measurements used in medieval Arabic cooking**

1 *ratl* = 12 *ugiya* = 16 ounces = 1 pint  
1 *ugiya* = 10 *dirhams*  
1 *dirham* = 6 *daniq*

Appendix: Medieval Islamic Caliphs

Rashidun Caliphs
Abu Bakr (632–634)
Umar (634–644)
Uthman (644–656)
‘Ali ibn Abi Talib (656–661)

Umayyad Caliphs (Damascus)
Mu’awiyah I (661–680)
Yazid (680–683)
Mu’awiyah II (683)
Marwan I (684–685)
Abd al-Malik (685–705)
al-Walid (705–715)
Sulayman (715–717)
Umar II (717–720)
Yazid II (720–724)
Hisham (724–743)
al-Walid II (743–744)
Yazid III (744)
Ibrahim (744)
Marwan II (744–750)

Abbasid Caliphs (Baghdad)
al-Saffah (749–754)
al-Nansur (754–775)
al-Mahdi (775–785)
al-Hadi (785–786)
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al-Hasan (d. 669)
al-Husayn (d. 680)
Ali Zayn al-Abidin (d. 713)
Muhammad al-Baqir (d. 735)
Ja’far al-Sadiq (d. 765)
Musa al-Kazim (d. 799)
Ali al-Rida (d. 818)
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Preface for Users of Global Medieval Life and Culture

Two concepts have dominated the twenty-first century: globalization and the information explosion facilitated by the Internet. When we decided to present a new history of the medieval world—also called the Middle Ages—we knew these modern principles could help guide us to new insights into the past. In these volumes, globalization shapes the content that we have chosen to cover, and the electronic age has guided our organization. In addition, the features are carefully considered to make these volumes engaging and pedagogically useful.

Global Content

The medieval age was a European concept. From about the fourteenth century, Europeans defined the 1,000 years from the fall of the Roman Empire to the Renaissance as the “middle,” separating the classical world from the “modern” one. Practically from the time of this designation, scholars have argued about whether this periodization makes sense, but scholarly arguments have not substantially changed the designation. Textbooks and curricula have kept the period as a separate entity, and we study the medieval world that extends from about 400 to 1400 c.e. with undiminished fascination.

Scholars of medieval Europe have shown that, during this formative period, many of the ideas and institutions developed that shape our modern world. The rise of democratic institutions, a prosperous middle class, and a vibrant Christianity are just a few of the developments that marked medieval Europe. These are some of the reasons that have kept the field of study vibrant. But what of the world?

Scholarship has disproved the Eurocentric analysis that defined the period of the Middle Ages. Exciting innovations took place all over the world during this pivotal millennium. Religious movements such as the rise of Islam and the spread of Buddhism irrevocably shaped much of the world, innovations in transportation allowed people to settle islands throughout the Pacific, and agricultural improvements stimulated empires in South America.

Furthermore, these societies did not develop in isolation. Most people remember Marco Polo’s visit to the China of the Yuan Dynasty, but his voyage was not an exception. People, goods, and ideas spread all across the Eurasian land mass and down into Africa. This encyclopedia traces the global connections that fueled the worldwide developments of the Middle Ages.
To emphasize the global quality of this reference work, we have organized the volumes by regions. Volume 1 covers Europe and the Americas. We begin with Europe because this was the region that first defined the medieval world. At first glance, linking Europe with the Americas (which were not colonized until after the Middle Ages) might seem to join the most disparate of regions. However, we do so to remind us that Vikings crossed the North Atlantic in the Middle Ages to discover this rich new land, which was already inhabited by prosperous indigenous peoples. The organization of this first volume demonstrates that Europe never developed in isolation!

Volume 2 considers the Middle East and Africa. These regions saw the growth of Islam and the vibrant interactions that took place in the diverse continent of Africa. Volume 3 takes on the enormous task of focusing on South Asia, East Asia, and Oceania.

This organization forces us to compromise on some content. Because we are not taking a chronological approach, we must collapse 1,000 years of history in regions that had many diverse developments. We partially address this issue in the Historical Overviews at the beginning of each section. These essays will point readers to the varied historical events of the regions.

However, we gain modern insights through our on Global Ties essays within each section. These essays offer a great contrast with other medieval works because they show the significance of global connections throughout this millennium. Readers will learn that globalization was not invented in the twenty-first century. Indeed, the great developments of the past flourished because people from diverse cultures communicated with each other. Perhaps this was the greatest contribution of the Middle Ages, and this encyclopedia highlights it.

**Organization for the Internet Age**

The Internet brings an astonishing amount of information to us with a quick search. If we Google Marco Polo, castles, or windmills, we are given an immediate array of information more quickly than we could have imagined a mere decade ago. However, as teachers too readily realize when reading the results of such searches, this is not enough. The very volume of information sometimes makes it hard to see how these disparate elements of the past fit together and how they compare with other elements. We have organized this encyclopedia to address these issues.

Each volume contains two or three regions of the world, and each region includes seven in-depth essays that cover the following topics:

1. Historical Overview
2. Religion
3. Economy
4. The Arts
5. Society
6. Science and Technology
7. Global Ties

These essays provide coherent descriptions of each part of the world. They allow readers readily to compare developments in different regions, so one can
really understand how the economy in Africa differed from mercantile patterns in China. In-depth essays like this not only provide clear information but model historical writing. But there is more.

Like other good encyclopedias, we have A–Z entries offering in-depth information on many topics—from the general (food, money, law) to the specific (people, events, and places). All the essays indicate the A–Z entries in bold, much as an online essay might have hyperlinks to more detailed information, so readers can immediately see what topics offer more in-depth information and how each fits in with the larger narrative. In the same way, readers who begin with the A–Z entries know that they can see how their topic fits in a larger picture by consulting the in-depth essays. Finally, this integration of essays with A–Z entries provides an easy way to do cross-cultural comparisons. Readers can compare roles of women in Islam and Asia, then see how women fit in the larger context of society by consulting the two larger essays.

This is a reference work that builds on the rapid information accessible online while doing what books do best: offer a thoughtful integration of knowledge. We have enhanced what we hope is a useful organization by adding a number of special features designed to help the readers learn as much as possible about the medieval millennium.

**Features**

- **Primary Documents.** In this information age it is easy to forget that historians find out about the past primarily by reading the written voices left by the ancients. To keep this recognition of the interpretive nature of the past, we have included primary documents for all regions of the world. These short works are designed to engage readers by bringing the past to life, and all have headnotes and cross-references to help readers put the documents in context.
- **Chronologies.** The chronologies will help readers quickly identify key events in a particular region during the medieval period.
- **Maps.** History and geography are inextricably linked, and no more so than in a global encyclopedia. The maps throughout the text will help readers locate the medieval world in space as well as time.
- **Illustrations.** All the illustrations are chosen to be historical evidence not ornamentation. All are drawn from medieval sources to show the Middle Ages as the people at the time saw themselves. The captions encourage readers to analyze the content of the images.
- **Complete Index.** The key to gathering information in the twenty-first century is the ability to rapidly locate topics of interest. We have recognized this with the A–Z entries linked to the essays and the extensive cross-referencing. However, nothing can replace a good index, so we have made sure there is a complete and cumulative index that links the information among the volumes.
- **Bibliographies.** Each of the long essays contains a list of recommended readings. These readings will not only offer more information to those interested in following up on the topic but also will serve as further information for the A–Z entries highlighted within the essays. This approach furthers our desire to integrate the information we are presenting.
- **Appendixes.** The appendixes provide basic factual information, such as important regional dynasties or time period designations.
The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Global Medieval Life and Culture has been a satisfying project to present. In over 30 years of research and study of the Middle Ages, we have never lost the thrill of exploring a culture that’s so different from our own, yet was formative in creating who we have become. Furthermore, we are delighted to present this age in its global context, because then as now (indeed throughout history) globalization has shaped the growth of culture. In this information age, it is good to remember that we have always lived linked together on spaceship earth. We all hope readers will share our enthusiasm for this millennium.
SOUTH ASIA

Raman N. Seylon, with the assistance of Joyce E. Salisbury and John A. Wagner
Chronology

c. 100 B.C.E.–100 C.E.  Composition of Bhagavad Gita

c. 100–200 C.E.  Compilation of the early law code of Yajnavalkya

c. 200–400  Composition of Bharata’s Treatise on Dramaturgy

c. 300  Mahabharata brought to its final written form

c. 300–500  A sect of Nestorian (Syrian) Christians is in existence at Cochin in South India

c. 300–888  Hindu Pallava dynasty rules at Kanchi in south India

c. 320–335  Reign of Chandra Gupta I, who begins expansion of the Gupta Empire across North India

c. 335–375  Reign of Samudra Gupta, son and successor of Chandra Gupta, who extended Gupta dominance to the south and west

c. 375–415  Reign of Chandra Gupta II, who extended the Gupta Empire westward to the coast of the Arabian Sea; the reign is also noted for the flourishing of Hindu culture, particularly in art, literature, and science

c. 380–450  Life of medieval India’s greatest poet, Kalidasa

c. 399–412  Faxian, a Chinese Buddhist monk, visits China to collect samples of Buddhist literature; he leaves a detailed account of his sojourn in Gupta India

c. 400–500  Composition of Vatsyayana’s Aphorisms of Love

c. 415–455  Reign of Kumara Gupta is a period of peace and political stability known today as India’s “Golden Age”

c. 454  First Hun (Huna) invasion of northern India is largely repelled by the Guptas

c. 455–487  Reign of Skanda Gupta, who is generally considered the last of the great Gupta rulers; his reign was marked by attacks by outside invaders, especially the Huns, which greatly weakened the Gupta state militarily and financially

c. 477  Guptas repel another Hun attack

c. 484  Huns conquer Persia under the leadership of Toramana

c. 495  Huns invade North India overrunning much of the Gupta Empire

528  Yasodharman, king of the central Indian state of Mawa, defeated the Huns, thereby checking Hun expansion and beginning the process of driving them back into the Punjab by the early 540s
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>c. 540</td>
<td>End of the Gupta dynasty</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 550–753</td>
<td>Rule of the Hindu Western Chalukya dynasty in the Deccan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>606–647</td>
<td>Rule of Harsha at Kanauj in North India reconstitutes some of the Gupta state; Banabhatta (Bana), a Sanskrit scholar who was court poet, leaves a biography of Harsha (<em>Harsha Carita</em>), which is an important source for the early part of the reign</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 629–645</td>
<td>Xuanzang, a Chinese Buddhist scholar, visits India and writes an account of India during the reign of Harsha</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 630–970</td>
<td>Rule of Hindu Eastern Chalukya dynasty in the Deccan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>644</td>
<td>Arabs conquer Balochistan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 647–700</td>
<td>Disintegration of Harsha’s kingdom into various smaller Hindu states</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>711–715</td>
<td>Muslims under Muhammad ibn Qasim conquer Sind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 760–1142</td>
<td>Hindu Pala dynasty rules in Bihar and Bengal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 907–1310</td>
<td>Hindu Chola Empire is ruled from Tanjore in South India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>962</td>
<td>Foundation of the Turkish Muslim principality of Ghaznin in western Afghanistan</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 973–1189</td>
<td>Second Hindu Chalukya dynasty rules western and central Deccan</td>
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<td>988</td>
<td>Capture of Kabul by Sabuktgin of Ghaznin</td>
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<td>999–1026</td>
<td>Mahmud of Ghazni raids India</td>
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<td>c. 1000–1100</td>
<td>Rise of Hindu Tantrism</td>
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<td>1021</td>
<td>Foundation of Ghaznavid principality at Lahore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1040</td>
<td>Ghaznavids defeated at the Battle of Dandanqan by the Seljuks, who seize control of the bulk of the Ghaznavid territories</td>
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<td>c. 1097–1223</td>
<td>Sena dynasty rules in Bengal</td>
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<td>1151</td>
<td>Ghazni is burned by the ruler of the rising Muslim principality of Ghor in central Afghanistan</td>
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<td>1170s–1206</td>
<td>Muhammad of Ghor, governor and general of the Ghorid dynasty, captures Lahore and destroys the Ghaznavid state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1192</td>
<td>Muhammad of Ghor defeats the Hindu ruler Prithviraj Chauhan at the Second Battle of Tarain, thus extending Muslim Ghorid rule into North India, with headquarters at Delhi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1192–1206</td>
<td>Ghorid conquest of North India</td>
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<td>c. 1200–1300</td>
<td>Composition of Sharngadeva’s treatise on music, <em>Sangitaratnakara</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>1206</td>
<td>Upon the death of Muhammad of Ghor, Ghorid general Qutb-ud-din Aybak declares his independence as Sultan of Delhi, thereby establishing the Delhi Sultanate, which rules in North India under various dynasties until 1526</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1211–1236</td>
<td>Rule of Iltutmish as sultan of Delhi</td>
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<tr>
<td>1223–1224</td>
<td>First Mongol invasion of South Asia</td>
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<td>1236–1240</td>
<td>Rule in Delhi of Razia Sultana, one of the few female rulers of medieval India</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1266–1287 Sultan Balban consolidates the power of the Delhi sultanate

1296–1316 Reign of Sultan Allauddin Khilji, who extends the dominion of the Delhi sultanate into South India and checks Mongol invasions of North India

1306–1310 Conquest of much of South India by Delhi sultanate; foundation of independent Muslim Bahmani sultanate in the Deccan

1325–1351 Rule in Delhi of Sultan Muhammad bin Tughluq

1336–1565 Vijayanagara, the last great Hindu kingdom, flourishes in South India

1351–1388 Rule in Delhi of Sultan Firuz Shah Tughluq, whose reign marks the end of the Delhi sultanate’s imperial expansion

1398–1399 Timur (Timur the Lame or Tamerlane), a Turkish-Mongol invader, captures and sacks Delhi, killing or enslaving almost the entire population

c. 1399–1450 Rise of various independent regional Muslim sultanates in North India

1451–1526 Revival of the Delhi sultanate under the Lodi dynasty

1469 Birth of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism

1504 Babur, a descendent of Timur and Chinggis (Genghis) Khan, captures Kabul in Afghanistan

1526 Babur defeats the Lodi sultan of Delhi at the Battle of Panipat and seizes control of Delhi and Agra, thereby ending the Delhi sultanate and establishing the Muslim Mughal Empire in North India

c. 1542 Francis Xavier, a Catholic missionary from Spain, arrives in India
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Gupta Empire under Chandra Gupta II, c. 375–415

Gupta Empire under Chandra Gupta II, c. 375–415
Pre-Muslim India, c. 1200
Delhi Sultanate, 1236
Delhi Sultanate, 1325
India, c. 1500
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Overview and Topical Essays

1. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The Imperial Guptas

By the start of the third century C.E., India was entering a period of political disunity, with northern India ruled by various local rulers and chieftains. The reunification of northern India occurred with the formation of the Gupta Empire (c. 320–550 C.E.). The Gupta ruling house was centered in the Magada region of the Ganges Valley, which had been the center of North Indian political culture since the time of Alexander the Great’s invasion in the fourth century B.C.E. Little is known about the origins of the Guptas, but, according to inscriptive evidence, the earliest Gupta rulers were Sri Gupta and Ghatotkacha Gupta (Keay, 134), who may have been minor princes in the area. The Puranas tell us that the early Gupta rulers dominated the area from the ancient city of Prayag (present-day Allahabad) to territories in Magada, but they do not seem to have controlled the capital of Magada, the city of Pataliputra, which was the cultural capital of this period. Commercial dominance, not military prowess, may have led to the political rise of the Guptas, because they were considered members of the merchant or Vaishya caste, which may have been the dominant caste of this region (Keay, 134).

In February 320 C.E., the accession of the first major Gupta monarch, Chandra Gupta, laid the foundation for the most splendid era of Indian history since the demise of the Mauryan dynasty in the second century B.C.E. (Basham, 1951, 63). Chandra Gupta made the year of his accession the year 1 of a new calendar system and took the lofty Sanskrit title *maha-raja-adhi-raja*, meaning “supreme ruler of the great kings,” which was used previously by the Kushana dynasty, rulers of northwestern India and Afghanistan. Under Chandra, Magada and the city of Pataliputra, which had been the capital of the first India-wide state, the Mauryan Empire (320–200 B.C.E.), again became the cultural and political capital of northern India. Chadra’s regional dominance rested in large part upon a favorable marriage alliance with the ancient and prestigious Lichavi clan, which had long ruled neighboring north Indian territories that extended to the foothills of the Himalayas. The Gupta–Lichavi marriage alliance may have united both families and their neighboring kingdoms (Wolpert, 86). The importance of this marriage alliance is illustrated by the minting of special commemorative coins that bear images of Chandra Gupta and his Lichavi queen, Kumara Devi, on one side, and a goddess seated on a lion with the inscription “Lichavi” on the reverse side. On his coins, Samudra Gupta
(335–375 C.E.), the son of Chandra Gupta, emphasized his paternal lineage, rather than his descent from a Gupta ruler. Such practices bear testimony to the high prestige of the Lichavi name during this period (Kulke and Rothermund, 80).

Samudra Gupta expanded the boundaries of the kingdom to include Punjab in the west, Assam in the east, Kashmir to the north, and the Northern Tamil country to the south. Called by some historians the “Napoleon of India,” Samudra Gupta recreated the territorial extent of the Mauryan Empire. An inscription placed during the Gupta Period on a preexisting iron pillar built by the Mauryan ruler Asoka in the city of Allahabad strongly suggests Samudra Gupta’s ambition to mimic his Mauryan predecessors and establish an India-wide empire. Although the Mauryan state had strived for a more centralized, direct rule than the Guptas loose tributary alliance, the Gupta state was the major power center in most of northern India in the early part of the first millennium C.E.

Samudra Gupta’s political successors continued his policy of territorial expansion with mixed success, as confirmed by a Sanskrit play composed in the sixth century by Visakhadatta. Titled Devi Chandra Gupta, the “Queen of Chandra Gupta,” the play tells of a ruler named Rama Gupta, who briefly succeeded Samudra Gupta. Most historians had doubted the existence of Rama Gupta, but discoveries of copper coins bearing his name confirm his reign. According to the play, when Rama Gupta attacked the kingdom of the Shakas to the west, he was defeated. Seeking to prevent his own capture, Rama Gupta was forced to give serious consideration to the Shaka ruler’s demand for the surrender of Rama Gupta’s chief queen, Dhruva Devi. This humiliating option was unacceptable to the king’s younger brother, Chandra, who undertook a daring plot to assassinate the Shaka ruler. Chandra disguised himself as the beautiful Dhruva Devi and was escorted into the enemy camp, where he slew the Shaka ruler when he embraced his much desired price. In the resulting confusion, Chandra made his escape. Disgraced by his attempted dishonorable, Rama Gupta was soon replaced by his brother, who assumed the dynastic title Chandra Gupta II (Keay, 141). It is impossible to verify whether such an event is historically accurate, or whether it is what one historian calls a formulaic narrative that both obscures and legitimates an internal palace coup.

Chandra Gupta II (c. 375–415 C.E.) conquered large areas and forced the Shaka rulers to pay homage, though they were not overthrown and continued to control vast areas of western India from their capital at Ujjain (modern Ujjain). The Shakas ruled over the western coastal area that included what is today the state of Gujarat, as well as the rich ports along the Arabian Sea, which had facilitated long-distance oceanic trade for over 2,000 years. Their fortuitous geographical location of these ports allowed them to benefit not only from the Indian Ocean trade but also from the overland trade routes of the Silk Road that passed through India.

Chandra Gupta II, like earlier Gupta rulers, also expanded his power through matrimonial alliances, in this case, by marrying his daughter to the powerful rulers of central India. He also issued special gold commemorative coinage to celebrate his military victories and assumed the title of Vikramadita (“one whose splendor equals one thousand suns”), which was the name of a legendary ruler who founded the Vikrama era, an important Hindu dating system begun in 58 B.C.E. and still used in North India. The fifth major Gupta ruler
was Kumara Gupta (c. 415–455 C.E.), whose reign marked a period of peace and tranquility in north India. During this period, other great empires, such as the Roman Empire in Europe and the Han Empire in China, were facing nomadic invasions and political turmoil. The sociopolitical tranquility and cultural and scientific creativity that defines this period in Indian history have led historians to characterize it as the “Golden Era,” when the cultural fruits of Gupta peace spread to wider areas in western, central, and eastern Asia through trade routes.

The Guptas ruled during a period when there was a revival of Sanskrit scholarship in the fields of literature and philosophy. This was the era of Kalidasa, who is considered the Shakespeare of Sanskrit literature. Kalidasa is known today for two epic lyrical works that have survived to our time. One is a poem titled Meghaduta or Cloud Messenger, and the other a drama titled Abhijnana-Sakuntala or The Recognition of Sakuntala, which is considered his masterpiece. Other lesser known pieces that have survived include Malavikagnimitram (Malavika and Agnimitra), a comedy set in the palace harem, and Vikramorvasi or Urvasi, a love story. During the Gupta Period, much of the great epic poetry that had been hitherto transmitted orally was written down, including the great epics Ramayana and Mahabharata. These two epics grew from simpler origins to poems of great length by picking up various additions, and verses were added in their surviving modern form. They have been the major sources of Indian high culture ever since.

Apart from Sanskrit literature, the Gupta Period was also noted for the development of the Sanskrit language. Official Gupta correspondence employed Sanskrit, which was as anachronistic in India as was Latin during the European Middle Ages; everyday use of both languages has long since faded away. Even the Mauryan dynasty, which ruled some 500 years earlier, used Prakrit, a derivation of Sanskrit, in its official inscriptions. Prakrit may have been closer to the common language spoken by the people. During the Gupta era, Sanskrit law codes called Dharmasastra and the manuals of statecraft called Arthasastra were revised and codified. These texts are ideal descriptive manuals rather than actual rules to be enforced. Gupta rulers and elite patronized scholars and artists and set aside funds for maintaining higher centers of learning, such as the prestigious Buddhist University at Taxila in northwest India and another at Nalinda in the Gangatic Valley. These institutions were visited and attended by Chinese scholar-monks, including Faxian and Xuanzang, both of whom have left valuable descriptions. Xuan Tang’s description is much more vivid and comprehensive and, therefore, is of greater value to historians. He left us detailed eyewitness accounts of the people, the land, and the kingdoms of India in his travelogue “Records of the western regions” (Si-Yu-Ki). It provides a valuable source for seventh-century India and chronicles the decline of Buddhism in India and Indonesia before the advent of Islam (see “Religion” section).

As under the Mauryan Empire, most trade was regulated and undertaken by the state. The Gupta rulers made private fortunes from their control of mines and their commercial activities. The private sector also played a vital role and was regulated by great caste guilds. Evidence suggests that a cash-based economy was in operation since the second century B.C.E., when copper and gold coinage may have been introduced from the Middle East. But for everyday trading, barter was the norm, because there seemed to be insufficient coinage for free
circulation. Generally speaking, ancient and medieval Indian coinage is crude and unattractive when compared to that issued by the Bactrian Greek rulers of Northwest India, whose coinage is among the finest in the ancient world (see Money and Exchange Systems). The Gupta coinage remains an exception; it is far clearer in its fine details and more attractive than any issued in India. After the Guptas, the numismatic standards declined quickly until the days of the Moghul Empire when portraits of the rulers again became reasonably recognizable. It has been suggested that coins issued by the Guptas were not actual tokens of exchange but rather commemorative issues. As noted by Xuanzang, even as late as the seventh century, most local commerce was conducted by barter.

In a strict sense, the Gupta rule did not politically unify the territories it covered, but it did so ideologically in terms of the Hindu ideals of chakravatin, or universal ruler. Samudra Gupta, being faithful to this Hindu Imperial ideology, performed the great horse sacrifice, Ashwa Metha, and proclaimed himself the universal ruler (Wolpert, 87). Recent scholarship sees this more as a case of political propaganda than as actual reality. According to this view, not even the central core of the Guptas’ realm was fully under their rule. Various unsubdued wild tribes still held their autonomy, though the Guptas’ political muscle probably did prevent these tribes from making raids into settled areas. This core area was surrounded by a concentric ring of frontier kingdoms, whose rulers were expected to pay tribute and to act as vassals of Samudra Gupta, which included attending his court for important functions. The early Indian form of vassalage differed from the European concept of vassalage; in Europe, vassals were expected to supply provisions and troops during military conflict. In later times in India, a class of tributary princes called samantas (relations) rose to high positions in the court and came closer to the Western type of feudal vassal (Kulke and Rothermund, 88).

**Gupta Society and Religion**

Much of what we know about life in medieval India comes from two early Chinese scholar-pilgrims, Faxian and Xuanzang. The Buddhist scholar, Faxian, who spent several years in India during the reign of Chandra Gupta II in the fifth century c.e., has left the following description of Gupta society:

The people are very well off, without the poll tax or official restrictions. The kings govern without corporal punishment, and criminals are fined according to circumstances either lightly or heavily. Even in cases of repeated rebellion, they only cut off the right hand. The king’s personal attendants who guard him on the right and left have fixed salaries. Throughout the country, the people kill no living thing, nor drink wine, nor do they eat garlic or onions, with the exception of chandalas only. These chandalas are named “evil man” and dwelt apart from others. If they entered a town, or a village, or a market, they make a sound with a piece of wood to announce their presence and to themselves separate themselves, then men not knowing who they are avoid coming in contact with them. In this country they do not keep swine or fowl, and do not deal in cattle. They have no slaughter house or wine shop in their market places. In selling, they use cowrie shells (as small demotional currency). The chandalas only hunt and sell flesh.

Like traders before him, Faxian came to India using branches of the Silk Road: a major overland trade route to India. He entered India by the Kara
Koram mountain trails, traveled along the Gangatic basin, and visited in safety all the major holy sites associated with the Buddha’s life. His mention of the *chandalas*, whose treatment he found degrading, is one of the earliest references to a segment of Indian society later referred to as the “untouchables.”

The *chandalas* were outcasts by reason of their degrading occupation: They were removers of human and animal carrion. This polluting task done made *chandalas* agents of contamination, or pollution, and, as a result, they were ostracized by the rest of society, which, paradoxically, needed this essential service provided by the *chandalas*. The *chandalas* had to make warning sounds so that caste-conscious shoppers and sellers could take necessary precautions to avoid them by diverting their gaze, which was believed to secure them from being contaminated. Curiously, Faxian himself failed to criticize this practice, which seems to us as a blatant violation of human dignity. But Faxian was certainly impressed by the peace and tranquility that India enjoyed under Gupta rule, and his glowing description of Indian society can possibly be read as a critique of the political disunion and social turmoil that had afflicted his Chinese homeland since the fall of the Han dynasty in the early third century C.E.

Others sources also indicate that Gupta society was industrious and contented. Highly influential guilds or *sreni* regulated an elaborate system of quality control, pricing, distribution, and training for every craft. They also acted in the capacity of bankers, even to the royal court. Their governing body, or *Siристем*, met regularly in a joint council that was much like a chamber of commerce. Trading was extensive, by land and sea, inside and outside India (see “Economy” section).

When Faxian returned to China, he did not use the long overland route but took an Indian sailing vessel that was involved in trade with Southeast Asia, and possibly with China. These vessels were also notoriously unreliable. From the Bengali port of Tamralipi, Faxian was almost shipwrecked off the coast of Burma, and the later Chinese traveler Xuanzang reached one of the major Indonesian islands (either Java or Sumatra), or part of Western Malaysia, which he called Ye-poti. Here, just as in other ports of Indo China, Faxian noted the overwhelming presence of a Brahmin community, which indicates Hinduism as the dominant faith, and he notes that the laws of the Buddhists were less well known. After more mishaps, Faxian returned to China, again in the company of the Brahmins, and possibly in Indian sailing vessels.

From Faxian’s writings, we find that urban life in Magada was very impressive; the towns of Magada were the largest and its people, according to Faxian, were prosperous and virtuous. We also see the return of Brahminical Hinduism to the center of religious life and learn that the historic sites associated with Buddhism, such as the city of Kapilavastu, the birthplace of the historic Buddha, look somewhat dilapidated. Faxian found Kapilavastu a great desert without a king or people, and the impressive palace of Ashoka was in ruins. However, thousands of Buddhist *stupas* still dotted the countryside (just as they do in present-day Burma or Thailand) (see *Temples, Buddhist: Stupas*). So, despite a decline in popularity from the time of Megasthenes’ visit to India in the third century B.C.E., Buddhism still enjoyed a wide following in large sections of the country, where Buddhist monasteries still housed thousands of monks.

Faxian was not at all concerned with contemporary political affairs and says nothing about Chandra Gupta II or his court. But the Chinese traveler, like a
present-day tourist, was greatly impressed by spectacular religious ceremonies, such as the annual cast or *ratha* festival in the city of Pataliputra. This occasion was marked by a magnificent procession of some 20-wheeled juggernauts in the form of *stupas*. These had sharp bristling towers with the images of the deities decorated in gold and silver, including seated figures of the Buddha attended by standing *Bodhisattvas*. As this procession approached the city, Faxian watched the *Bramacharias*, or Brahmin students, come forth and offer their invitation for the procession to enter the *Bodhisattvas* in their giant carts; then, one after another, the carts entered the city of Pataliputra. 

According to Mahayana belief, *Bodhisattvas* were individuals who attained enlightenment and were eligible to enter the state of *nirvana* after death but, due to their great compassion, chose instead to remain on earth in spirit form to help all human beings achieve relief from the cycle of life. For the Orthodox, or Theravada Buddhism, the concept of *Bodhisattvas* only applied to Siddhartha Gautama himself, and they denounced the teachings of the Mahayana as being inspired by demons. But to the proponents of Mahayana, such ideas extended the hope of salvation to the masses. Mahayana Buddhists revered saintly individuals who, according to the tradition, had become *Bodhisattva* at death, and erected temples in their honor so that the whole population could pray and make ritual offerings. The most popular *Bodhisattva* is Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, whose name, in Sanskrit, means “lord of compassion.” Perhaps due to this identification of Avalokitesvara with the concept of mercy, in China where he was transformed in China into a female goddess known as Gwan Yin, the goddess of mercy.

Here, perhaps, is an example of religious ecumenism that was practiced in Gupta India, which witnessed a resurgence of the Hindu religious authority. Major systems of Brahminical post-Vedic and pre-Bhakti or devotional Hindu philosophy were being articulated and expanded from the earlier teachings of the Upanishads. The Vedanta philosophy posed a powerful alternate version to Buddhism and Brahminical Hinduism began to regain its ascendancy over Buddhism in India. 

Caste rules were elaborated and enforced with greater vigor. The high-level Gupta administrators and wealthy landlords gave patronage to Brahmins in the form of land grants or court positions. The Brahmin priests also asserted their role in ritual performance. Buddhism, which had flourished through the patronage of earlier empires, and had the support of the business classes, let the Brahmin priests handle many of the ritual performances and thus began to decline as the basis for everyday forms of devotion. Although the Gupta rulers had adopted the Brahminical Hindu faith, identifying themselves with the Hindu god Vishnu and performing ancient Vedic sacrifices, they granted endowments to Buddhist and Brahmin establishments in an even-handed manner (see *Caste System*).

Yet the physical separation between the Buddhist and Brahminical establishments implied by Faxian may be significant. Buddhist monasteries are usually located near enough to the main centers of population to collect alms and instruct the laity, but far enough from urban centers for peace and seclusion. The term “Brahmacharia,” on the other hand, which technically means unmarried Brahmin students, is here employed to mean the entire Brahmin educational establishment. It was located within the city, close to the court and the wealthier segment of the population. So what Faxian was witnessing, as he
watched the religious procession of the giant *stupa* carts, is a clear example of Buddhist rituals being absorbed by Brahminical Hinduism. Major Buddhist rituals had become a Brahmin monopoly and were undertaken under Brahmin supervision. These interactions often led to some mutual hostility between Brahmins and Buddhists.

During the early Gupta Period, at least for a while, Buddhism was able to counter Brahminical Hinduism with its own salvationist creed of Mahayana, which also emphasized devotion. But the role of Buddhism as a popular faith in India was coming to a conclusion during the Gupta Period.

**India after the Guptas**

By the late fifth century C.E., the Gupta Empire was coming under pressure from the Huns, or Hunas, as they are referred to in Indian records. Called *xiongnu* in Chinese chronicles, these nomadic invaders from the Central Asian steppes attacked India through the northwest corridor. One of the last great Gupta emperors Skanda Gupta (455–467 C.E.) repulsed the first major Hun invasion. He mentions the victory in an inscription that refers to the Huns as *mlecchas*, or “foreign barbarians.” But the continuing Hun presence on the northwest frontier disrupted international trade along the Silk Road and reduced Gupta wealth.

Skanda Gupta’s successors apparently could not hold the empire together, and regional strongmen began to achieve autonomy. The Huns invaded again around 500, and for the next half-century controlled much of Central India from their political centre at Bamiyan in Afghanistan. The Huns in India earned a reputation for acts of great cruelty, which were reported not only by the Indians, but also, in 520, by the Chinese ambassador to the Hun court at Gandara and, some 20 years later, by the Greek sea traveler Cosmos. Though brutal, Hun rule was mercifully brief; by 528 a coalition of Indian princes drove the Huns northwest, as far as Kashmir. About a generation later, Turkish and Persian armies defeated the main Hun concentration (Kulke and Rohermund, 91), thereby removing them as a threat to India.

The social impact of Hun rule was traumatic and long-lasting. As recorded by the Chinese scholar-monk, Fa Hsiun, the tranquil nature of North Indian society was forever lost. The Hun invasion rippled an already enfeeble Gupta state, and the defense of distant frontiers exhausted the imperial treasury; the empire collapsed by the year 550 as regional princes openly declared their independence and carved out territories. Pataliputra, the cultural capital of North India for nearly 1,000 years, was replaced by the city of Kanya Kubja, or Kanauj, which remained the cultural capital for the next 500 years. In 606, a 16-year-old prince named Harsha-Vardana, or Harsha as he is popularly known, was offered the crown by the magnates of Kanya Kubja. Although not strictly of Gupta lineage, Harsha restored the better days of Gupta rule during his 40-year reign.

Harsha is the best-known Indian ruler of this period because his biography was recorded by his court poet Banabhatta (known as Bana), who was a somewhat rakish Brahmin with a shady past. Bana’s *Harsha Carita*, a prose account of Harsha’s rise to power, is the first historical biography in Sanskrit, as well as a masterpiece of medieval Indian literature.
Bana’s work records only the early years of Harsha. For the later years of Harsha’s life, we have an eyewitness account by the Chinese scholar-monk Xuanzang (596–664), who, like Faxian 200 years earlier, described his travels through India. Xuanzang stayed in India from 630 to 644. He was from a privileged background, a member of the Sui-Tang gentry from the city of Luoyang. Early in his life, he and his older brother developed a deep appreciation for Buddhism, which he embraced, and, by his late teens, he had established himself as an authority in the Theravada and Mahayana branches of Buddhism in China. He also gained a reputation as a Confucian scholar and as a learned and eloquent monk.

Dissatisfied with the existing translations of Buddhist doctrines, which contained contradictions and errors, he sought to study the original Pali cannons in India. In 629, Xuanzang left for India in great secrecy against the wishes of the reigning Tang emperor Tang Tai zong. Traveling by the northern route through Central Asia, he crossed high mountain passes and bleak deserts, barely escaping bandits. Xuanzang was considered charming and courtly and was honored by the great monarchs of Northern India, including Harsha and Baskara Varman of Kama Rupa or Assam. Xuanzang also stayed at the Buddhist center of learning at Nalanda for 5 years, while studying Buddhist philosophy with the great scholar of the age, Silabhadra.

It was customary for the Buddhist monasteries to honor learned and visiting monks with a presentation of a precious book. Xuanzang is said to have collected some 657 volumes, many of them rare texts. These collected volumes were so bulky that they had to be carried by a pack of twenty horses along the Silk Road back to China. Xuanzang came to India when Buddhism was in a state of deep decline; he made it possible for texts on Buddhist philosophy to survive in their Chinese versions after the Pali and Sanskrit originals were long lost in India.

For the next 19 years, until his death, Xuanzang worked at translating his large collection of Sanskrit texts brought from India. Altogether he translated some seventy-five books, including sixty-five biographies of Chinese monks who visited India. The most important ones being his own and those of Faxian and I Shang. For modern secular historians, Xuanzang’s account provides valuable information about India in this period; he took meticulous notes about his personal experiences and all aspects of the societies he encountered during his travels. Largely because of this we have first-hand detailed accounts of North Indian society and cultural practices in the midseventh century and of the decayed state of central Asian Buddhism just before the advent of Islam.

Fortunately, Xuanzang’s description, unlike the earlier account of Mauryan India by the Greek traveler Megasthenes (350–290 B.C.E.), has survived intact. Although, like all Chinese Buddhist scholar-monks, Xuanzang’s main goals were to obtain primary documents of rare Buddhist texts, he was also an astute observer and had a sharp eye for local customs. He had the foresight to record much of the secular lifestyle that he witnessed.

Most popular history texts portray Harsha as the last great Buddhist ruler of India, but this is erroneous. Harsha’s enthusiasm for Buddhism may have been stimulated by his meeting with Xuanzang, who had an honored place at Harsha’s court. Evidence indicates that Harsha, although actively sponsoring Buddhism, was not a Buddhist ruler, but a Hindu. In Harsha Charita, Bana claims that Harsha belonged to the Saivaitic sect of Hinduism. Harsha’s interest in Buddhism likely came quite late and largely as a result of the influence of
Xuanzang; there is no definitive indication that he actually embraced Buddhism. But he practiced extreme tolerance toward all faiths in his realm, building monasteries for the Buddhists and temples for the Hindus. For the Buddhists, Harsha built a vihara and a temple at Nalanda, the Buddhist center of higher learning, and 1,000 stupas along the banks of the Ganges, which paralleled the actions of the great Mauryan ruler Ashoka (r. 269–232 B.C.E.). Harsha also undertook a variety of humanitarian and public welfare activities.

Xuanzang’s records also indicate that Buddhism in India was losing its appeal in favor of devotional Hinduism, most especially in the Deep South and in Tamil country, where Buddhism had ceased to exist as a living faith. In spite of Harsha’s patronage, theistic Hinduism advanced all across India at the expense of Buddhism. We also see the developments of puja as the standard Hindu form of worship, which required devotees to bring fresh fruits, seeds, sweets, and other accepted offerings to the sacred icons of Hindu deities, which were worshipped with deep devotion or bhakti.

The period also saw the development of nontraditional forms of Hinduism, which may be deemed occult or magical in form. These forms developed during the latter days of Gupta Period and include the worship of feminine deities in manners that may seem shocking or polluting to the orthodox and that fall under the category of Tantrism.

**Harsha’s Administration**

Although Harsha seems to have controlled most of North India (from Kathiwar to Bengal), his empire was decentralized and feudal in structure. Outside the immediate domain of his capital, Kanya Kubja, many vanquished rulers of
neighboring kingdoms retained their thrones. It is unclear how Harsha’s kingdom differed from that of the Guptas. According to most historians, centralized rule existed under powerful Gupta monarchs, such as Chandra Gupta II and his son, Samudra Gupta, but was restricted to the central part of the Gangetic Plain that lay between the capital of Pataliputra and the city of Madhura, near present-day Delhi. Beyond this area, there was no centralized rule. But, unlike the great Gupta monarchs, Harsha never controlled the trade routes in northwest India. As a result, he lacked the financial resources of the Guptas.

Thus, Harsha did not have ready sources of revenue to pay his officials, who were instead granted land. These grants to officials and donations to Hindu and Buddhist institutions further depleted his central treasury. Because Harsha could not afford a large bureaucracy to run territories under his control, he had to set up an alternate system of government called the *Samanta* system, where rulers of recently subjugated territories were left in place if they swore allegiance and loyalty to Harsha. This indirect and semiautonomous rule of large territories contributed to Indian regionalism.

Also promoting regionalism was the westward shift of capital from Pataliputra to Kanauj, which encouraged the growth of autonomous kingdoms around the Gangetic delta during periods of weakening central authority. Under Harsha’s successors, this eastern area was permanently lost to his kingdom. Another and more definitive contrast between Harsha’s empire and that of the early Guptas was that the founders of the Gupta dynasty had few formidable rivals within India. Harsha’s southern boundary was under the control of the powerful Chalukya ruler of the Deccan kingdom, Pulukasin II, who surprised and humbled Harsha when he sought to extend his authority southward.

Harsha stayed in touch with public opinion and maintained control over his vast domain by constantly traveling from province to province. By Harsha’s reign, the centralized administrative system devised by the Mauriyans was unworkable in the context of the prevailing socioeconomic conditions. Harsha’s extensive tours were attempts to hold together his domain by sheer force of personality. Xuanzang portrayed him as a man of intense energy and dedication. He is said to have heard the complaints of his humbler subjects with great patience in a roadside traveling pavilion. Harsha, like all medieval Indian monarchs, was also well aware of how the trappings of political power could help maintain his authority and was accompanied by a large train of attendants, including courtiers, officials, Buddhist monks, Brahmins, and a retinue of court drummers who gave weight to the king’s public actions. The literary sources also inform us that he was a loyal friend to those who knew him and was generous financially to those he favored. Harsha also loved philosophy and literature and in his leisure found time to write three competent Sanskrit dramas and three comedies, one with a religious theme.

**The Last Years of Harsha’s Rule**

Under Harsha, law and order were not as well maintained as under the early Gupta monarchs. In contrast to the account of Faxian, who was highly impressed by the general peaceful state of the country, Xuanzang, 200 years later, was robbed twice by bandits within Harsha’s domain. On one occasion, he is said to have narrowly escaped being sacrificed to Goddess Kali by highwaymen, who, like the later thugs, murdered their victims after robbing them.
Crime was a serious problem in medieval India, and local officials and military commanders tried to counteract it by maintaining large numbers of informants or "spies" and special watchmen to keep guard throughout the night in cities and villages. In some medieval kingdoms, special officers were given the task of hunting down criminals. Apart from the high crime rate, we also find unrest among Orthodox Hindus, who were enraged by Harsha's generosity and partiality toward Buddhists, which led to a plot to assassinate him. Harsha was fortunate to escape one such attempt; the plot leaders were executed, and five hundred Orthodox Brahmins were exiled.

Under Gupta rule, the humanitarian ideals of Buddhist doctrine led to the abolition of capital and corporal punishment. But under Harsha, torture and long-term imprisonment were common forms of punishment (Auboyer, 59). Despite Harsha's lifetime efforts to forge one large imperial structure, his empire collapsed after his death in 647. How Harsha died is not exactly clear, but assassination is suspected by some historians, who also see Harsha becoming more paranoid and ruthless toward his opponents in later years. Chinese chronicles indicate the throne was usurped by Harsha's Brahmin minister. The Chinese Tang emperor, Tai Tsung, with whom Harsha cultivated good relations and had exchanged an earlier diplomatic mission in 643, sent another ambassador to his court in 647. This time, the Chinese arrived in the midst of a political and sectarian conflict; they were ill treated, robbed, and held captive by the usurper. The Chinese ambassador barely escaped, fleeing to Tibet. From there, acting in concert with Harsha's allies in Nepal and Assam, he defeated the usurper, who was taken to China, where he died in captivity as a personal attendant to the Tang emperor. Upon the disintegration of Harsha's empire, local rulers once again turned North India into a battleground as they sought to enlarge their realms at the expense of their immediate neighbors.

**Dynastic Turmoil**

Following Harsha's death, India entered a period of political instability and chronic warfare between rival dynasties. The five major Indian dynasties of the period were the Gurjara Pritihara from the western region of Rajasthan; the Palas from Bengal in the east; the Chalukyas, whose capital was at Badami in the southwest; the Cholas, whose capital was at Tanjore in the far southeast; and the Pallavas who were centered at Kanchipuram, a city north of Tanjore in southeastern India. In the north, the Gurjara Pritihara and the Palas fought for regional dominance, especially for control Harsha's capital Kanauj. Further south, the Chalukyas and Pallavas raided each other's territories and sacked their rival's capital. Eventually vassals won dominance other their former overlords, as occurred when the Rashtrakutas, a dynasty that ruled a large swath of western India from the seventh to the thirteenth centuries, absorbed the Chalukyas, and the Cholas absorbed the Pallavas in the southeast.

**North India**

In North India, the Gangatic heartland of Harsha's empire, the major political conflict was between the Palas of Bengal and the Gurjara-Pritihara from Rajasthanire. By the ninth century, the Palas from eastern India had gained
ascendancy and become rulers of the city of Kanauj. The Pala dynasty was closely linked to the Indian Ocean trade and had commercial and political relations with the Sailendra dynasty kings of Srivijaya from Sumatra. The Pala kings patronized Buddhism, which had, by this period, taken an unorthodox tantric form in Bengal. From the Pala Empire, Buddhism was introduced to Tibet that, in combination with local beliefs, became the basis of modern Tibetan Buddhism.

The early sixth-century invasions by nomadic groups such as the Huns, which had dealt a deathblow to the Gupta Empire, also destroyed or dispersed the original warrior castes of Rajasthan. The migrating Turks Hinduized themselves and assumed the role of Ksatriyas, and from them arose most of the warrior castes of North India, such as the Rajputs.

Also around the time of the Hun invasion, a nomadic group called Gujars emerged as one of the most powerful North Indian dynasties of the Indian Middle Ages. In the ninth and tenth centuries, the descendants of this nomadic tribe, now joined with another and calling themselves Gurjara-Pritiharas, migrated from their base in Rajasthan and became masters of Kanauj, which they seized from the Palas to become the most powerful kings of North India. They had also successfully resisted the Arabs, stopping the Abbasid dynasty when it tried to expand eastward from its base in Sind province, which had been occupied by Arabs in 712. However, the Gurjara-Pritihara kings were themselves weakened by the repeated attacks from the powerful Rashtrakuta dynasty of Deccan in central India, who temporarily occupied Kanauj in the early tenth century (Basham, 1967, 74).

These continuous raids and threats from the southern frontiers turned the attention of Gurjara-Pritihara kings away from Northwest India, where was gathering a new and more formidable foe, who would ultimately seal the fate of many of the Hindu dynasties and end Hindu political power in northern India for a thousand years. This was the arrival of Islamized Turks, who established their center of power in Afghanistan.

Although the Gurjara-Pritihara eventually regained their capital from the Rashtrakutas, they never regained their earlier dominance. As a result, throughout the tenth century, the Gurjara-Pritihara vassals grew powerful at the expense of their former masters. Around this time in Afghanistan, a powerful line of Turkish chieftains established a powerful kingdom at Ghazni and began to look eagerly at the rich plains of India, which lacked a strong political center and seemed ripe for plunder.

**South India**

In the south, despite recurrent and mutually destructive warfare between the rival Pallava and Chalukya dynasties, there was a revival of Hindu culture. Following the fall of Harsha’s kingdom, contact between Indo-European speakers of the north and the Dravidian-speaking south produced a lively hybrid. This cultural synthesis was to influence not only the south, but the entire Indian civilization.

Political power in the south was centered on two areas. One was western Deccan in central India, and the other was in southeast India, along the Coromandal Coast, where were located the Chola capital of Tanjore and the Pallava
capital of Kanchipuram. The political history of Deccan was largely concerned with the struggle between the dynasties that controlled these two centers.

Around the time of Harsha, central India came under the control of the Chalukya dynasty, ruling from Vatapi (now called Badami) in Andra, near the western coast of India. Southeast of the Chalukya kingdom was Kanchipuram, or Kanchi, capital of the Pallava dynasty. The Pallava kingdom, which was known to Roman and Chinese traders, owed its existence to the prosperous irrigation and dense agricultural settlement around Kanchi as well as to the Indian Ocean trade.

The origins of the Pallava dynasty remain a mystery. Some historians maintain that their origins could be traced to Pallava (or Parthian Persian) of northwest India. But it is more likely the Sanskrit equivalent of the Tamil word Tondai, or Tondai Mandalam, describes the area of southern India from where they originated. Other lineage legends claim that the first Pallava ruler was an adventurous outsider who married a local Naga princess (the Nagas, or snakes, were symbols of fertility and also a local tribal power). Similar lineage histories are also found in Southeast Asia concerning the rise of Hindu dynasties there.

What seems to be clear about the Pallavas is that they did not belong to any of the ancient south Indian dynasties such as the Cholas, Cheras, and Pandyas. They owed their rise to the defeat of the Kalabhras, who, in the first centuries C.E., were a Tamil country regional power that patronized the Jains and Buddhists. The Kalabhras had defeated the three traditional Tamil country dynasties. By the late seventh century, however, the Pallava had extended their power into the heart of Tamil country, overthrowing the Kalabhras and creating the largest kingdom in south India until that time.

The Pallavas also confronted the Chalukyas in the north, under the powerful Pallava rulers Mahendra Varman and Narashima Varman. Mahendra Varman had a reputation as a talented ruler and constructed the first Hindu cave temples of south India. According to Hindu sacred history, Mahendra Varman had been converted from Jainism by the Hindu saint Appar, one of the charismatic Bhakti saints of devotional Hinduism. The Pallava rulers also constructed ports for the Indian Ocean trade, with bonfire lighthouses, as well as some of the most beautiful rock-carved temples of south India (see Temples, Hindu). The southern architectural style, which portrays the temple tower as a steep mountain, was perfected under the Pallavas and was later transmitted to Southeast Asia, especially to Java.

The city of Kanchi flourished as a royal capital, and the Pallavas, although they were Hindus, extended their patronage to Buddhists. Xuanzang visited the Pallava kingdom in the reign of Narashima Varman and reported that there were about one hundred Buddhist monasteries with ten thousand monks studying the doctrines of Mahayana Buddhism. To the south of the Pallava country was the Chola kingdom where Xuanzang reported that Buddhism had become extinct.

The northwest of the Pallava country was under the rule of the Chalukya dynasty, whose kings were known to be patrons of art and architecture. Earlier scholars regarded the Chalukyas as mere transmitters of preexisting copies of Gupta art and architecture, but recent, more detailed studies show that the Chalukyas were creative in their own right. According to some art critics, the Chalukya sculptures are among the greatest of Hindu iconography. Many of the major figures of Hindu mythology are portrayed in beautiful stone sculptures.
Politically, the Chalukyas reached their zenith under King Pulakasin II (609–642), the ruler who had defeated Harsha and thereby ended his southward expansion. But Pulakasin was himself soon killed by the Pallava ruler Narashima Varman. As the Pallavas fought with such north Indian powers such as Chalukyas and the Rashtrakutas, who were themselves one-time vassals of the Chalukyas, Pallava vassals, such as the Cholas, began asserting their independence. In spite of their declining political fortunes, the Pallavas of Kanchi survived until the end of the eighth century, when their territories were annexed by the Cholas of Tanjore.

The Cholas of Tanjore

The Chola kingdom was one of the three great kingdoms of Tamil culture. Emerging in the eighth century from centuries of dominance by the Pallavas, the Cholas so dominated the southeastern coast of India for the next 300 years that the entire area is still called Coromandel, or Chola Mandal—the domain of the Cholas. Chola domination gave security to the people of southern India, and supported a flourishing social and cultural life.

The most notable Chola ruler was Raja Raja Chola I (r. 985–1014), under whom Chola power reached its zenith. Raja Raja conquered Sri Lanka, and his son, Rajandra Chola, extended his power into the Gangatic basin. Rajandra Chola also conducted punitive naval expeditions to various parts of Southeast Asia, including Burma, Malaya, and Sumatra. These expeditions were perhaps undertaken with the intention of ending the piratical activities of the Sumatran kings of Srivijaya, who were interfering with Indian merchant guilds conducting the flourishing trade between India and China.

The Chola hold on Southeast Asia did not last long, but, in spite of this, Raja Raja’s naval expeditions were unique to the history of India. The Cholas ruled over Sri Lanka until 1070, when they were expelled by the local Singalese princes. From then on, Chola power declined due to military pressure from the Chalukyas of Deccan and unrest among the vassals, especially among the Pandia princes, who sought to regain their autonomy and independence.

In spite of their declining power, the Cholas maintained their hold over the central part of their empire: the Tamil country from Kanchi to Tanjore. The political stability and freedom from external attack that strong Chola rulers provided in the tenth and eleventh centuries encouraged the development of Tamil culture, which thrived under a stable and flourishing economy and entered a period of artistic and architectural achievement (Basham, 1967, 74–75).

Like other medieval Indian polities, the Chola state was decentralized. At the local level, administration was in the hands of autonomous village councils. Chola power collapses in the mid-thirteenth century, and their territory was shared by their former vassals the Pandiyas, who were centered in the city of Madurai.

The Coming of Islam

In the twelfth century in the region of Afghanistan, a Muslim dynasty called the Ghaurids arose to influence the whole region. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, a new religious force, Islam, entered India in full strength. Northern and western Deccan fell to Islamic invaders (see Balban). Eastern Deccan and even the heartland of Chola country was raided by Muslim generals such as Malik Kafur, a former captive and converted Hindu who became
general of the army of Allauddin Khilji (r. 1296–1316), second Khilji ruler of the Delhi sultanate. The Khilji dynasty was the first major Islamic dynasty on Indian soil. Under Malik Kafur’s leadership, the Turkish Muslims army toppled all local Hindu states throughout the entire subcontinent, compelling them to become vassals. Their treasures were carted off to Delhi to finance the foundation of the Delhi sultanate.

Allauddin’s political and administrative reforms were as comprehensive as his military exploits. He decided to tackle the irregularities of tax and tribute payment right at its root. He first undertook a survey of the entire agricultural resources of his kingdom and then imposed a fixed standardized tax on all agricultural landholders, which was half their crop. A similar tax was also imposed on pastoralists. The revenue was collected by military officials and deposited into the central treasury. By this act, Allauddin was able to increase his land revenue and make it more reliable while reducing the powers of his courtiers and of local magistrates, such as petty rajahs and village chiefs. These Hindu chieftains were seen as the major source of conspiracies and rebellion against his rule. Therefore, according to Islamic chronicles, Allauddin believed that if everyone was busy earning a living to pay for his taxes, nobody could ever have time to think about rebellion.

Allauddin felt that the feasts and excessive drinking of his Muslim officials were also a source of plots against him. Therefore, alcohol, which was in any case forbidden under Islam, was now prohibited by the state, along with feasts and private meetings. Spies watched for transgressions of these orders. Allauddin, despite the unpopularity by these harsh methods, was able to control his ambitious courtier officials and rebellious local chieftains.

To maintain his authority, Allauddin required a large standing army. To hire more troops with the same budget, Allauddin lowered his soldiers’ pay but, to prevent unrest in the army, also issued an edict fixing the prices of basic necessities so that they remained affordable for soldiers. To provide subsidized grain for his soldiers, Allauddin’s state granaries provided the necessary grain stocks to military garrisons from grain previously collected as tax. To eliminate the occurrence of any future uprising against Muslim rule by Hindus, Allauddin closely regulated the power of Hindu chieftains, who were thus unable to effectively raise rebellion. It is also difficult to judge how effective Allauddin was in implementing these measures. According to Muslim chronicles his prohibitive measures were flaunted and the official prohibition of alcohol led to distilling of illicit liquor, which was sold in Delhi in the spirit of prohibition-era Chicago. Bazaar traders also violated the fixed price rules by using smaller measures. Further away from Delhi many of these measures had no significant impact and, as a general rule, before the British Period, no Indian ruler had any direct authority outside a radius of 100 miles from his capital.

Allauddin’s most notable deed for the history of India was his ability to withstand Mongol assaults on his capital and keep India from the Mongol yoke. When he died in 1316, his general and supposed lover Malik Kafur tried to control the Muslim Turkish court and the army, but he was murdered by his own men. One of Allauddin’s sons, Qutb-ud-din Mubarak, survived as ruler for 4 years by undoing some of his father’s draconian measures. Tughluq, a former slave soldier in Allauddin’s service, overthrew Qutb-ud-din Mubarak in 1320. In 1324, Tughluq’s son, Muhammad bin Tughluq, deposed his father and ruled the Delhi sultanate until 1351.
Allauddin conquered and looted but preferred to leave the old Hindu ruling families as his vassals. However, Muhammad bin Tughluq dreamed of making the entire Indian subcontinent his realm. To this end, he built a new capital at a more central location 700 miles to the south at Dalutabad, to which he forced the inhabitants of Delhi to move. Although, in theory, this venture made sense; in practice, it failed and, perhaps, led to the downfall of the sultanate.

After moving his capital to Dalutabad, Mohammad lost control over North India and failed to consolidate his hold on the South. When he returned to Delhi 2 years later, the return was seen as a weakness by his vassals, Hindu and Muslim, and many broke away to form independent states in southern and eastern India. In 1334, the governor of Madurai, deep in Tamil country, declared his independence and called himself the sultan of Mabar, and, 4 years later, Bengal followed suit. In 1336, the Hindu Empire of Vijayanagar, the last and largest Hindu state in terms of area, was founded in South India. In Central India, the Bahmani kingdom was founded in 1347.

To revitalize the economy and support his policy of expansion, Muhammad bin Tughluq had introduced economic and administrative reforms. He extended the system of direct administration to all the provinces, but it could only be implemented at the core region of the Sultanate. Whereas Allauddin collected a great deal of revenue in kind from the core region to secure a reliable supply system to Delhi, Muhammad Tughluq insisted on tax in cash to transfer the anticipated revenues from the far-flung provinces to his capital. When Muhammad Tughluq discovered that the stock of coins and mintable silver was inadequate for such an extensive monetization, instead of abandoning the scheme, he issued token currency in copper, an idea that was foreign to India, where the nominal value of coins never deviated from their intrinsic value.

Perhaps with the hope of imitating China’s successful use of paper currency, Muhammad bin Tughluq issued his token brass and copper-based currency with the equivalent value of the rare silver tanka (140 grams of silver). Indians were also permitted to turn in their copper tokens at the royal mint for silver and gold. And, with this policy, according to the chronicles, every house became a mint producing copper tokens, and the entire currency system of the sultanate collapsed. This novel economic experiment thus ended in financial disaster. Muhammad bin Tughluq was forced to withdraw his token currency barely 3 years after its launch. To direct attention away from this monetary fiasco, he launched two major military campaigns against Persia and Central Asia, which were unsuccessful.

After the failure of this ambitious plan, Muhammad bin Tughluq’s rule disintegrated into a reign of terror, of which the fourteenth-century Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta gives us a vivid account. Although the rural Hindu population also suffered oppression and exploitation, the main targets of Muhammad bin Tughluq’s reign of terror were Muslims living in the urban areas, where even learned Islamic scholars were swiftly eliminated if their views displeased the sultan.

Despite the tyranny of his later years, and his failed monetary innovations, Muhammad bin Tughluq tried to fashion a form of kingship that could win the allegiance of Hindus and Muslims. To this end, he adapted some of the familiar symbols of Indian kingship, such as processions on richly decorated elephants on special days. He also attempted to lend legitimacy to his rule by obtaining a document of authorization, or investiture, from the puppet Abbasid caliph of Cairo.
The last important sultan of Delhi was Firuz Shah Tughluq, who succeeded his cousin Muhammad bin Tughluq in 1351 and enjoyed 37-year reign. Firuz Shah consolidated his power in North India and made a few unsuccessful attempts to win back lost territory in Bengal and Sind. The latter ended in military disaster. After this, he suspended any further military campaigns. On the cultural front, Firuz Shah added to the archaeological splendor of Delhi by building new mosques, forts, and waterways.

A multistoried structure known as the Firuz Shah Kotala (citadel) was built in Delhi and adorned with two Ashoka columns transported from distant provinces. Firuz Shah is said to have consulted the learned Brahmins in an attempt to decipher the inscription on these pillars, but no one was able to decipher them because the Brahmi script had long fallen into disuse (it was only decoded in the nineteenth century by an East India Company official). These polished sandstone Ashokan pillars posed a psychological challenge for later rulers, due to the artistic merits of their carving and the techniques and methods used in transporting and erecting them. They, therefore, challenged the very authority of the new Islamic states, which is perhaps why such a great deal of effort was spent on transporting them by Firuz Shah, who reerected them in Delhi with a great public celebration.

Like his predecessors, Firuz Shah also introduced reforms. He abolished judicial torture and extended the Islamic zhyza or poll tax on non-Muslims, to the previously exempt Brahmins, possibly in an effort to convert them to Islam. He also rewarded new Hindu converts. Enslaved Indians from the provinces were converted and sent to the capital, perhaps to augment the number of Islamic residents who would support the sultanate against any potential rebellions by the Hindu majority.

When Firuz Shah died in 1388, the Delhi sultanate disintegrated with a succession struggle. With weakness at the center, provincial governors declared their autonomy and reigned as independent sovereigns. In 1398, another new Turkish invader swept into the plains of North India. This was Timur the Lame, or Timurlane, as he is known to Europeans.

Fresh from the victories in Western Asia, where he conquered Persia and captured the city of Baghdad, then one of the biggest metropolises in the Islamic world, Timur sacked the city of Delhi. For 3 days, Timur’s soldiers indulged in an orgy of murder and plunder. The entire Hindu population in the city was massacred. The Muslims were spared their lives, but their movable properties were confiscated. The deeds of the Turkish warriors shocked even Timur who wrote in his autobiography that he was not responsible for these terrible events, and only his soldiers should be blamed.

After Timur left the city, Delhi remained desolate for years, and the first epoch of Muslim political power in India came to an end. A new period of Afghan rule in North India commenced in 1451 when the Afghan clan of Lodis established a new dynasty in North India centered in Delhi (see Babur). To their credit, the Lodi sultans established an efficient administrative system that later provided a good foundation for Mughal rule after 1526.

Further Reading

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**2. RELIGION**

**Buddhism**

That Indian Buddhism grew and thrived between 200 B.C.E. and 200 C.E. is confirmed by the numerous Buddhist sites and archaeological remains from the period. From India, Buddhism was spread to Sri Lanka, East and Southeast Asia, and parts of Central Asia by traders, envoys, immigrants, and missionary monks. The sacred Buddhist sites, such as where the Buddha was born, got his enlightenment, preached his first sermon, and died, became centers of pilgrimage for Indian and foreign monks. With the patronage of wealthy merchant communities and pious donors, Buddhist centers were stylishly rebuilt, and rulers gave away the entire revenues of prosperous villages to support large monastic organizations. Buddhism, like all major religions, split into two (later three) divisions as the great vehicle and lesser vehicle.

As Buddhism began to expand during this period, changes occurred within the old Vedic or Brahminical Hinduism (see below), which strengthened that tradition. The earlier sacrifice-centered religion with its pantheon of nature deities gave way to new deities who sought great devotion more than sacrificial offerings. By the time of the Emperor Harsha, who ascended the throne in 606 C.E. and ruled northern India for 41 years, the lesser vehicle Buddhism had vanished from India, and Buddhism itself was slowly disappearing. The Chinese scholar-monk, Xuanzang, who
visited India during the time of Harsha, noted that Buddhism seemed to lack
the emotional pull of reinvigorated Hinduism. Xuanzang observed that many
former centers of pilgrimage were deserted, though a few major ones, such as
the Buddhist University of Nalanda, were still active. Nalanda was a major cen-
ter of Buddhist scholarship where thousands of novice monks were taught by
noted Buddhist scholars. It attracted foreign students from all over India and
also from East and Southeast Asia (Basham, 1967, 265).

Eastern India, around the early medieval period, saw a growth in interest in
Tantric or magical, mystical rites that also involved the breaking of social or
sexual mores, and these ideas affected Hinduism and Buddhism. In Buddhism,
this development gave rise to a third path, Vajrayana (meaning “vehicle of the
thunderbolt”). Xuanzang viewed these new developments unfavorably, as
doctrinal corruption. This form of Buddhism grew in popularity in Bengal and
Bihar in northeastern India, and it was this form of Buddhism that was to be-
come the basis of Tibetan Buddhism. With the death of Harsha in 647 C.E.,
eastern India came under the rule of the Palas, a dynasty centered in Bihar,
whose kings patronized Buddhism for the next three centuries. Under the
Palas, Tantric Buddhism became part of the mainstream and Tantric literature
was widely available (Wayman, 318).

Xuanzang had also noted that in Tamil Nadu in the far south Sivaism and
Vaisnavaism were gaining popularity at the expense of more monastic-centered
Buddhism. In Karnataka in southwestern India, Buddhism lost its appeal to
Jainism, and later, to a new form of Sivaism called Lingayat, which may have
been influenced by the ideals of Islam. Also at this time, Indian Buddhist schol-
ars began migrating to Tibet, then a new and promising religious frontier where
the popularity of Buddhism was growing. The Buddhism they brought with
them had elements of Tantric rituals and beliefs.

The decline of Buddhism in India was due to a number of factors, external and
internal. According to Columbia University Buddhist scholar and historian Alex
Wayman, the chief internal reasons for Buddhism’s demise were the following:

1. Buddhist strength lay in monasteries and was not deeply embedded in
   the village life of the people.
2. Buddhist prosperity depended on steady patronage from royalty and rich
   merchants.
3. Although Buddhism did not embark on any active campaign against In-
   dia’s caste-based social system, its egalitarian message offended and chal-
   lenged the powerful upper castes, especially the Brahmins.
4. Buddhist sectarian divisions and rivalry wastefully drained the powers
   of its institutions.
5. Buddhism, in its Indian form, was non-violent, and had no defense
   against a determined and organized aggressor motivated by plunder and
   ideology.
6. Buddhist doctrine was too profound for the masses.

Wayman lists the external reasons for Buddhism’s decline as follows:

1. Hinduism had adapted many of the strong points of Buddhism.
2. Hostile kings, plundering invaders, and, sometimes, fanatical mobs de-
   stroyed Buddhist monasteries and monuments and murdered monks.
3. Hinduism, now revived and invigorated by a new devotional ideology, challenged Buddhism and squeezed it out of its sacred centers by deliberately placing Hindu icons or shrines in them.

4. The works of Sankara (788–820), who debated with Buddhists and set up four Hindu holy sees or “maths” at four corners of India, greatly strengthened Hinduism. Most important, he systematized and unified the Hindu great and little traditions, and established a new form of devotional “monistic” Hinduism that spread to all corners of India (Wayman, 381; Basham, 265).

Although Buddhists faced persecution, the more formidable challenge came from the revived and reformed Hinduism that spread west from Tamil country from the ninth century onwards. This new form of Hinduism, with its emphasis on a personal god, had a profound appeal to ordinary folks. Also, the Hindu tendency to assimilate caused Buddha to be seen as the ninth incarnation of Vishnu and, with that, Buddhism began to lose its individuality and special appeal.

A more fatal blow to Buddhism came with the Turkish Muslim invasion of India that began in the early eleventh century. Buddhist monasteries, with their libraries and rare collections, were obvious targets for the Muslim Turks, who sacked many, forcing surviving monks to migrate to functioning Buddhist centers outside India, in Tibet and Nepal. With this migration, Indian Buddhism ceased to be a functioning faith (Basham, 1967, 265).

**Jainism**

Jainism was another major Indian religion that coevolved with Buddhism but has survived in India to the present day. Like Buddhism, Jainism also thrived during periods of state patronage and, like Buddhism, split into two sects in its early history. The major schism among the two branches of Indian Judaism focused primarily on dress code. The monks of the south, from whom originated the Digambar (“sky clad”) sect, insisted on an orthodox dress code of total nudity whereas the north Indian Jains, from whom derived the Svetambar sect, wore white garments. This division was established early in the history of Jainism, during the first century C.E. Unlike the schism among the Buddhists, there were no doctrinal differences between the Jain sects. In the Middle Ages, the Jain monks spent time, as religious merit, in writing commentaries on sacred and secular literature of the period. It was largely through their efforts that many rare and almost unknown texts of non-Jain origins have survived to the present. By the medieval period, the white-clad sect was centered in the northwest at Kathiawar in Rajesthan, whereas the sky-clad sect was based in Andhra and Karnataka in the southwest, all of which places were also home to large concentrations of Jews.

The influence and popularity of the Jain sects among the Indian populace depended upon charismatic Jain teachers and pious Jain rulers. The loss of imperial patronage also meant loss of prestige and influence, and such loss often occurred as a result of the revival of devotional Hinduism. Just as it was with Buddhism, Jainism became the target of persecution instigated by bhakti saints and rulers who were recent converts to Hinduism. We have few references of
Jain monks accompanying trade and diplomatic delegations sent abroad. But, unlike Buddhism, Jainism never gained any appeal outside India. However, the Jains left a lasting memory among the ancient Greeks and Romans, especially the Jain practice of self-immolation as a way to end their lives. In spite of this, Jainism survives today in India, where it has millions of followers, including wealthy merchants.

Jainism shares many fundamental ideas with Buddhism. Like Buddhism, it was basically an atheistic faith, which sees the universe functioning according to an impersonal law of cause and effect. Unlike the Hindus, the Jain cosmology has no universal deluge, or destruction; the Jain universe is eternal, although within it there are a number of micro cycles with their periods of improvements and decline. The process of decline continues some 40,000 years until civilization returns to barbarism, and then the cycle improves and reaches another high crest, and then yet another decline, a cycle that goes on forever. Unlike Buddhism, Jainism offers no course for salvation for ordinary laypeople. Nirvana or salvation in Jainism is only possible for a monk. To attain nirvana, a Jain devotee must abandon all material earthly possessions, including clothes, and undertake long periods of fasting and self-mortification, meditation, and study. Thus, only Jain monks could ever hope to gain salvation. Unlike Hinduism, Jainism does not permit spectacular penances but seeks only quiet fasting. It was common for a Jain monk to fast himself to death. Jainism totally renounces all forms of violence and even the lives of insects are spared. Jains take special care not to harm even the tiniest forms of life. They strain water before drinking and sweep the path with a feather duster to brush away any small insects and thus prevent them from being trampled under their feet. They also mask their mouths, like surgeons, to prevent any living form from being inhaled or killed accidentally.

The Ajivakas

The third major non-Hindu sect that coevolved with the Buddhists but survived only until about the fourteenth century was the Ajivakas, a group of ascetics who followed a rigorous spiritual discipline similar to that of the Jains. They too, like the sky-clad sect of Jains, went about in total nudity. The founder of this sect was Gosala Makkhaliputra, a former friend of Mahavira, the founder of Jainism. Like Mahavira, he took preexisting teachings of local ascetic groups and further developed them. Unlike Buddha and Mahavira, Gosala Makkhaliputra, who died around 484 B.C.E., was of humble birth; his followers combined the teachings of Gosala with other teachers and founded a synchronic sect.

The Ajivakas were never as popular as the Buddhists or Jains and remained only the south, in eastern Karnataka and Tamil Nadu until the fourteenth century, when all records of them cease. Unfortunately, we also don't have any sacred texts of the Ajivakas; these must be reconstructed from the surviving criticisms of them by their rivals, the Buddhists and Jains. From these it seems that the Ajivakas, like the Buddhists and Jains, were atheistic but had a central doctrine of strict determinism, which was very different from the karma, or cause and effect doctrine common to the Buddhists, Jains, and Hindus (Basham, 296). The doctrine of karma believes that a person’s present condition was determined by his or her past actions and therefore influences future
fate in this life and in future life. Likewise, individuals could influence their destiny by choosing right actions and conduct. Such a dynamic view of fate was rejected by Ajivakas. They saw their entire universe as conditioned by an impersonal law called Niyati, (rule or destiny). Niyati controls and determines every single detail of the material universe, and it was impossible to influence future states in any way. It also saw the world of movement as illusory, and that reality is fixed and unchanging. The real world is forever at rest.

In spite of their belief in the fixity of each person’s predestination, Ajivaka monks practiced rather severe forms of asceticism. They explained this seeming contradiction not in terms of an attempt to gain merits to alter their karmic fate, which they believed impossible, but rather as a result of that very destiny. In latter periods, Ajivakas survived in small pockets in south India and resembled the Mahayana, or great vehicle, Buddhism, with Gosala taking the central role of a Buddha. Although the Ajivakas, like Buddhists and Jains, paid no attention to supernatural beings or gods, they were not true atheists; they accepted the existence of supernatural beings, though these had no real bearing on human affairs.

**School of Ajita**

Some Indian scholars of philosophy were totally atheistic. The earliest known of these atheistic schools was found by Ajita Kesakambali (Ajita of the hair blanket), who wore only a piece of blanket fashioned out of human hair and lived in the sixth century B.C.E. about the time of the Buddha. According to this atheistic school, man “is formed out of four elements. When he dies the earth returns to earth, water to water and fire to fire, air to air and the senses vanish into space. . . . They are fools who preach almsgiving and those who maintain the categories of immaterial speak in vain and lying nonsense. When the body dies, fools and wise alike are cut off and perish for they do not survive after death” (Basham, 1967, 296).

According to Buddhist scripture, Ajita founded a sect that was condemned by the historical Buddha as having no real reason for performing asceticism. It is also possible that this particular school was not an order of monks, but a brotherhood that, at least from the writings of their adversaries, declared all religious observances and morality to be futile. The ultimate purpose of life was to derive the greatest happiness. In this sense, they were similar to the Greek School of Epicureans. They also rejected the virtues and morality preached by the Jains and Buddhists. Perhaps in response to the self-denying dictums of their rivals, they subscribed to the following general motto: “Those who shy away from pleasure and joy that is freely available for various metaphysical reasons are fools no better than dumb animals.” Because our sources for the Ajita and all other heterodox atheistic schools come from the writings of Buddhists, they are not impartial observations or devoid of polemics (Basham, 296–297).

**Hinduism**

The early Vedic Hinduism brought to India by Indo-European Aryan tribes was seriously undermined during the time of Alexander the Great’s invasion of India in the second century C.E. by various popular cults. New deities
emerged and became the focus of popular veneration. One of these new gods that was popular in western India during the Greek invasion was a deity named Vasudeva. A stone column in Besnagar erected by one of the Greek rulers of northwest India (the descendents of Alexander’s generals) in honor of Vasudeva informs us that the cult of Vasudeva had royal sanction and was popular among the ruling elite. We also find the link between the cult of Vasudeva and a minor Vedic deity named Vishnu, an equally minor deity called Narayana, and a flute-playing pastoral hero god Krishna (who also appears in the epic Mahabharata). A number of regional gods were also associated with the composite Vasudeva/Vishnu/Narayana/Krishna cult, such as the cult of the divine boar, which was gaining popularity in the Gupta Period (fourth to sixth centuries C.E.). Later the hero of the second major epic Ramayana was also associated with this composite, which became the core of what came to be known as the Vishnavite traditions. The hero of the great epic, along with the divine boar, came to be seen as various incarnations of the composite deity now known as the “Supreme Vishnu”—or Mahavishnu. To a member of the Vishnavite tradition, Mahavishnu is the universal god, the source of all things in the universe; all other gods are but manifestations of Vishnu in other forms. Vishnu is seen as a compassionate deity who takes on various incarnations to serve humanity and save it from all forms of danger. Traditionally, there are ten incarnations of Vishnu in human and supernatural forms, including a divine gigantic boar incarnation, to save humankind. Nine of these incarnations, including the historic Buddha, have already taken place, with the final incarnation yet to appear.

The second major cult to emerge during this period was the worship of Siva, whose origin may have been as a non-Aryan fertility deity popular among the Dravidian-speaking people. This deity probably emerged among the Harrapan people of the Indus Valley civilization prior to the Aryan invasion. This god was known as “Proto-Siva” and appears in Harrapan artifacts as a deity in meditation (possibly having three faces), who had the power to attract wild animals and who may have been worshipped as a phallic symbol. This non-Aryan deity was associated with the Aryan god of storms called Rudhra. In later times, known popularly as Siva and seen as a father god in high heaven, he was just as popular as Vishnu and thus became the second major sect of popular Hinduism. Other popular regional deities also became associated with the cult of Siva; these included Ganesha, the elephant-faced lord of (or remover of) material and spiritual obstacles, and Skanda or Murugan, the lord of war, who were seen as two of his sons. Whereas Vishnu was generally benevolent, Siva could, at times, be ferocious. In popular imagery, he is shown as wearing a garland of skulls and does a spectacular awe-inspiring dance in the company of goblins, ghosts, and demons. But Siva is also a great yogi, the perfect ascetic often seen deep in meditation and perfect stillness. He is also the god of all motion as Nataraja—the lord of dances. In Hindu religious iconography, nothing can rival the bronze imaging of Nataraja, where Siva becomes the cosmic dancer, with four hands and flying locks he dances on a prostrated dwarf (apasmara purusa) who symbolizes human ignorance. The Siva’s left back hand holds an hour glass–shaped drum (damaru) symbolizing the sound of creation, while the front hand has a “fear-not” gesture made by holding the arm upward, which also symbolizes the act of preservation or protection. Siva’s right back hand holds flames (agni) in his hands, the fire signifying destruction. The front
left hand is held across the chest in the elephant trunk pose, with fingers pointing downwards toward an uplifted left foot, which symbolizes release. The dancing figure of Siva is encircled by a ring of flames or *prabha mandala* symbolizing the entire visible universe. The form of the dance is called the tandava dance.

The significance of this dance is that Siva is the source of all movement. The purpose of the dance is to release humans from illusion, and it takes place at Chidambaram, the center of the universe, which is also considered the center of one’s heart. Other dances of Siva, seen in bronze, are the terrible, wild tandava dance, which is performed at the time of the dissolution of the universe and destroys the world, thus ending a cosmic cycle. In the sacred puranic stories, this dance is performed in auspicious places, like cremation grounds, with his fierce dwarf attendants (*gana*) and his consort Devi (see *Puranas*).

Siva, like Vishnu, manifests himself from time to time in temporary incarnations either to destroy the wicked and to test the faith of his devotees or to uphold virtue in an exemplary fashion. Since the early part of the first millennium C.E., most educated Hindus were either Vishnavites (worshippers of Vishnu) or Saivaites (worshippers of Siva). All other deities are seen as holding secondary positions as manifestations of the supreme godhead. In this sense, a Vishnavite does not deny the existence of Siva but sees Siva as one of the many secondary creations of Maha-Vishnu and vice versa.

Many devout Vishnavites and Saivaites see the gods they worship as different aspects of the same ultimate godhead. Attempts had been made to harmonize Vaisnavism and Saivism. A Hindu trinity or *trimurti*, a composite figure combining the Brahma, the creator; Vishnu, the preserver; and Siva, the destroyer, evolved during the Gupta Period; this figure strongly resembles the three-faced Harrapan deity called the “Proto-Siva” and thus points to the deeper roots of popular Hindu traditions. In central India there developed during the middle ages a fusion of Siva and Vishnu as Hari Hara (*Hari* is another name for Vishnu and *Hara* an alternate name of Siva), which combined the attributes of both deities.

### Goddess Worship

Apart from Siva and Vishnu, the worship of goddesses became a major focus of Hindu devotion in the Middle Ages. Images of goddesses are found in Harrapan sites, but in early Vedic Hinduism goddesses were rarely the source of popular veneration. The worship of goddesses reemerged in the Gupta Period from the fourth to sixth centuries C.E. and has gained popularity ever since. Today, all Hindu classes and castes worship powerful female deities in their own accord and as consorts to major deities associated with either the Saivaite or Vaisnavite traditions. The goddess is seen as *shakti* or the strength of her male consort and the potent force behind static transcendent male deities. The most popular pan-Indian mother goddesses are Parvati, the consort of Siva, who is also seen in an autonomous malevolent form as Durga, and as the terrifying Kali. Durga is a fierce goddess who rides a lion and battles a buffalo-headed demon. The repulsive Kali is a jet black or purple-colored female figure, with bloody tongue sticking out and wearing a garland of freshly decapitated hands and amputated limbs, and dances on the body of her husband Siva. There is also a fusion of Siva and Parvati, an androgynous deity combining the masculine and feminine energies of godhead known as
Aradanarisvara. It is commonly depicted in sculptures as a half male and female figure fused as one. It is an imagery found in Chola bronzes or carved in the cave temples of Ellora and Elephanta.

Hindu Religious Change in Medieval India

Between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries, Hinduism underwent a dramatic transformation, so profound that it basically altered the very nature of the faith. The primary focus of worship moved from the polytheistic Vedic deities to a supreme, paramount deity, and his manifestations and incarnations.

A new emotional attitude towards the deity became the core of a passionate religion of self-abandonment; called bhakti (devotion), this religion began to supersede the older sacrifice-based Vedic religion with its meditations and mystical techniques, and one that exemplified the ascetic virtues and renunciation. Now, the new ascetic mysticism replaced the older philosophical mysticism of the Upanishads. Devotional love songs, sung in groups called kirtans, became the dominant mode of popular religious expression, pushing the esoteric Sanskrit Vedic chanting and Brahmanical Hindu rituals into the inner sanctuaries of temples. Because these kirtans were sung in local vernaculars, they also gave a boost to regional literature. These changes in the very fabric of everyday Hinduism altered the essential role of the Brahmans, who, as a caste, lost much of their prestige and authority. The leadership of popular Hinduism passed to bhakti saints and gurus whose songs and sacred inspirational and miracle stories became the new Vedas, accessible to everyone. Although this new devotional form of worship did not destroy the older Hindu socioritual order, it made it less significant. The new devotional religion fostered a sense of equality before a loving god. Most bhakti saints were non-Brahmins, who also included untouchables and women in their ranks.

The Development of Devotional Hinduism

Around the first century B.C.E., the earliest devotional form of Hindu worship emerged among the sect of Bhagavatas, who worshipped Vasudeva, a god associated with the pastoral deity Krishna and the Vedic deity Vishnu. Some time later, a similar mode of worship appeared among a sect known as the Pasupathas, who worshipped Siva. The early histories of these devotional sects are still murky but both stressed worship rather than sacrifice. By the Middle Ages, they had also developed their own religious doctrines and philosophy (Basham 1967, 328–29).

These earlier forms of devotional worship were more restrained than the later full-fledged bhakti mode of worship. The earlier godhead had been seen as a benevolent but distant father and king to be worshipped and venerated from afar, while the ever-present imminent deity of bhakti tradition was worshipped with deep, uncontrolled passion. These new modes of devotional worship may have been influenced by the earlier Mahayana Buddhist cult of Buddhisattava, which presented a compassionate being deeply concerned with the plight of ordinary mortals (Basham, 1967, 329).

The bhakti form of intense devotional worship first developed in the Tamil country of southern India. Here was the first development of a godhead that had deep love for humanity and whose devotees were expected to express a similar passionate devotion. Early devotional hymns by Saivaites saints, called Nayanmar, and Vaisnavite saints, called Alwars, originated in Tamil country and facilitated the full development of this intense devotional form of worship.
This new emotionally charged Hinduism moved north from Tamil country by about the ninth century. According to Hindu tradition, this devotional mode of new worship was spread by charismatic and articulate theologians, such as Sankara, who travelled the length and breadth of India debating and defeating Buddhists and Jains in public and setting up Hindu monastic centers to carry out further dissemination of this new form of Hinduism (the Jains also have their alternate versions where Jain monks triumph in public debates). This devotional bhakti tradition became the basis of modern Hindu tradition. Early Hindu sacred literature, such as the Vedas and Upanishads, had been the total monopoly of the literate Brahminical class, but now sacred literature, such as the epics of Mahabharata and Ramayana and the sacred devotional hymns (tevaram) and stories (puranas), became available to all.

At this period, the two great epics of India, the Mahabharata and Ramayana, which are often comparable to the Greek Iliad and Odyssey, began to be interpreted as devotional texts from which inspiration could be drawn. These texts were enlarged with additional legend stories, moral tales, and sacred laws. The mystical and philosophical texts of the Bhagavad Gita, which was independently composed, was fused to the main body of the Mahabharata. The Ramayana, which perhaps began as two separate secular tales (one about a prince who rescued his wife with an army of monkeys and another about a righteous prince who abdicated his right to rule to fulfill his father’s vows) was fused as a single continuous epic and enlarged after the Gupta Period (see Gupta Empire).

During the Gupta Period, the eighteen chief sacred stories, or puranas — stories on god’s grace, miracles, and religious teachings — came to include the additional Vishnu purana, Agni purana, and Bhagavala purana. These contained many earlier religious stories but were now put in a more polished form. Between the seventh and tenth centuries, these devotional Saivaite saints composed twelve devotional books (Tirumurai); the main ones, a collection of deep devotional hymns by four Saivaite Bhakti saints called Tevaram, are still sung as a popular mode of worship. The Tamil Vishnavite bhakti saints, called Alwars, also produced hymns — four thousand (nalayiram) stanzas were composed by the twelve Alwars. Similar devotional poems were also produced in other Dravidian vernaculars, such as Kannada and Telugu. In the thirteenth century Vaisnavite bhakti saints composed hymns in North Indian languages, such as Marathi. This passionate form of devotional songs affected the entire religious world of Tamil country and was also loosely associated with the philosophical teachings of the Upanishads, by a number of eminent southern theologians (Basham, 1967, 332).

The best known among of these Bhakti theologians was Adi Shankara (or Adi Sankaracarya), a Brahmin scholar from the great Vishnu Temple of Sri Rangam, called Ramanuja. Just like his Shaivite predecessor, Adi Shankara, the Vishnavite theologian Ramanuja also travelled the length and breadth of India and wrote long commentaries on cardinal Hindu scriptures, such as the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads. Like all bhakti saints, Ramanuja also prescribed intense devotion to his deity Vishnu as the best means for salvation — far superior to salvation by knowledge (as proposed by Adi Shankara) or by ritual observances. Ramanuja believed that those who totally abandoned their entire being to the service of god and totally trusted divine grace would find themselves in the superior state of bliss. The devotional path carved out by Ramanuja was popular and spread throughout India; it became the source of all subsequent devotional movements (Basham, 1967, 333).
Another Vishnavite teacher who developed Ramanuja’s doctrines was Madhava, who lived in the thirteenth century. Madhava interpreted the monastic doctrines of the Upanishad concerning the unity of god as figurative and subscribed to a form of dualism. According to this view, individual soul and matter are totally separate. Vishnu has sole power over both and saves the deserving souls by his divine grace while the evil souls are sent to eternal damnation. Perpetual rebirths (a Hindu version of purgatory) were reserved for the average that blends both characters. Some historians believe Madhava’s teachings were inspired by the Syrian Christian community in Malabar. They point to the important part played by the wind god Vayu, who was Vishnu’s agent in this world, whose role seems to closely resemble the idea of the Holy Ghost in Christianity. In Syriac, the meaning of the term Holy Ghost is divine wind or breath. This idea, along with the sharp division between god and the human spirit, the idea of eternal damnation, the essential role played by Vayu, and the numerous miracle stories surrounding Madva that seem to parallel the stories of Christ, suggesting probable influences from Eastern of Syrian Christianity of the Malabar coast (Basham, 1967, 333).

In Kashmir in northern India, another school of Shaivism, known as Trika, or triad, emerged. This doctrine, unlike the South Indian variety, shared the philosophical outlook of Sankara. Here the general outlook is that the phenomenal world, as we know it, is unreal and its existence is due to the failure of the souls to understand its true nature. The sect teaches that salvation comes of sudden enlightenment. The best-known philosopher of this text is the tenth-century teacher Abhinava Gupta.

The third important Saivaite sect was the Lingayat or Virasaiva sect. This sect of Savism was founded in the tenth century by Basava (1134–1196), who was a royal minister. Basava opposed image worship, and his sect worshipped the gods in the form of a miniature linga, a symbol of the god carried by the faithful. Basava also rejected the teachings of the Vedas, and the social status of the Brahmins. The Virasaivas have their own order of priests, called the Jangamas, and all believers are considered equal. Unlike many Hindu castes, they also permitted widow remarriage. Basava opposed religious pilgrimages, sacrifices, and the cremation of the dead (Virasaivas bury their dead). It is highly plausible that lingayats were influenced by what Basava may have heard about the essential ideals of Islam.

The Lingayats of today are concentrated in the South Indian states of Andhra and Karnataka. Although they keep separate from other Hindus, their religious scriptures are in the local vernaculars of Telegu and Kanada. Many have adopted the customs of the orthodox Hindus around them.

**Hindu Ritual Changes in the Middle Ages**

In Vedic Hinduism, the main mode of worship was sacrifice, whereas in devotional Bhakti Hinduism it was puja or worship with deep emotionally charged devotion. In Bhakti Hinduism the deity is worshipped in the form of an icon as opposed to the un-iconic Vedic rituals. It is believed that god is present or occupies the sacred icons for the devotion of the ritual (Basham, 335). Puja is more than quiet prayer. It is also paying homage to the deity and also to amuse him in the form of entertainment. The deity is treated as a king or honored guest, and in major temples, devadasi dancing girls perform dances on special occasions. Also on such occasions, the deity tours the area around the shrine in a special car pulled by devotees and led by musicians and accompanied by Brahmin attendants with parasols and fly whisks.
Another new development was the building of temples, which was not part of Vedic Hinduism. The Hindu temple building tradition became well-established by the end of the Gupta Period in 600. We also see the disappearance of animal sacrifice, which was a high point in Vedic ritual; it is replaced by devotional offerings of fruits, flowers, or specially cooked consecrated food, which is later shared among the worshippers. Although the major form of worship in modern Hinduism was puja or devotional ritual, animal sacrifices did not entirely disappear but remained a part of folk or village Hindu tradition.

In the Gupta Period, magical practices and secretive occultist rituals were often associated in the worship of female deities by small states mainly in Eastern India. These secretive sects are called Tantrics, and their scriptures are called Tantras. The members of these sects believe that the usual Hindu practices are only for ordinary folk, but specially initiated followers of the goddess can choose the tantric rituals, which are far more potent. These rituals involved breaking the cardinal taboos and pollution rules of Hindu life and took place in secret in the dead of night, often in auspicious spaces, such as cremation grounds or in houses of members. The initiates sat in a circle around a magical diagram or yantra drawn on the floor. These rituals break the caste rules by including all castes. Brahmins may sit next to untouchables, and there is no ritual pollution associated in mutually taking part in all rituals. After performing the necessary rites to placate the spirits, the participants take part in a ritual that breaks all major food and social taboos, which include consumption of alcohol, eating meat and fish, and orgiastic dancing and group sex. In these cases of tantric ritualized sexual intercourse, the sex may involve either a physical partner or partners or be symbolic, with the participants mentally performing the sexual union (Basham, 1967, 344).

Non-Indian Religions: Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians

According to popular Christian tradition, the Apostle St. Thomas is believed to have made the first Christian converts in India and said to have died a martyr’s death in Mylapore, South India. But most historians consider these accounts unreliable. The first certifiable evidence of Christianity in medieval India is found in a text titled The Christian Topography, by Cosmos Indicopleustes, a sixth-century Greek monk from Alexandria, who has left us interesting accounts of his travels. He writes of Christian churches in Malabar and Sri Lanka, run by Iranian Christian priests and under the control of the Iranian bishop of Cochin. Iranian Christianity belongs to the Nestorian branch of the Christian faith, which, in the eyes of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, is a heresy. Before the coming of Islam, Iranian Nestorian Christianity was gaining a strong following in Sassanian Iran, which was officially and predominantly Zoroastrian. The Nestorians were active missionaries who spread their branch of Christianity as far as China along the Silk Road. The legend of St. Paul may well be based on the Nestorian missionary activities in parts of India.

When Islam became the dominant faith in Iran, it also completely wiped out Iranian Christianity; as a result, Indian Christians looked upon the patriarch of Antioch, in Syria, as their spiritual head and therefore came to be known as “Syrian Christians.” Over the ages, the Indian Christians, isolated from their first Asian roots, began to adapt Hindu customs, and would have eventually
become a heterodox Hindu sect, like the Buddhists before them. This Hinduization process came to a sudden halt with the arrival of European Christian missionaries, especially the Portuguese Jesuits in the sixteenth century. This European intervention also led to a split in the Church; one section accepted the authority of Rome, while the other continued to maintain its link with Antioch. Most of the Hindu customs were eradicated as the Christian groups attempted to unify their rituals in conformity with their respective mother churches.

There was also a small community of Jews in Malabar. The earliest reference to the Indian Jewish communities was the tenth-century Charter by Bhaskara Ravi Varman II, the Chera ruler of Kerala in southwestern India. The Chera king is said to have granted land and rights to a Yemani Jew by the name of Joseph Rabban. There may also have been a large community of Jews at Cochin, a major trading center in southwestern Malabar since around the first century C.E. Known as Beni Israel (or sons of Israel), the members of this colony were descended from Middle Eastern Jewish expatriate merchants who married local women. In appearance, they look no different from the Hindus of their neighborhoods. Although other Indian Jews, such as the Baghdadi Jews, migrants from Iraq and other parts of the Middle East who married other migrant Jews, looked very “Semitic” in appearance.

Another known Indian ex-patriot community that made significant impact on Indian history was the Zoroastrians, who are referred to as the Parsis. The name originates from a province in Iran, Pars, which is the heartland of ancient Iranian civilization. Before the seventh century, when Iran was under Sassanian rule (224–642 C.E.), Zoroastrianism was the state religion. Iranian trading communities that had established themselves in India were largely Zoroastrians in faith. Little remains of this community; and, as a result, we have little information, either oral or textual, about the medieval Iranian mercantile community in India. Zoroastrian refugees from Iran came to seek sanctuary in India in large numbers only after the Arab conquest of Iran. They settled in the western ports of India near Bombay in the eighth century and established a lasting foothold in western India from where they played key roles in politics and the economic life of pre- and postindependent India.

Islam

The largest communities of non-Hindus in medieval India were Muslim. Arab merchants had visited India long before Islam became the religion of Arabia in the seventh century C.E. There were Arab, Persian, and Jewish settlements in the coastal towns of India. Once such community is the Mappila in Malabar, where Arab sailors and merchants who cohabited with the local women and adopted India as their home. There is no evidence of Indian Islamic communities existing before the first Islamic invasions.

The first Islamic invasion occurred in 711, when Arab armies sent by the governor of Baghdad invaded the Indus Valley and annexed portions of northwest India to the Islamic Umayyad Empire. Two other waves of Islamic invasions followed the Arabs—the eleventh-century Turkish invasion and the sixteenth-century Turkish-Afghan invasion. All three invasions placed large parts of northern India under the control of invaders whose religious heritage was totally different from the traditional Indian faiths. Very early on Islamic rulers also
realized that they were a tiny minority in an ancient and confident civilization, and they could hope to govern the territories they had conquered only with the cooperation and consent of the Hindus, who could not, therefore, be treated as polytheistic pagans fit for religious conversion. Early Arab conquerors and later Turkish dynasties had to be pragmatic and maintain the legal fiction that Hindus were people of the book and thus entitled to the privilege of being protected people or zimmi, analogous to Christian and Jewish communities in the Middle East. The early Arab rulers of Sind in northwestern India were careful not to violate the caste hierarchy, allowing Brahmins to maintain their high status and at times exempting them from special discriminatory head taxes (jiziya) imposed on non-Muslims. Arabs also adapted Indian modes of kinship rituals and maintained themselves as Arab maharajahs of Sind.

Under the subsequent Delhi sultanate (1206–1526), Islam became the religion of the ruling Turkish elite and assumed the role of state religion. The court culture of the Turkish ruling class was Persian, and this was to become the dominant expression of Islamic high culture. The Turks also adapted Persian forms of statecraft, court rituals, literature, and arts. A separate Islamic cultural identity was also strengthened by the infusion of large number of Iranian and central Asian migrants fleeing the political turmoil created by the Mongol invasions under Genghis Khan and his immediate successors. Although Islam forbids racial discrimination, the new central Asian and Persian migrants saw themselves as the Ashraf community, that is, one that is socially distinct and superior to the rest of Indians, whether Hindus or new Muslim converts. Members of the Ashraf community held the highest civil, military, commercial, or scholarly positions.

Few Hindus converted to Islam during the earlier period of the Arab conquest. Later, under the Turkish Delhi sultanate, when Islam was the state religion and enjoyed official patronage, conversion rates increased and separate Indian Muslim communities began to form. Most of the early converts may have been disaffected Indian Buddhists. Hindu conversion to Islam was a relatively slow and lengthy process taking many centuries. Hindus converted for many reasons, including personal ambition; the promise of material rewards, such as top positions in the state bureaucracy; the prospect of war booty, or the fear of enslavement or death. Some converts sought to escape the stigma of low social status within the Hindu caste system, or the prospect of becoming outcastes through their close dealings with Muslims; in either case, conversion seemed a better alternative. But most religious conversions of Hindus to Islam came through the efforts of Islamic ascetics like the Sufis, who spread Islam at local levels through their social work, healing skills, and popular, synchronic blend of
Hindu and Islamic mysticism. Sufis lived either by themselves or among disciples in the manner of the Hindu swamis or sadus. The prestige of these Islamic mystics was a major source of influence that no Islamic ruler could afford to ignore. A medieval Islamic ruler’s authority rested on three bases of support: (1) the noble and military class, (2) the Islamic scholars trained at madrasas, who staffed government offices and had the power to issue fatwas, or legal opinions, and (3) the Sufis. No sultan could maintain himself in power long without the active cooperation and tacit consensus of these three power groups.

Unlike the ulama, legal scholars who specialized in Islamic law that dealt with practical matters, the Sufis were members of mystical brotherhoods. In India, Sufis borrowed Hindu and Buddhist monastic practices and philosophical ideas and incorporated them into an Islamic framework. By the time of the Delhi sultanate in the thirteenth century, the Sufis were divided into fourteen brotherhoods, or orders, with each under its shaikh or pir, a spiritual guide who alone can initiate disciples. The center of any Sufi order was the hospice, which is where the novice went to seek guidance in the spiritual life from a Sufi master. The first major Sufi auspice was established in the northwestern town of Multan (present-day Pakistan) by the Sufi Shaikh Bahaud-din Zakariyya (1182–1262), a member of the Suhrawardiyya Order, which was established in Punjab, Sind, and Bengal, all major centers of Islamic activity. Eager for the conversion of Hindus to Islam, the Subrawardiyya were aided in this by their wealth, which was derived from gifts from pious merchants and state officials, and by their links with the centers of Islamic power.

The second most important Sufi auspice established in urban India under the Delhi sultanate was the Chishtyya, or the Chisti Order. This particular order was brought to India by a Persian mystic, Khwaja Muinud-din Chishti (1142–1236), who made his final home in the town of Ajmir in 1206. By the time of his death, the Chishti auspices were established in many parts of the Delhi sultanate. The Chishti Sufis led a life of poverty and asceticism that was devoted to their single universal deity, Allah. Although they were dependent on public charity, their distribution of wealth and feeding stations for the poor made a favorable impression even among the Hindus. The shine of Muinuddin Chishti in Ajmir is still a center of pilgrimage for Muslims and Hindus.

The Chishti Sufis, like the Hindu yogis, practiced breath control and meditation and were influenced by the ascetic exercises (see Yoga). They also composed Hindi poetry with Vishnavite and Saivaite overtones, which was seen as far more suited to elevate them to a higher status of mystical ecstasy than the earlier Persian mystical poetry. Such activities and a spirit of tolerant ecumenism were frowned upon by the more orthodox ullama, who urged the state to end these un-Islamic practices. These efforts failed largely due to the great influence wielded by the Sufi masters. However, the ullama were sometimes able to convince the more orthodox sultans to publicly execute a few Sufis in an effort to stamp out what they saw as deviant practices, but these were rare exceptions. Certain Sufi philosophies concerning the nature of reality and god were remarkably similar to the teachings of Hindu mystics or yogis, who played a vital role in popular Hinduism. On an intellectual level, the Sufis were also influenced by Hindu yogic texts such as Amrita Kunda, a Hatha yogic text that was translated into Persian or Arabic. Such texts were instrumental in teaching the Sufis their meditation techniques and in providing information about Hindu healing arts, such as the medicinal or chemical properties of herbs.
After nearly 600 years of political domination and proselytizing, Islam chose to coexist with Hinduism in India. Although the central tenets of the two religious traditions seem diametrically opposite, Hindus and Muslims interacted to produce areas of commonality. Once again, Hinduism was able to face a major challenge, like that of Buddhism some 2,550 years earlier, without altering its basic form, but, unlike it did with Buddhism, Hinduism could not overwhelm, absorb, and redefine Indian Islam as a heterodox sect within the fabric of an inclusive Hindu tradition. See also Document 10.

Further Reading

Raman N. Seylon

3. ECONOMY

The Hun invasions of the fifth and sixth centuries C.E. and the subsequent collapse of the centralized Gupta rule had its impact on long-distance trade and the North Indian economy. We find less evidence of the minting of new coins during the period, which is one indication of a downturn in trade, especially international trade. But, in medieval India, the state’s minted coins were only one medium of exchange; there was a multiplicity of currencies and other mediums of exchange, which varied from region to region (see Money and Exchange Systems). These other mediums of exchange included gold bullion, silver rods and bars, and even iron needles or cowry shells as small denominations. And in many cases transactions did not involve any money. In premodern times, taxes were paid in kind, such as paddy (un-husked rice). An inscription in the Chola capital of Tanjore dated to the early eleventh century mentions that in rural areas paddy served as a form of currency to pay for many everyday food items, such as dhal (lentils), curds, ghee (clarified butter), tamarind, salt, pulse, and betel leaves (Appadurai, vol. II, 703). The latter, a mild pепперy tasting leaf, was chewed along with quick-lime and areca palm nuts and served as a stimulant and a breath freshener. It also had a variety of ritual and social uses and is still central to traditional Indian hospitality. It was also a major trade article as well as an item of everyday consumption.

The political fragmentation of the Gupta Empire meant that regional states became the norm in early medieval India. In northern India, Rajput dynasties, such as the Pritharas from Rajasthan, dominated the region from the eighth century and fought the Pala dynasty of Bengal and Bihar for control of Kanauj and the central Gangatic region. By the eleventh century, the Palas were overtaken by the Sena dynasty. The western and central Deccan was under the control of the Chalukyas (973–1189) and the south was under the Cholas, who waged frequent war against the Chalukyas. The Cholas, at the height of their
power in the tenth and eleventh centuries established firm bureaucratic control over the core riverside areas through their ability to dominate local chieftains and assemblies.

Agrarian Base of the Medieval Indian State

As is the case today, the majority of the population in medieval India lived in small villages and was involved in agriculture. The ownership of land conferred a great deal of prestige, and everyone, regardless of their main profession, aimed to have their own personal plots of land. A large class of landless laborers assisted in the agricultural operation and shared in a portion of the final harvest. Along with seasonal monsoon, irrigation, whether based on river-fed canals or on man-made dams, played a major part in the cultivation of crops, and great importance was attached to its upkeep. The state encouraged the reclamation and cultivation of new lands by granting special tax concessions for frontier cultivators. The prosperity of any cultivator depended not only on the availability of water and the nature of his tenurial rights but also on the revenue demands of the state (Nilakanta Sastri, 326).

Land revenue, the most important revenue source for all premodern Indian states, was collected in kind. The gross revenue of any great or small landowner was divided into a number of separate categories, such as state dues, village dues, community dues, and temple dues. The rate of tax was determined by the state revenue department, which standardized rates according to the type of land, type of crops, and the actual harvest. Collection in kind was done by state officials but also through lineage heads, who managed the river valley, or through the assembly of nadu heads, who managed the dry lands. There is considerable difference in opinion as to the exact portion of the gross produce that was the king’s share or kadamai. According to the Brahmin legalist Manu in his first-century C.E. compendium within a larger collection of Hindu legal texts collectively known as the Dharmasastra, the king’s share should be anywhere from one-sixth to one-fourth. But this legal ideal fails to consider other forms of dues, such as funds for the maintenance of irrigation canals, funds to support local village officials, and funds for the maintenance of local temples and Brahmin settlements. The proceeds of these dues did not reach the coffers of the state but nevertheless were demands upon the land revenue collected on the authority of the state (Appadurai, vol. II, 681). Some historians of medieval India, such as Richard Sewell, author of A Forgotten Empire: Vijayanagar, are convinced that the dues collected as land tax by Hindu and Islamic powers were one-half the gross harvest of a cultivator (Appadurai, vol. II, 674). Throughout the Middle Ages, Indian states carried out careful surveys to estimate the revenue potential of the land under their jurisdiction, and payment was both in cash and kind, either directly collected by the state or by its intermediaries (Appadurai, vol. II, 685, 691).

Aspects of Crafts and Small-Scale Industry in Early Medieval India

The basic unit of production in medieval India was the individual craftsman who worked from his own home and would have been aided by members of his extended household. In premodern India, the type of craft that could be
undertaken was circumscribed by the caste system and by community norms, and was linked to Hindu ideas concerning purity and pollution. The most common form of village industry was the manufacturing of textiles, which employed large numbers of workers. Most were manufactured for the local market, but the export of finer varieties of textiles to other parts of India and to overseas markets was made possible by the movements of individual merchants and by a highly developed and organized network of mercantile corporations (Nilakanta Sastri, 329).

There is also evidence of large-scale manufacturing by entrepreneurs who hired pools of workers and fleets of transport boats to distribute their products. Although such large-scale productions were rare, ancient Buddhist Jataka tales refer to wealthy manufacturers, such as Saddala Putha, who had five-hundred workshops of pottery manufacturing. The Jataka stories also mention what could be considered workers’ cooperatives, which undertook the building of large enterprises such as temples or large private houses. The nature of their work led to a division of labor. The employer and the workers safeguarded their part of the agreement by contracts with clauses and penalties outlining the punishments for breaking the contract by any member of the cooperative.

By far the largest industrial or trade organization was the “guild” or sreni, which included the individual craftsman, and the cooperative group belonging to that trade. Of the craft guilds, medieval inscriptions list goldsmiths, coiners, blacksmiths, carpenters and masons, weavers, oil mongers, gardeners, stonemasons, braziers, rope makers, jewellers, potters, basket weavers, mat makers, toddy (palm beer) drawers, and tailors. In some respects, medieval Indian guilds functioned like modern-day trade unions; they had clearly established the rules for work and wages and accepted standards and prices for commodities. Its rules and regulations had the authority of law and were respected even by the local ruler. All conflicts concerning its members were resolved in the guild trade court, which functioned much like a traditional village panchayat or caste council. The court had the power to expel errant or refractory members, a punishment equal to the social outcasting imposed by a caste council. Labor outcasting forbade the condemned to continue to practice his profession, making the laborer unemployable. Also like the caste council, the guild had influence over the social life of its members; it settled domestic disputes and took care of orphans and widows, thus providing a form of basic social insurance for its members. It was possible to have two or more guilds for a single profession or trade, which indicates that guilds may have split whenever the need arose. The head of a guild, called jetthaka, or “elder,” in Buddhist texts, was assisted by a council of respected senior members. The office of elder was hereditary and held by the most influential and wealthy householders. Guilds also functioned in the capacity of major financial donors to local and regional temples and funded ritual functions. The fund acquired for such pious deeds came from membership dues and from criminal fines on those violating guild rules. Guilds also functioned in other capacities, such as acting as lending institutions or “banks” that lent money to merchants at interest, trustees of religious organizations, and the funders and maintainers of perpetual lamps at particular shrines.

The regulations and the cooperative spirit of guilds gave medieval India a better qualified and organized labor force, as well as the capacity to safeguard the collective interests of all workmen. But the guilds also had shortcomings.
Like feuding castes, they had the capacity to create public disorder or riots against their rivals. This was more common in the Deccan region, where guild members and caste groups were often the same (Basham, 1967, 224).

Apart from the trade guilds, kings and large temples also functioned as lending institutions and financed large undertakings. Kings or officials made loans to peasants to encourage the clearing and cultivation of wastelands and the development of irrigation canals and ditches. Large temples also lent money to villages in their neighborhood. In South India, professional money lending and commercial castes, called Chetty or Chettiar (also spelled as Shetty), functioned as moneylenders and merchants. Members of the wealthy south Indian castes were also leading guild members. By medieval times, these castes settled in other parts of South Asia and there developed wider networks of commercial ties.

Medieval India also had guilds of sellers or merchants, which were called vira valanjiar or “company of valiant merchants.” These merchant guilds undertook major commercial ventures, such as outfitting and providing security for trade caravans, outfitting commercial ocean voyages, building warehouses, and maintaining agents in foreign ports and cities to assist members. They may also have participated in joint ventures with craft guilds. But the main function of merchant guilds was not to function as a trading body, but to protect and regulate the activities of its members and further their common interests. Just like craft or manufacturing guilds, the merchant guild also had social responsibilities. They aided families of members who met financial misfortunes or personal loss. They kept strict watch over the quality of products and business practices, preventing any unethical malpractice among members. They also undertook the role of spokesman for their members at the king’s court. Their influence was such that even kings sought their counsel and advice. The Indian guilds, like their medieval European counterparts, had their own banners and emblems granted to them by the king, which were similar to those of the local nobility, and were carried in local religious processions. They also had their own mercenary armies, which may also served with the king’s army in critical times.

**Trade in Early Medieval India**

Since the time of the prehistoric Indus Valley civilization, Indian merchants participated in overseas trade. But we have far more evidence from the medieval period, including local records left by merchants. Perhaps the most interesting is one that came from the outside—a series of tall tales left by a fictional merchant adventurer named Sinbad. Often overlooked as fantasy fiction or an Arabian adventure story, the story of the merchant Sinbad from Basra contains elements of actual accounts of Indian Ocean trade during the Middle Ages. It also gives a rare glimpse into the ideas, worldviews, spirit, and attitudes of Indian Ocean traders of the ninth and tenth centuries.

The primary Indian export of the period was “spices,” a broad term that includes food flavorings, medicines, and raw material for making perfumes. In food flavoring, Indian spices had the reputation of making even the coarsest dishes palatable. The most highly sought after flavor spice was pepper—this is reflected in the a pepper shaker which is still a standard fixture on every Western dinner table. Most pepper in India is grown along the southwestern coast
of Malabar. In the story of Sinbad, his fourth voyage is to gather pepper in Malabar. Another important spice, cloves, was imported to South India from the Indonesian island of Java and reexported to the Middle Eastern or Mediterranean markets. Cloves are used to flavor food and drinks and also as medicine. Ginger, another highly valued spice in the Middle Ages, was also both a flavor agent and a medicinal drug.

Among Indian medicines, the most important were aloes (used for everything from burns, coughs, and headaches to arthritis and constipation), rhubarb (a reexported item from Sumatra used to treat eye diseases), balsam resin (for making medicines and perfumes), gum, benzoin resin (a fragrant resin from Java and Sumatra used for making incense and believed to have antiseptic properties), cardamom, and camphor (Appadurai, vol. II, 534). Wood was also exported to the tree-scarce Persian Gulf and the Arabian coastal cities. Most important was teak wood, which was used for construction and shipbuilding because it was not affected by saltwater. Most of the teak wood came from the Konkon forests on the east coast of India. Bamboo, from the west coast, had a variety of usages, such as scaffolding for buildings, thanks to its lightness and strength. Luxury wood exports included ebony for furniture and sandalwood for medicine, perfume, and dye. The most important textile dye was indigo (the source of the blue dye used in the original blue jeans). India was also a major source of precious stones, including diamonds, the trade of which was in the hands of south Indian merchants and mariners (Appadurai, vol. II, 492). Among the food products exported, the most sought after was sugar. Ancient India pioneered the manufacture of this universal sweetener from the treated and boiled juice of sugar-cane plants, which crystallizes as it cools. In medieval times, sugar was exported from Bengal in northeastern India in a powder wrapped in small dried leaf packets. The English terms sugar and candy (solid pieces of sugar) have Sanskrit roots. The modern term English sugar comes from the Sanskrit term shakara, through the Persian and Arabic shakar and the Spanish azucar. Another Indian foodstuff that had a prominent place in medieval Arabic cuisine was the coconut, which was used as a sweetener. But India also produced and traded various important by-products of the coconut palm, such as coconut oil, used for cooking; palm sugar or jaggery, used in traditional Indian medicine; and, most important, the “coir” rope, which was in heavy demand in shipping because it was light, highly durable, elastic, and impervious to saltwater. For the late Indian Middle Ages, Portuguese accounts tell of Indian-dyed cotton textiles and food grains such as wheat, millet, and rice, being exported to the Swahili coast of East Africa. An early-sixteenth-century Italian traveller noted that an immense quantity of cotton was produced near Cambay (near present-day Mumbai), and every year forty or fifty vassals filled with cotton and silk textiles came to Cambay and from there these textiles were shipped overseas (Nilakanda Sastri, 336). The importance of this Arabian Sea commerce is underlined by the large amount of revenue extracted from it in the form of custom duties. According to one Arabic source, the custom toll from three major Persian Gulf and South Arabian ports in the twelfth century was well over 2.5 million gold dinars (Appadurai, vol. II, 512).

In South India, there were two different merchant circuits. Those who operated locally, called Svadeshi, and those who took part in international trade, called Nana-deshi (Kulke and Rothermund, 125). These merchants lived in their
own settlement areas. Although autonomous, their activities in port areas fell under state supervision. Long before the time of the Chola Empire (eighth to thirteenth centuries), the network of South Indian guild merchants linked various towns and became a powerful and influential body. In their multiple roles, they functioned as bankers and financiers of kings and funding agencies for local development projects and temple constructions; the economic benefits provided by these guilds made them vital institutions in any kingdom. Their multiregional role and their ability to employ mercenary armies ensured that the state recognized their exclusive sphere of activity and did not interfere in their affairs. All south Indian rulers respected the authority and wishes of their local guild and gave it autonomy, allowing the guilds to act much like a state within a state. In this sense, the Indian guilds were analogous to the European warrior-merchant companies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which also functioned as autonomous trading bodies outside the jurisdiction of the local land powers (Kulke and Rothermund, 125).

Three of the most powerful guilds in medieval India were the Ayyavole, Anjuvaranam, and Manigramam. The Ayyavole guild, from the Deccan near modern Aihole in Karnataka State, had branches in every major Indian city and controlled the West Asian trade. Members were identified by their flag, which had a symbol of a seated bull and was carried in procession in temple rituals. Confident in their overseas ventures, they claimed to be known “all over the world” for their daring trading activities and to have travelled land and water routes penetrating all the countries of the six continents (Nilakanta Sastri, 331). The Manigramam guild from South India focused on the South East Asian trade, though this was, by no means, its exclusive domain. Inscriptions at Takuapa, in Southern Thailand, and another in Sumatra dated 1088 testify the Manigramam guild’s overseas ventures. Not much is known about Anjuvaranam (meaning “fire colors”) guild except that it often shared duties such as the collection of customs in Trivancore along with the Manigramam guild. Both had complete control over these duties without the interference by the state. Anjuvaranam may have been primarily based in Trivancore (Appadurai, vol. 1, 413).

Apart from commercial links, the South Indian states, notably the Pallavas and Cholas, were engaged in military actions against powerful Indonesian states such as Srivijaya and its vassals centered on the Isthmus of Siam. The Pallavas and Cholas undermined the political power of the Srivijaya state. These overseas conflicts arose from local disputes, struggles over markets, the need to support the South Indian merchant guilds and their mercenary armies, or simply long-distance looting expeditions. Inscriptional evidence indicates that under the Pallava ruler Nandivarman III (844–866) a ritual water tank was constructed and handed over to expatriate merchants of the South Indian merchant guilds in the island of Sumatra. The merchants were living in an armed camp, probably engaged in a power struggle with the regional Srivijaya rulers, and had sought the aid from the powerful fleet of the Pallavas, who were then the paramount power in southeast India (Nilakanda Sastri, 160, 331)

The Cholas, who followed the Pallavas, also sent naval fleets—first in 1025 and again after 1069. The precise reasons why the south Indian monarchs sent out these naval expeditions is not known. However, one thing is clear; the south Indian states actively supported their merchant guilds in conducting their overseas business, and occasionally resorted to the use of force (Kulke
and Rothermund, 123–125). Inscriptional evidence also indicates that the merchant guild of Manigramam, which had branches in Sri Lanka, also got involved in local power struggles by lending its own mercenary armies at a price to local Singhalese princes during succession struggles.

**Major Trade Rules in Early Medieval Period**

Since antiquity, the major artery of trade routes covered most of northern India. The largest route (the predecessor of what later became the grand trunk road in the colonial era) ran from what is present-day Calcutta through the ancient town of Pataliputra to Delhi, then crossed the three rivers of the Punjab to Taksasila, and continued to the Kabul Valley and Central Asia. The great cities north of the Ganges were linked to this major trade route by secondary roads. Earlier, during the height of India’s first political union under the Mauryan dynasty in the second century B.C.E, the main trade routes that crossed through Mauryan territories are said to have had milestone markers and traveller inns at regular intervals (Basham, 224). Another long-distance trade route was located further south; it went from the city of Ujjayini in northwest Deccan to the city of Kanchi (capital of the Pallavas) and Madurai (capital of the Pandiyas). A vast network of secondary routes had developed by the first century linking all-important cities of the peninsula. The breath of a major trade road was about 24 feet and well suited for wheeled transport. There were also numerous tracks only slightly better than footpaths that were unsuited for wheeled transport (Nilakanta Sastri, 330).

With the fall of the Gupta Empire, the roads were not maintained, and the encroaching jungles with their large predators, wild elephants, and poisonous reptiles, as well as hostile tribes, further discouraged long-distance travel. Further disruption of travel was caused by seasonal flooding during monsoons, which shut down ferry service across major rivers. Indian states left the maintenance of roads to local authorities, and neighboring villagers were expected to provide free labor to maintain them. The state also did not attempt to bridge major rivers but depended on private ferry services at all important crossing points along major travel routes. Thus, the absence of a strong central authority meant serious disruption of the transport system; regional travel became more difficult during periods of political crisis, which provided more opportunities for hostile tribes and castes of professional thieves to plunder any traveler, merchant, or pilgrim.

When central authority reestablished its control over trade routes, professional guides and hired guards led large merchant caravans of pack animals loaded with luxury goods westward toward the Silk Road, from where they travelled to the market towns of Central Asia and the ports of the Mediterranean Basin. These large caravan trains had about five-hundred handlers, a caravan leader (sarthaovaha), and an experienced land pilot (thalaniyyamaka), who could guide it through unmarked routes and deserts by using the stars. The major articles of this long-distance trade were luxury fabrics, masks, gemstones, and spices. The major rivers, such as the Ganges and Indus, were also used to transport goods, but these, apart from navigational hazards such as hidden rocks or sand banks, were plagued, especially in unsettled times, by professional bands of river pirates (Basham, 225).
Apart from the land routes linking India to the Silk Road, which stretched from China to the Mediterranean Basin, a parallel sea route also linked India to western Asia, southeastern, and eastern Asia. These routes were well established before the Gupta Empire (320–600 C.E.), and most certainly as early as the first century C.E. The wind patterns of the monsoon were used for deep ocean sailing, and knowledge of these seasonal wind currents was essential for a safe voyage. Summer monsoon winds blew from the southeast and winter monsoon winds from the northwest. Indian Ocean merchants learned to plan their trading schedules around these changes in wind patterns. During winter months, merchants from western India sailed the Persian Gulf to the Red Sea and then used the summer monsoons to sail back to India. Shipbuilding flourished in Calicut on the Malabar coast, which had large forests of teak wood particularly suited for ship construction. The high demand of Indian goods, led to the construction of keeled ships, which could carry goods weighing 1,200 bahares (about 480,000 pounds), were built. To carry maximum cargo, Indian merchant ships were built without decks. Their construction did not use nails, and the entire hull was sewn with coir rope and waterproofed with bitumen. These stitched ships had a number of advantages over nailed ships: they were more resilient, could better withstand the fierce storms of the monsoon season, and could better navigate over coral reefs (Basham, 1967, 227). They were all conditioned for Indian Ocean trade, being able to dock in shallow ocean and river ports without danger of serious structural damage, and needed a thorough overhaul only every 5 years as opposed to annual maintenance required by a nailed ship. Their shortcomings included the need for continuous bailing—they were not as leakproof as nailed ships—and, as revealed later with the coming of the Portuguese, their unsuitability for gunpowder-based warfare. A sixteenth-century Portuguese traveller named Duarte Barbosa noted that every monsoon these stitched merchant vassals left Calicut laden with goods gathered from various parts of India and journeyed to the Red Sea ports from where they shipped their goods through intermediaries to Venice (Nilakanda Sastri, 335).

In the Middle Ages, the island of Socotra, strategically located near the mouth of the Red Sea and East Africa (its original name may have come from the Sanskrit word for “blissful island”), had a large Indian merchant settlement and was a major landfall for merchant ships crossing the Indian Ocean (Basham, 218). Indian merchants also made regular trip to Alexandria, then the major trade emporium on the desert crossing of Egypt from the Red Sea to the Nile and then to the Mediterranean. Before steamships, sailing the full length of the Red Sea was extremely hazardous. The northern part of the Red Sea was swept year round by northwest winds while the rest of the sea was subject to reversible seasonal wind patterns. Along the Red Sea shore, treacherous rocks reached right to the water’s edge, and the entire coast was uninhabited and unprotected. Therefore, travelling was only possible during daytime; at nights, ships had to find a safe shelter to lay anchor. The sea is also subject to heavy fog cover and violent gale force winds. For this reason, Indian merchants disembarked at the port of Jeddah on the Arabian Peninsula and transhipped their goods through local Arab ships, which were familiar with this difficult waterway, or carried their goods overland by caravan, crossing the desert to a Nile port. One merchant who made this trip left evidence of his presence in the form of graffiti at the ancient shrine of the Min, an Egyptian
deity of travellers later identified with the Greek god Pan, at Wadi Mia, a major land link between the Red Sea and the Nile River. It states “Sophon the Indian pays homage to Pan for good journey.” Sophon may well have been the Hellenized version of the Indian name Subhanu. The pastoral Greek deity Pan may well have been the Indian counterpart of the Hindu deity Krishna. Like Pan, Krishna played a small flute to his flocks. One thing is certain: unknown Indian merchant on route to the Mediterranean port city of Alexandria was highly Hellenized (Basham, 228).

In late antiquity, the net balance of trade in this Indo-Mediterranean exchange was unfavorable to Rome. In return for its exports to the Roman world, Indian merchants mainly wanted precious metals in the form of gold coins. Although there was a limited Indian demand for wine, slave girls, industrial metals such as tin and lead, and semiprecious corals from the Mediterranean, the Indian appetite for Roman coin led to a serious drainage of gold from the Roman Treasury. This unfavorable balance of trade concerned the Roman government and Roman citizens, such as Pliny, who calculated the annual gold drain as 100 million sesterces. This drain was an important cause of Roman financial difficulties since the time of Nero (r. 54–68 C.E.), who took economic measures to reduce the gold content of Roman coinage, thus frustrating Indian merchants who had appreciated the formerly high gold content and standardized weight of Roman coins. In Medieval India, except in port cities, Roman coins were not used as a medium of exchange, but as the monetary reserves of princes. For this reason, Roman coins in India are often found in hordes.

By the time of the Gupta Empire, the collapse of the Western Roman Empire also led to the demise of the Mediterranean trade, which probably prompted Indian merchants to seek other sources of gold and trade opportunities. Roman trade was replaced by increasing trade with Southeast Asia and China. According to the Chinese pilgrim-scholar Faxian, by the Gupta Period, Indian merchant ships had the capacity to carry two-hundred sailors and passengers (Basham, 1967, 226).

Indian trade with China began during the Gupta Empire, when the Chinese demanded similar trade items to that of the Romans. Imports to China included manufactured textiles, mostly of cotton, medicinal drugs, and spices, but the most valuable exports were jewels and semiprecious items such as ivory, rhinoceros horn, ebony, amber, coral, and perfumes. This trade was welcomed by the Chinese state, which in return offered silk and porcelain, both of which found ready markets in India and throughout the entire Indian Ocean Basin. The local Indian silk industry probably felt the adverse impact of cheaper and better quality Chinese silk. By late ninth century, political troubles made China unsafe for foreigners, but Chinese ships still came regularly to ports on the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra to buy Indian and other foreign goods. These voyages were the beginning of Chinese navigation deeper into the Indian Ocean. From the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries, Chinese vassals frequently visited the west coast of India. But in the twelfth century, the drain of currency and precious metals resulting from this expansion of trade in luxuries caused serious concern for the Chinese, who banned the export of precious metals and coined money and put restrictions on trade with India. (Nilakanda Sastri, 333). However, trade continued uninterrupted until the end of the thirteenth century, when China again faced political turmoil, this time due to the Mongol invasion.
In the early fifteenth century, the third Ming Emperor Yongle (1405–1425) sent a large fleet under Admiral Zheng He to intimidate India and Sri Lanka. The fleet included sixty-two giant nine-masted “treasure” ships and over three-hundred support vessels, including water tankers, as well as an army of over twenty-seven thousand men. Zheng He made seven epic voyages and visited ports in western India. He sought, through military means, to establish Ming hegemony over the Indian Ocean trade, and interfered in the internal political affairs of a number of Southeast Asian states and Sri Lanka. But after 1433, China’s overseas naval ventures ended as abruptly and completely as they had begun.

In the late medieval period, the shipping of Indian products was increasingly undertaken by foreign merchants in foreign vessels. This was because advances in nautical engineering among the Arab, the Persians, and, especially, the Chinese, gave them vessels that were more seaworthy than those available to Indian shipping. Indian merchants found that it made more economic sense to sell their products to foreign middlemen and to use foreign vessels for shipping (Basham 1967, 231). Waves of foreign invasions since the eleventh century also created a sense of xenophobia in Hindu India. The earlier zeal for establishing merchant guilds overseas to conduct all aspects of trade gave way in later times to religious sanctions against ocean travel; the sea came to be seen as dark and forbidding, the very embodiment of pollution.

The Integration of South Indian Trade Guilds with the Local Agrarian Economy

During the height of Chola rule in South India from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries, inscriptions show that trade guilds played an influential role in South Indian society. Although the guilds lingered on until the sixteenth century, they were by then largely marginal. In trying to understand the function of these guilds, we must see them as intimately integrated with the rural-based agrarian social and economic order and not with the towns of medieval India.

The agrarian system of the Eastern or Coromandal coast of South India was a combination of two types of settlements and cultivation. The core areas had settled villages where cultivation was based on irrigation from rivers or dammed water reservoirs called tanks. These core agricultural areas were under the control of the two dominant castes, the Brahmin and the Vellala peasantry and their assemblies, which also included some artisan castes. These agricultural settlements that spread along the fertile river basins were well integrated into these trade networks (Stein, 233).

The second type of settlement was located in the peripheral hilly and forested areas. These settlements were inhabited by hostile tribal groups that practiced shifting agriculture and engaged in predatory activities such as cattle theft. This is also a frontier area of conflict. As the land-hungry Vellala peasantry expanded into this frontier zone, cutting down forests to bring more land under cultivation, they also pushed many of these tribal people further away from their traditional homes. This led to tensions and open hostility between the expanding migrant peasantry and the local tribal population, but it also slowly assimilated the tribal people into a more developed form of peasant economy.
The Brahmin-controlled villages (or brahmdeyas) had been earlier donated to Brahmin families by pious Hindu rulers to support the essential role of Brahmin as teachers and ritual specialists. Brahmin families were given the right to collect the surplus of village produce, and the right to manage all aspects of village life through their own caste assembly, the Brahmin-mahasabha, the grand assembly of Brahmins.

The Vellalas, the dominant agrarian peasant caste, governed their areas of settled agriculture through assemblies called ur, which included the vast majority of settled villages in the core areas as well as the peripheral areas of agricultural development. The network of peasant settlements in these core areas were at the heart of the medieval Southeast Indian society. They were self-governing and were loosely linked in a variety of ways with other areas in the region and were also instrumental in maintaining the state’s political hold over the entire region.

As governing bodies, the supraregional assembly representing all communities within the core area met occasionally to act as a single unit. These multistate assemblies of the dominant Vellala and Brahmin castes were called periya-nadu (“supra region”) or chitrameli (“sign of the ploughshare”)—inscriptional records are often adorned with a picture of a ploughshare. The chitrameli formed an overarching umbrella association linking various smaller associations within the irrigated core agricultural areas. During the Chola Period, inscriptive evidence indicates a close relationship between the agriculturalists and the merchant classes. Trade items included such commodities as grain, salt, iron, horses, and elephants, with the last two mainly used for the armies of local princes.

According to inscriptive evidence, overseas trade organizations (nana desi), such as Ayyavole, Manigramum, and Anjuranam, were active from the eighth to the seventeenth centuries, but their period of importance in the local South Indian economy did not go beyond the thirteenth century. The inscriptions also make clear that these merchant guilds were well integrated and subordinate to the assemblies representing the major interest groups in the developed parts of Coromandal.

The supraregional assemblies or chitrameli were made up of agriculturalists, who produced many of the commodities that were later sold by the merchants involved in local and multiregional trade. Both types of trade were essential and well integrated into the fabric of this predominantly agricultural society. It is, therefore, understandable that the fate of these large merchant guilds was closely linked to development of the agrarian order of the medieval Coromandal.

The decline of Chola military power in the thirteenth century meant the core areas were increasing vulnerable to predatory attacks by outside warrior groups. After the demise of the Cholas, attacks by Turkish horseman from the Islamic states to the north; Hindu raiders from neighboring kingdoms, such as the Hosalas and Pandiayas; migrant Telugu warrior castes from the northeast (acting as vanguard of the Vijayanagar Empire), and Tamil warrior castes such as Maravar and Kallar permanently altered the earlier social and political order (Stein, 239). After a period of political turmoil lasting more than a century, a new political order, the Hindu agrarian regime of the Vijayanagar Empire, filled the power vacuum in South India. In the Vijayanagar state, political organization was subordinated to and dictated by military needs (Stein, 239). The writings of foreign
visitors describe the large standing armies of the Vijayanagar rulers, and the di-
vision of much of South India into a patchwork of two-hundred military fiefs
under households of various sizes. This system of military households was
based on the one already in practice in the Delhi sultanate of North India, and
its origins could be traced to the Turkish heartland in Central Asia. This new
military revenue requirement could only be met by altering the earlier agrarian
setup of South India. The formerly autonomous local caste assemblies of the
Vellala and Brahmín castes now became subordinate to the new demands of the
powerful military households of the Telugu and Tamil warrior castes (Stein,
239) (see Tamil Country). Many of the Telugu-speaking warrior groups came
south either as vanguards of the Vijayanagar armies or were driven from their
northern homelands by expanding Islamic power.

Each military household was assigned or controlled a fief (amaram), which
was composed of a number of revenue-bearing villages. Each household closely
guarded the resources within its territory and made its fief into a self-sufficient
economic unit that was relatively isolated from any major trans-regional eco-
nomic network. The households also encouraged internal development of their
fiefs by establishing towns with their capital, for fortified citadels and garrisons,
and for pilgrim centers and temple sites within their territories. These new
towns became the new focus of local trade groups, the development of which
led to the narrowing of trading activities and the demise of the former great net-
work of itinerant trade.

Warrior control of southern India increased the colonization and settlement
of previously marginal areas. This process involved cutting down forest areas
and reclaiming it for agricultural purposes, primarily to meet the military
needs of the new warrior-based polity. The fourteenth through the seventeenth
centuries saw large-scale settlement and expansion of agricultural villages that
were not integrated organizationally with the larger economy and lacked the
self-government of earlier times.

This tendency toward more localized military households that exerted max-
imum control over all the resources within its territory also led to the shrink-
ing of the number of commodities that were now traded. As regional trade
became limited, the focus was more on essentials and luxuries. The more ex-
tensive overseas trade of textiles and food grains fell into the hands of foreign
West Asian merchants, who now had colonies in every major Indian port. This
domination of the agrarian order by warrior-based states weakened the South
Indian-based trade guilds that earlier had played such a key social and eco-
nomic role locally and regionally.

These military households, whether great or small, sought to reduce the
power of the trade groups. As mentioned earlier, under the Cholas, the multi-
regional and overseas trade networks of Ayyavole and Manigramam func-
tioned as an autonomous state within a state. They were self-governing and
autonomous bodies whose interests were motivated largely by economic fac-
tors. They also safeguarded their interests by hiring bodies of mercenaries and
private militias. In the Vijayanagar Period, the military households viewed these
private militias as a threat to their power. The isolation and self-sufficiency
sought by these new military households benefited locally based merchant
groups at the expense of large trade guilds. Advantages were also gained by
the migrant Telugu merchant classes that belonged to the home territories
of the new Telugu military households. Telugu migrant castes, such as the
Komatis, who were patronized and supported by their fellow Telugu Poligars, became the new powerful trade cliques of South India.

The older trade guilds faced a slow but steady road to extinction, and all epigraphic records of the great merchant guilds ceased by the seventeenth century, when they were mere shadow of their former selves. By the time European traders arrived in force, these trade groups were gone; nothing was ever mentioned about them in the copious records of the Portuguese.

Aspects of Craft and Small-Scale Industry in North India during the Later Middle Ages

Despite all the chaos and social displacement that resulted from the Turkish invasions of North India, archaeological evidence suggests urban growth. In 1330, the Moroccan traveller Ibn Battuta wrote that Delhi, the capital of the Delhi sultanate, and Daulalabad, where much of the population had shifted under the eccentric reign of Muhammad Tughluq, were two of the largest cities in the entire Islamic world.

The growth in craft production that accompanied this urban growth was a result of a number of technical developments. One of the biggest craft industries in medieval India was the manufacture of textiles. The antiquity of Indian domination of the textile trade can be illustrated by modern English terminology for various everyday fabrics, such as calico (from Calicut, a port in Malabar), chintz (from the Hindi word chitra or “design”), dungarees (named for a place near Mumbay where this heavy denim fabric, so favored by seafarers, was sold), seersucker (from the Hindi word shir shakkar), cashmere wool (from a goat indigenous to Kashmir), pashmina (a high-luxury shawl made from the wool of a high-altitude Himalayan mountain goat), bandana (from the Hindi word “to tie”), jute (from the Bengali word jhuto), gunny (from the Hindi word ghoni), and khaki (from the Hindustani term meaning “dust colored”). However, India’s greatest textile contribution was the manufacture of cotton, a cheap and durable fabric that is universally preferred for everyday wear. The history of cotton manufacture is goes back over 4,000 years and predates India’s first urban civilization (Harappan). The cotton plant is native to India, and Indian cotton textiles were in demand throughout the medieval world. For over a millennia, the production of the cotton textiles was based on a simple and labor-intensive manufacturing technique. The most important contribution of the medieval period to the manufacturing of cotton was the spinning wheel, or charkha, which increased the production of cotton yarn. This device, along with the threader, probably originated in China and spread quickly once it arrived in India via the Silk Road. The spinning wheel and the weaver’s threader were essential for the subsequent expansion of the Indian cotton textile industry, which made cotton textiles readily available and more affordable. Similar innovations also took place in the manufacture of silk production, yet another development from China. Before this, any large demand for good quality silk could only be satisfied by Chinese imports. Now, as a result of improvements and innovation in silk weaving, the Indian silk industry took off, making the price of silk more affordable, though it is unclear whether Indian silk matched the quality of the Chinese import.

A craft industry that arrived from Persia with the Turkish invasions was carpet weaving. The use of vertical beams for carpet weaving dates from the
time of the Delhi sultanate. Another Chinese invention that revolutionized all aspects of storing and disseminating information was paper. Paper mills in India developed in Gujarat, and by the thirteenth century paper production was ample enough to allow the use of paper for packing popular delicacies, such as sweet meats, another foreign import (Habib, 372). Both paper and carpet making are also associated with Islamic religious usages in the form of Qur’anic texts and prayer rugs.

In the production of metals, the incorporation of Chinese techniques of zinc production through distillation was to revolutionize the Indian brass industry. Commercial production of zinc from mines in Rajasthan was important in the manufacture of brass utensils and weapons. In construction, lime began to be used as cement, and vaulted rooms were introduced. The use of Mediterranean architectural techniques, such as the true arch, as opposed to the Indian corbel or false arch, and the use of domes, allowed for larger interiors in the building of mosques and palaces.

The Economy of the Delhi Sultanate

The development and introduction of new techniques, and the spread of new technologies, resulted from two major factors. First is the development of a large pool of skilled Muslim urban dwellers, including the integration into Indian society of artisans and merchants migrating from the Islamic world and bringing with them new methods and tools. Second, during the Delhi sultanate, there a pool of cheap and able-bodied laborers who could be made to do complex tasks. These laborers included a large enslaved population and prisoners of war. Related to this was an improved system for using the rural agricultural surplus to feed the urban labor force.

The enslaved population was a cheap source of labor that arose from the human military booty of the Dehli sultans. Estimates of the size of this population, which also included people enslaved as a result of debt bondage, range from twenty thousand to fifty thousand. Slaves provided the largest supply of manpower during the expansion phase of the Delhi sultanate but became a dwindling resource as slaves died and their descendents bought their freedom within a few generations. Slave labor is also less efficient and skillful than free labor, and slaves lacked the incentive for creativity and had no motivational drive other than fear. As the period of conquest ended so did the source of fresh slaves to replace declining stock; and, by the sixteenth century, it had shrunk to insignificant levels that are not mentioned by European sources.

The methods of revenue collection changed significantly during the Delhi sultanate period. The two major means of revenue extraction were the iqta and the Kharaj. The iqta, which was brought to India by the Central Asian Turks, significantly increased revenue extraction from the countryside. The iqta was a temporary revenue assignment on particular lands—usually non-Muslims—made to nobles and military commanders in lieu of a salary. Use of the iqta allowed the central administration to effectively control rural surpluses without the need for an extensive and costly administrative setup, and the regular payments iqta holders made out of their revenue to the sultan’s treasury funded military forces for local defense in emergencies and the maintenance of order in the countryside. The iqta enabled the Delhi sultanate to maintain its large cavalry force and feed a large urban-based, nonagricultural population.
The *Kharaj* was a new form of land tax introduced during the reign of Sultan Allaudin Khilji (1296–1316). Imposed on territories under the control of the Delhi sultanate, the *Kharaj* consisted of half the total produce from a given piece of land paid in both cash and kind. With an additional house and cattle tax, imposition of the *Kharaj* meant that a large portion of peasant production was sent to urban areas, which lowered grain prices in Delhi and other large towns. Lower grain prices meant the sultanate could afford to maintain a larger standing army in urban centers. The *Kharaj* also significantly reduced the power of rural Hindu magistrates by depriving them of much of the peasant surplus. However, this sharp increase in the amount of direct taxes extracted from the rural peasantry, especially under Sultan Muhammad bin Tughluq (1325–1351), triggered peasant uprisings. Nonetheless, this new augmented land tax was the major source of state revenue until the end of colonial rule, and from this point on the state functioned as the dominant or even the sole proprietor of all land within its realm.

A number of key technological innovations that spread during the Delhi sultanate period aided agricultural production and small-scale manufacturing. The introduction of the Persian wheel, a geared water wheel run by animal power, allowed for extensive irrigation from deep wells. This system was primarily used in Punjab, India’s wheat basket, which was close to Delhi. In textile manufacturing, the use of lime and gypsum-based waterproof cement allowed for the construction of larger indigo vats replacing the smaller stone vats. This innovation allowed for large-scale dying of textiles because indigo is a natural dye extensively used in textile manufacturing. Another new technology the liquor still, originated in Central Asia; the still was used to distil alcohol from fermented sugar syrup, thus increasing production of distilled alcohol.

**Trade in Later Medieval India**

The large amounts of late medieval gold and silver coins that have been found testify to the growth of trade in this period. Whereas earlier gold coins were rare and silver was often debased, the increased amount of gold in this period and the fact that gold coins were also used as a medium of exchange indicate an increase in trade with the Middle East and in the flow of gold from Sub-Saharan Africa to India.

The expanded trade included increasing import of high-spirited cavalry horses. The military demand for cavalry horses among Indian rulers grew with the success of Turkish horsemen in conquering vast stretches of Northern India. No Indian ruler could defend his kingdom against the Turks or rival princes unless he adopted the new form of mounted warfare. Unfortunately, most of the horses imported to India succumbed to poor maintenance. Lacking any local horse culture, most Indians were not familiar with the proper care and feeding of horses. Some were even said to have been fed with a specially cooked rich human diet, including roasted barley, boiled rice, boiled meat, or grains boiled in milk. As a result of this bad feeding and bad training, most of the high-strung imports either died prematurely or grew fat and sluggish, losing all their vigor and vitality. Because the Indian climate was generally unsuitable for breeding cavalry mounts, little breeding of warhorses occurred in India. It was therefore more practical to import cavalry mounts from the Persian Gulf, Central Asia, or even the Ukraine and the Russian steppes.
Evidence of the latter sources for horses comes from the Moroccan traveller Ibn Battuta. Although constantly importing foreign horses was very costly, India’s highly favorable balance of trade ensured a steady flow of gold for trade. To ensure that only the finest breeds were shipped, the rulers of powerful kingdoms paid for any horse that was injured or died en route, thus insuring against any hesitancy in shipping on the part of foreign horse traders. In exchange for horses, India sold textiles and indigo dye (Habib, 403).

One of the side benefits of greater numbers of mounted soldiers is that they could also double as effective tax collectors and regularly patrol trade routes. The increased commerce also led to the settling of new towns, which had garrisons of mounted soldiers, a treasury, and a market. The rise in international trade also led to greater monetization, which allowed tax collectors to receive their revenue more in cash than in produce.

**Major Trade Routes during the Later Middle Ages**

India’s overland trade to the Mediterranean Basin went through the northwest mountain passes to Afghanistan and from there to Iran, Central Asia, and along the Silk Road to Antioch in Syria. Two other major sea routes also linked India with the Mediterranean, one ran through the Persian Gulf before linking up via the Silk Road to Antioch, and the other went through the Red Sea then overland to the Egyptian port of Alexandria. In Europe, Italian and Venetian merchants distributed Indian wares. Large communities of Indian merchants lived in the main Red Sea, such as Jeddah and Aden. The Arabian port of Dhofar, located in present-day southern Yemen, was a source of cavalry horses (Rizvi, 221).

In northwest India, the port of Debal (or Dewal) in Sind, which had been developed by the Arabs since their eighth-century conquest, had by the fifteenth century been eclipsed by Lahri Bandar in lower Sind (Rizvi, 221). Cambay in Gujarat was a major port along with Div, Surat, and Randar. Ships from these sea ports were fully engaged in trade in the Arabian Sea, reaching the ports of the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, and voyaging as far west as East Africa, and as far south as Kerala, the Malabar coast. The port of Bandar-e Sir-af (modern Taheri), located along the Iranian coast on the Persian Gulf, was a chief western emporium in the ninth and tenth centuries; its notoriously rich merchants invited merchants from China, Java, Malaya, and India to visit their city for a common feast. The caste taboos concerning commensality that prevailed in social relations among Indians were also faithfully duplicated abroad, and to the amazement of their Iranian hosts every Indian merchant at the feast insisted on having a separate plate exclusively reserved for his own use (Nilakanta Sastry, 333).

Ports in Kerala on the Malabar Coast of southwestern India were midway between Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia in the east, and the Persian Gulf, Red Sea, and East Africa in the west. As the result, these were the major ports in South India. Calicut and Quilon in Kerala were said to have rivalled Alexandria, then the largest Mediterranean port. Large Indian ports were also home for foreign expatriate merchant communities of Arabs, Persians, Jews, and Armenians who had the protection, patronage, and support of the local ruler.

Late medieval India exported precious stones, drugs, spices, sandalwood, saffron, aromatics, iron, sugar, rice, coconuts, textiles, beads, and seed pearls.
In return, India imported Arabian horses, gold, silver, lead, mercury, coral, vermilion, rosewater, and opium. Trade between the port of Calicut and ports along the Arabian Sea was dominated in the late medieval period by Arab and Persian merchants who were based in Calicut and travelled twice a year to the Persian Gulf and Red Sea. Along with Persians and Turks, Gujarati merchants, Hindu and Muslim, handled the other great trade routes. Arab settlements along the Swahili coast in East Africa, such as Mombasa, Mogadiscio, and Kiwa promoted trade between East Africa and Gujarat. Ships carried rice, cloth, beads, and spices in exchange for African ivory, wax, gold, and slaves (Rizvi, 221).

The sailors were Muslims, but ship owners were Hindus and Muslims. Indian ports also functioned as convenient staging areas and depots for trade between the western and eastern fringes of the Indian Ocean Basin. In the East Indian Ocean, Gujarati merchants controlled the trade from Malacca, which is situated between the Malay Peninsula and the island of Sumatra. There was a large Gujarati settlement in Malacca, composed of Muslims and Hindus. The port at Malacca was the source for many of that region’s commodities, including gold from Sumatra, cloves from the Moluccas, sandalwood from Timor, mace and nutmeg from Banda, camphor from Borneo, and aloe wood from China. These items were exchanged for Indian textiles, spices, drugs, and goods obtained through West Asian trade (Rizvi, 221–222).

Before the development of Malacca as a major commercial center, Chinese ships had to travel as far as the Red Sea to tap the vast Asian trade. They had to make frequent stops at ports in South India that catered exclusively to Southeast Asian trade. However, after the fourteenth century, Indian merchants established a large trading emporium at Malacca. Because most of the Indian products were now readily available in this emporium, Chinese ships rarely ventured farther west because there was now no strong economic reason to do so. This had serious economic implications for Indian ports, which specialized in the China and Southeast Asian trade.

The Islamic conquest of North India and the Arab, Iranian, and Gujarati Muslim domination of shipping also led to the Islamization of much of the Malay Peninsula and the islands of Indonesia. One notable sea-faring tradition resulting from this was the development of an Islamic patron saint of seafarers. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Muslim sailors and merchants were deeply devoted to an Iranian Sufi saint, Shaykh Abu Ishaq Gaziruni (d. 1035) (Rizvi, 322). A chain of Abu Ishaq hospices was started which offered free hospitality to merchants from the Persian Gulf to the South China Sea. These hospices were financed by contributions made by grateful merchants who made wows to the saint in return for a safe passage. Muslim merchants made interest-free loans to the hospices to sustain them. Communities of independent merchants that lacked the local integration or the grand organization of earlier guilds now oversaw Indian Ocean trade. Indian rulers heavily depended on these foreign and local Muslim and Hindu merchants to get luxury goods from overseas as well as cavalry horses and slaves. This prompted rulers, including the sultan of Delhi, to grant a great deal of autonomy to these merchants in their port cities, allowing them to act independently in their own self-interest. Even Hindu merchants enjoyed considerable autonomy in the field of banking, which they dominated largely due Qur’anic injunctions against usury. As a result, Hindus were medieval India’s chief bankers and
moneylenders. The moneylenders, called Sarraf, dominated all monetary transactions; they acted as bankers, issued bills of exchange, and organized insurance of goods. The risk-sharing insurance setup, or bina, was another by-product of the long-distance trade that developed in India, and had no parallel system in the Islamic commercial network (Habib, 402–403).

Further Reading
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Raman N. Seylon

4. THE ARTS

The Indian medieval period is generally assumed to have come after the fall of the Gupta Empire. However, the usage of the term medieval in the Indian context is somewhat problematic, because it invites a comparison with the European medieval period. In Europe, the medieval period lies between two high points of European civilization: the high civilization of classical Greece and Rome and the rebirth of high culture during the European Renaissance. However, in India, it represents the further refinement of developments of the Gupta era, such as its artistic maturation; according to one historian, a better term than “medieval” in the Indian context would be “Baroque” (Lannoy, 57).

However, we cannot isolate India from the rest of the Eurasian landmass; the developments that occurred elsewhere in the Near East or in Europe had their consequences and parallels in India. This is especially true with the advent of Islam. A faith with followers in the Middle East and India, Islam acted as a culture bearer between India and the rest of Eurasia. Ideas and events that touched the medieval Middle East, or even originated in medieval Europe, had their effects in medieval India through Islamic-Turkish or Arab intermediaries (Lannoy, 57).

Hindu Architecture

Religious architecture is an area where India differs from the rest of Eurasia in the early Middle Ages. Whereas the rest of Eurasia was building its finest
monumental places of worship above ground, Indians were building their finest religious edifices below ground, or quarrying them out of cliff faces. This had been the case since the time of the Mauryan Empire (322–185 B.C.E.); and, for a thousand years, the most important cultural monuments were inside these man-made caves (see Temples, Hindu). Although this is a key distinguishing factor of early medieval Indian religious architecture, there were Buddhist and Hindu places of worship built out of stone, brick, or wood above ground. The writings of the seventh-century Chinese traveler Xuanzang mention what seem like fortified sangharamas or monasteries with multistory turrets of various sizes and three-story towers on all four sides; Xuanzang praises the extraordinary skillful architecture of these structures. These monasteries had a large central hall for communal prayers and profusely painted and ornamented monks’ quarters (Beal, 74). They also may have served as caravansaries for travelling merchants, who may have provided the funds for their upkeep and may have commissioned the beautiful murals on their walls. Because these were constructed with perishable bricks and wood, they have long vanished. They never exhibited the same aesthetic perfection attained in the underground cave centers, which often imitated and sculptured the finer points of the above-ground wooden monastic architecture in stone. More than twelve hundred such man-made caves at some twenty major sites were quarried between the third and the tenth centuries. The earliest example of this rock-cut architecture, the Lomas Rishi Caves at the Barabar Hills in Gaya, was constructed for the ascetic monks of the atheistic Ajivaka sect by Emperor Ashoka (273–232 B.C.E.) of the Mauryan dynasty. Its entrance way is carved to imitate a bamboo, wood, and thatched roof hut with a pottery top finial—the illusion of its perishable materials faithfully carved in solid granite.

Some of these cave centers even had cells for monks, spacious assembly halls, shrines, and galleries quarried from sheer cliff faces to a depth of 100 feet or more. The tools used for these excavations were rather basic; the two main ones were a ¾-inch wide iron chisel and a hammer, which were used for initial work and for chiselling the finer details. Studies in aborted cave projects inform us as to the techniques involved in quarrying the caves. The process of cutting began at the ceiling and then moved down. This method eliminated the need for any scaffolding during the early stages of work. Many types of workers were needed to complete such a project, including rock cutters who did the early work of splitting and removing the rocks. This task was accomplished by inserting wooden pegs into chiselled holes in the rock at close intervals along the line the cutters intended to split. When the pegs were soaked with water, the wood expanded and the rock fractured. By inserting the wooden pegs in a system of grids, the entire block could be dislodged. Next, masons did the more precise cutting, and then sculptors and polishers performed the final finishing. All the workers functioned as a team (Dehejia, 109).

Some of the most spectacular man-made cave centers in the Indian tradition include the caves of Ajanta, Ellora, and Elephanta, and the rock-cut temples of Mamallapuram.

Early Indian architecture is closely related to changes in the religious sphere. Early Buddhist codes of behavior for monks demanded that they adhere to a life of wandering and be detached from anything that would affect their religious goals. The realities of India’s weather led to monks setting up monasteries. Early stupas also had a large joining hall, which was used as a shelter to
preach Buddhist teachings to the general public as early as the third century B.C.E. (see Temples, Buddhist: Stupas). Many of these early halls were built of wood, or had thatched rooftops, but from about 50 B.C.E in the Western Deccan, along the foothills of the Western Ghats, a number of man-made caves were quarried from softer volcanic rock, which reproduced these wooden teaching halls entirely in stone, with all their fine details, for example, roof ribs, windows, and porticos. The caves at Karle and Kancheri had life-sized couples on their facades, and others had attractive women sitting in balconies. Over time, the monks, who used these caves halls to preach, also began to live at the sites. This transformation of rudimentary cave shelters as preaching halls into cave quarters fit to house large groups of Buddhist monks can be clearly seen at Ajanta. Here, for eight centuries, beginning sometime around the third century B.C.E., twenty-six man-made caves were quarried, with four of them used as primarily as preaching caves while the rest were converted into living quarters to house a population of six hundred to seven hundred monks. Cave walls were plastered and painted several times over often with scenes from Buddhist legends. Few of the later paintings were done in more serious doctrinal themes, but the vast majority of the earlier ones may well have been painted by professional lay artists, because their imagery is very sensual and worldly. They seemingly sought to beautify and transform the bleak rocky interiors of these man-made caves so as to mirror murals from the palaces of the period’s elite. In these majestic underground dwellings were created many great works of Buddhist scholarship in philosophy, psychology, and logic (Basham, 199–200).

To understand the need for the construction and functions of these man-made caves, we must define the word monastic in the Indian context. The Buddhist monastic tradition predated the Christian monastic tradition, which had first developed in the Egyptian desert under St. Anthony (251–356 C.E.) as a solitary retreat entirely cut off from the rest of society. The Indian monastic tradition, like its Christian counterpart, also served as a retreat for monks, but they also differed, in purpose and organization, from the Christian monastic tradition. The cave monasteries in the Indian context were not mere retreats, but places focused mainly on achieving nirvana, or union with the absolute. The sites themselves had been formally sacred spots and local places of veneration prior to becoming Buddhist monastic centers. In this capacity, they had always been places of pilgrimage, and never an exclusive domain of any monastic order (Lannoy, 33–34). Another major difference was that in spite of the respect in which they were held, these Buddhist monasteries never played an influential social role as it was the case with monasteries in medieval Europe (Dehejia, 112).

The construction of these cave monasteries was an expensive undertaking. Inscriptional evidence indicates that the earliest cave monasteries were funded by the collective donations of ordinary people of the community, including housewives, gardeners, fisherman, monks, and nuns, but there were also large individual donations from wealthy merchants, financiers, and guilds. For this reason, they were strategically located not too far from major trade routes, which would have brought wealthy merchants and distant pilgrims to the site as patrons and devotees able to provide a portion of the funds needed for the upkeep of the monastic centres (Dehejia, 109–110). The prosperity of the merchant classes in India during this period was due to the expanding trade network.
needed to satisfy Mediterranean markets; a great deal of wealth and prosperity was generated by the mercantile classes, and a portion of this wealth was given away as donations (Dehejia, 110–111). Although often located in difficult terrain, these monasteries were thus also well-known centers of pilgrimage, situated at strategic points along trade routes and providing access for all sections of society. In this sense, they were the opposite of the isolated and austere retreats of ascetic monks found in the Western Christian tradition. The worldly sensual art is a reflection of this attempt to appeal and cater to the interests of ordinary people outside the monastic setting.

Many of the early great Buddhist stupas—dome-shaped sacred mounts constructed out of wood and clay or bricks—have long vanished, but by studying their rock-carved replicas in caves modern researchers have a fair idea of what they looked like, and even some of the more practical details, such as the manner of preserving wooden columns that held the roof beams from termites and other wood-eating vermin. At a Buddhist cave site at Karle, about 100 miles from Mumbai, there are thirty-seven such columns with curious-looking vase-shaped bases, dating from late first and early second centuries C.E. They mimic the use of early earthen pots that once had protected the buried portions of the wooden columns from being eaten by vermin. Epigraphical evidence indicates that the seven of the interior pillars were gifts from by the Yavanas (Greek or foreign merchants), who presumably came here along the trade route that passed through this area. In its early days, Buddhism gained support from the general public and merchants, but around the fifth century C.E. this community base was being replaced by the patronage by royalty. The reasons for this shift are not clear, but the result was a flourishing of artistic endeavor. A good example of this is the monastic center at Ajanta, which was sponsored by the court of the Hindu ruler Harishena (r. 462–481 C.E.). It may seem odd that a Hindu monarch would sponsor construction of new Buddhist monasteries, but from the point of view of a medieval Indian ruler donations to any religious establishment brought good merit and perhaps more practical considerations as the encouragement and facilitation trade and the opening of new settlements throughout his territory.

Ajanta, perhaps the most well known of all cave monasteries of medieval India, is located in present-day state of Maharashtra. The site comprises a set of man-made caves in a horseshoe-shaped ravine, which was an escarpment rising from the riverbed. The caves in Ajanta were quarried and refashioned as Buddhist religious centers sometime between the fifth and eighth centuries C.E. They were conveniently located near the ancient trade routes that pass from the inland town of Ujjayani through the Western Ghats to the Western seaports. Previous to its receipt of royal patronage, Ajanta was an insignificant monastery. By the fifth century C.E., Ajanta had become a major Buddhist center of veneration that catered to increasing numbers of Buddhist pilgrims (Cra-van, 123). In Ajanta, as in other cave-quarried monasteries, the number of occupants increased, new excavations occurred, and the artificial caves grew in scale over the centuries (Basham, 352).

As centers of pilgrimage, these monasteries exhibit much secular art work by local artisans that captured domestic themes of everyday life in Buddhist India, which were blended with themes from the Buddhist moral Jataka tales and with religious iconography. These paintings were commissioned by wealthy patrons, who maintained a number of workshops of painters. These works allow us a glimpse of the complex art scene of post-Gupta India. The technique
of making roughly hewn rock surfaces into large smooth canvasses took some
effort but was rudimentary. First, the rough cave walls were plastered with a
mixture of cow dung, mud, animal hair, and rice husk to give it strength and
the necessary adhesive bond. This mixture was levelled and covered with lime
plaster a half inch to 2 inches thick, which served as the painting surface. The
plaster was first allowed to dry, then the artist outlined the scene in red paint,
with details in gray paint. Colors made mainly from local minerals—lamp
black, white lime, kaolin, mineral green, and imported blue Lapis Lazuli—
were then added to the scene, and the whole composition was defined clearly
with a black or brown line (Dehejia, 118). Then the entire work was either pol-
ished with a smooth stone or covered with stucco to give it the necessary lus-
ter and shine. Had these painters painted while the lime was wet, the work
would have had the greater durability of a fresco, but by painting over the
dried surface the work became a mural and as such was more delicate and
water soluble. Such painting techniques allowed for the water damage that
has subsequently affected these paintings. The rice husk in the original plaster
was also affected by insect attacks, which weakened the planter foundation of
the murals. Literary evidence suggests such types of mural art were common
in the houses of the wealthy during this period; however, of the many galler-
ies of paintings that may once have existed from this early period, only the
ones in Ajanta have survived the ravages of time (Dehejia, 118).

Ajanta’s murals may not have been intended only for the benefit of the resi-
dent monks but also for a diverse audience of pilgrims, though the paintings
could have been only viewed by the use of oil lamps. This suggests that they
may have functioned as touring art galleries to be viewed by outside patrons
guided by monks, or been merely for the use of the monks to focus on their
meditative practices (Dehejia, 122). The murals of Ajanta have greater num-
bers of Mahayana Buddhist imagery, especially the increasing number of
Buddhist savior figures. This new group of Buddhist divine beings, known as
Bodhisattva figures, were compassionate beings at the threshold of full Bud-
dhahood who nevertheless chose to remain on earth to help others attain
enlightenment (Dehejia, 114). The lotus-bearing Padmapani, also known as
Avalokiteshvara (Bodhisattva of infinite compassion), is the best-known
mural of Bodhisattva figures in Ajanta. The large scale of this mural is an indi-
cation of the significance the painters attached to this image, which they
shaded and highlighted to create a sense of three-dimensionality (Dehejia,
114). In Ajanta, the fifth-century fresco of Padmapani is depicted with a
pointed hair adornment and holding a blue lotus with serene expression; it is
one of the great masterpieces of the post-Gupta murals. Other murals have
more sensual or even erotic themes, such as two lovers engaged in a passion-
ate courtship within an idealized architectural setting; this was to remain a
common romantic motif even in later centuries, and could be seen in many of
the Rajput miniatures of the nineteenth century. The concept of Avalokitesh-
vara, a popular Buddhist male savior figure, soon spread with Mahayana
Buddhism to other parts of East Asia, where it curiously underwent some-
thing of a gender transformation into a popular female deity called Guan yin
or “Goddess of Mercy” in China, Kan on in Japan, and Gwan eum in Korea. By
the end of the first millennium C.E., Buddhism had lost much of its individual-
ity and was being assimilated by theistic Hinduism and had vanished from
India with the coming of the Muslim-Turkish invasions of the twelfth century.
The quarrying and painting in Ajanta began according to recent estimation about 462 C.E., when the Vakataka dynasty ruler Harishena came to throne; the work thrived during the lifetime of this monarch but seemed to stop abruptly with Harishena’s death. The best most recent estimate is that the site was abandoned soon after 500 C.E. This is perhaps why Xuanzang failed to mention it and why the surviving paintings were preserved in such good condition. The caves themselves were abandoned and forgotten only to reemerge in the early days of the British rule.

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, the existence of a large cave complex at the frontiers of the Bombay presidency was part of the local lore known to British military personnel stationed in Bombay. In February 1824, a young British officer, James Alexander, who had taken leave from his regiment for some tiger hunting in the hills north of Aurangabad, decided to explore this local legend. This area was heavily forested, and Alexander was warned about the hostile aboriginal tribe living there. Undeterred, Alexander and his companions pressed on, following the river called Waghur into tiger-infested jungle country. Near its source, the river had, over the years, cut a deep horseshoe-shaped canyon out of the dark grey volcanic basalt rocks; high on this rock face Alexander spotted what seemed like a series of caves with the entrances flanked by elaborate stone pillars. As Alexander and his party hacked their way to the top, they realized that the site had previously served as a retreat for a large monastic community. But this site was different from other well-known cave retreats in that it had painted murals, well preserved in vivid color, that detailed the dress code, habits, and lifestyles of an ancient people now long forgotten (Allen, 129). The news of this discovery soon found its way into preeminent archaeological journals of the period. It first appeared in *The Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society* in 1830 and then in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* in 1837. Under the full glare of the academic limelight, these long-forgotten medieval masterpieces again became the focus of popular attention.

About the same time as work ceased in Ajanta, cave quarrying was going on in the island of Elephanta off Mumbai Harbor. Unlike Ajanta, Elephanta was a Hindu sanctuary and, although the Hindus copied the quarrying techniques of the Buddhists, they redefined the rock-cut caves to meet their religious needs. As such, the Hindu caves in Elephanta have no living quarters for priests who may have resided in brick or wooden structures at the top. The caves reflect changes in Hindu religious faith, especially the path of devotion to a chosen deity known as Bhakti or devotional Hinduism. The preeminent deities Siva, Vishnu, and the Goddess Devi now began to dominate the Hindu religious sphere.

Dedicated to Siva, Cave I of Elephanta was 131 feet across and colonnaded; at one time it held a number of sculptures of Siva. Unfortunately, most of these sculptures were badly damaged by the artillery practice undertaken by the Portuguese garrison, which was stationed there (Craven, 123). One sculpture that escaped this fifteenth-century vandalism was the triple headed 18-foot-high sculpture of the triple form of Siva, which represents the fusion of attributes associated with Siva, fusing the three heads into one homogenous sculptural form. The serene, impassive central face of the sculpture is known as Sadyojata or Siva as absolute knowledge. The left face, with snakes as earrings, skulls rising out of matted hair, and an angry wrathful demeanor, is
known as Aghora or Siva the destroyer of delusion. The right face with feminine features is known as Vamadava or Siva’s beautiful consort the Goddess Parvati. There is also a large sculpture of a lingam or emblem of Siva, which is kept in a square chamber flanked by four guardians and purposely set off center of the cave complex. This was done to allow devotees entering though the north entrance to witness the full majesty of the triple form of Siva. Grouped around the cave are eight large sculptures that are from the sacred stories of Siva-purana, depicting the god’s various forms to bestow grace upon his devotees and to delude, humble, or destroy the wicked. These stories of the eight large sculptures would have been familiar to all Shaivaite devotees. The imagery within Cave 1 depicts an even more profound philosophical concept of Sivaite Hinduism. According to the most recent interpretation, the Lingam, the triple form of Siva, and the eight figures are linked ideologically. The Lingam represents the un-manifest form of Siva. The triple form represents Sadashiva or the point where the formless begins to assume form. The eight sculptured forms from the Siva purana are the manifest forms through which Siva appears to his most ardent devotees (Dehejia, 126–127). The Elephanta sculptures may have been sponsored by the Kalachuri ruler Krishna Raja I (550–575 C.E.), who was a recent conqueror of this region and known for his deep devotion to Siva. The construction of this site is dated to 550, when it was undertaken to commemorate Krishna Raja’s conquest of this territory.

Contemporaneously with this are the Pallava Period rock-sculptured temples at Mamallapuram, some 37 miles from the city of Chennai, Tamil Nadu, which had always had been a major tourist attraction. In medieval times, Mamallapuram was developed by the Pallava ruler Narashima Varman (630–668 C.E.), the forth ruler of the Pallava dynasty, as a major port with lighthouses to guide Coromandal Coast shipping. From these ports, the king sent naval vasals to engage in long distance commerce with states in Southeast Asia and to interfere in the domestic politics of Sri Lanka. Narashima, who was titled ma-malla or great warrior (or great wrestler), also bequeathed his epithet to the town that was previously named Mamalai (or great hill) and turned this into a large open-air artistic center.

The most famous narrative relief sculpture at Mamallapuram is called the “Descent of the Ganges,” which is 20 feet high and 80 feet long. Its theme is the Hindu religious story that honors the role played by Siva in cushioning the impact of the heavenly waters of the River Ganges by consenting to receive the river flow through the locks of his matted hair, thereby allowing it to fall gently to the ground. This new religious theistic Hindu devotion or bhakti, as opposed to the earlier contemplative Buddhist meditation or dhayana, demanded impressive narrative structures to focus the attention of worshippers. This was created by an emotive and colorful sacred story or lila from the Hindu sacred text Siva-purana, which seems to have functioned as “visual sermon,” giving the devotees hope and optimism.

To emphasize that central cleft, the River Ganges, that area of the relief is filled with Nagas, mythological semidivine human snakes usually associated with water. Next is seen Siva granting a boon to an ascetic, who is identified either as the sage Bhagiratha, praying to Siva to bear the brunt of the torrential waters as the river makes its earthly descend, or the hero Arjuna, from the epic Mahabharata, praying to Siva to gain powerful magical weapons for the upcoming Mahabharata war (Dehejia, 190). Around Siva various ascetics perform
rites of self-mortification. A comic relief involves a penance-performing cat, who, by standing on one paw, has cunningly attracted a crowd of pious mice with their front feet pressed together in prayer. In one of its side stories, the *Mahabharata* narrates this event as an allegorical moral story concerning the sad fate of gullible and trusting mice. There is strong evidence that there was once a storage water tank above this sculptured narrative relief with a pool below. It is, therefore, plausible that on special or ceremonial occasions the water from the pool could be let out to cascade down the cliff like a flowing river. By witnessing a reenactment of the central narrative of the purana, local devotees and visitors could experience the divine grace of Siva.

Another notable site at Mamallapuram is a group of small temples, most carved from a single granite boulder. Called the five rathas, or chariots, these might be replicas of five types of wooden temples with thatched roofs. Traditionally, they are identified with the five Pandava brothers, the heroes of the *Mahabharata*, although there is strong evidence that this was a later interpolation (Dehejia, 193). It is more likely that these are shrines for the three main traditional Hindu deities: Siva, Vishnu, and Devi (Dehejia, 193–194). This set of sculptured temples had been personally sponsored by Narashima Varman; the title *Mamalla* is prominently engraved in the site and indications are that work on the five rathas halted abruptly on that ruler’s death in 668.

The Shore Temple is a stone Siva temple along the sea with a high conical tower. Many of the finer details of the temple’s carvings and the rows of sculptured stone bulls that marked the temple’s perimeter were eroded away by centuries of wave action as the sea expanded; the temple thus has a soft “melted look.” According to local lore, four similar shore temples originally stood here in Pallava times but have now been swallowed up by the ocean. Recent archaeological surveys give some validity to these tales. These shore temples, with their pointed high towers, would have allowed Hindu sailors to pray from their boats to Siva for safe passage before undertaking long oceanic voyages or to give grateful thanks upon their safe arrival.

The design of these shore temples is important; they are perhaps the earliest stone-built temples in South India. The Mamallapuram shore temple, along with Kailasanatha temple at Kanchipuram (another stone-built temple by the Pallavas from around the same time), served as models for other stone temples, including those of the Cholas, who replaced the Pallavas as the preeminent dynasty of South India. They were also influenced Hindu architecture outside India, especially the Hindu temple architecture in the island of Java in the Indonesia, where Hinduism was once the dominant faith. Over one-half the monuments in the site remained unfinished, which was perhaps the result of a Pallava dynastic struggle. The new branch that came to power may have decided to focus their temple building near the Pallava capital at Kanchipuram, because the site at Mamallapuram had strong associations with the former ruling house (Dehejia, 137).

On par with Ajanta in grandeur were the rock-quarried Hindu cave temples constructed three centuries later at Ellora some 30 miles from Ajanta. Ellora, unlike Ajanta, is preeminently a Hindu site and was named after one of the hillside abodes of Siva, high in the Himalayas. Nevertheless, the Ellora site was ecumenical and had Buddhist and Jain meditation caves. This ecumenism reflected the changed religious landscape in this part of India where theistic Hinduism had now gained dominance at the expense of Buddhism.
and Jainism. Altogether, Ellora has some thirty-four caves, and its construction and quarrying work began ran from the fifth to the eighth centuries, which makes it contemporary with Ajanta, though its prominence outlasted Ajanta. The most important site in Ellora is the large late eighth-century monolithic Kailasanatha Temple (775 C.E.) built by the Rashtrakuta ruler Krishna I (757–873); its style also influences the Pallava art of the Tamil country in southeastern India. It was staggering in its dimensions. The entire rock face on a hillside was carved like a sculpture and an estimated million cubic feet of stone was quarried and excavated to construct a large temple with a shrine room, and a ground plan that equalled the size of the Parthenon in Greece (Basham, 354). One historian calls it the “most stupendous single work excavated in India.” It differs form earlier cave temples in that its exterior and interior were excavated and then carved out of solid rock (Basham, 355; Dehejia, 131).

This Hindu architecture gets its inspiration from the Buddhist caves and monastic shrines in Ajanta and Hindu temples that were already coming into existence in South India. But unlike Ajanta’s dark cave-like quarters, the temple at Ellora is open to the sky. It was also adorned with ornate pillars and painted with vivid colored frescos, differing from the average, plain-looking Hindu temples of earlier periods. The temple consists of three separate units and a gat house, a pavilion to house Siva’s sacred bull vehicle Nandi, and a temple built in the South Indian pyramid-shaped temple style (discussed more below). Sacred climactic scenes from Hindu myths were used as a kind of theatrical effect to impose upon viewers the power of the divine and his mercy, for example, the image of ten-headed Ravana, the demon king of the epic Ramayana, trying to uproot and take to his kingdom at Lanka Mount Kailasa, the abode of Siva. According to this puranic story (see Puranas), as the demon king tried to uproot the mountain, the entire earth shook, and the alarmed goddess Parvati clutched her consort Siva. Calm and serene, Siva pressed his toe down thereby trapping the demon king under the crushing weight of the mountain. Fearing death, Ravana in desperation tears off one of his heads and an attached limb and used his tendons as the strings of a lyre to play a devotional ode to Siva, who in his benevolence takes pity upon the demon king and grants him freedom. Ravana in turn becomes an ardent devotee of Siva. This story and its various versions, which must have been familiar to every Hindu of this period, is an allegorical story about the divine grace of Siva and his infinite power, which is depicted here in three-dimensional dramatic sculptures. When these temples were new, they would have been coated outside and inside with a thin layer of plaster and painted with colorful murals. Sixteenth-century Islamic sources identify Kailasa temple as “Rang Mahal,” or colored mansion. This name indicates that at one time it must have been richly decorated with colorful religious murals (just like modern-day Hindu temples), which had to be continuously repainted. Only traces of these paintings are now evident within the temple precinct (Dehejia, 134).

One of the advantages of the medieval Indian man-made caves is that they are easy to maintain and extremely durable habitats. They also had climatic advantages; they were cool during the hot season, dry during the torrential monsoon season, and could be easily heated during the cold season. They provided an ideal environment for contemplation for the layman and the monk to practice meditation. However, the increasing popularity of the Hindu Bhakti
tradition called for a different kind of religious architecture, one that was open and spacious to accommodate large passionate crowds (Lannoy, 58). The resulting innovation was the stone-built Hindu temple. The surface-level Hindu temple had moved away architecturally from earlier simpler structures made of less durable wood with thatched roofs. It benefited from the experience Indian stone masons gained while working on rock quarried temples and monasteries. The early transitional forms were the ones at Mamallapuram, which stand midway between pure rock-carved cave halls and freestanding medieval temples (Lannoy, 59).

A comparison between the predominantly Buddhist cave temples and the Hindu temple underline the essential differences between these two religious ideologies. The Buddhist cave sanctuary is an enclosed space to which all monks had free access, one where they could stand face to face with the central Buddha imagery. The communal and fraternal relationship among monks and their brotherly bond with the historic Buddha is expressed in the layout of the cave sanctuary. Only in later caves, when Buddhism became incorporated with Hinduism, was the Buddha image kept in a separate cell and apart from the congregation of monks. However, in Hindu temples, the central image expresses a new theistic Hindu view; the devotees are distant from the deity and had the religious obligation to bridge this gap by their passionate devotion and service. The sanctum is accessible only to the ritually pure chief priest who conducted the \textit{puja} (ritual); those in a ritually impure state were not permitted to enter the sanctum. It was also necessary for the lower castes to be kept at a distance from the holiest icon since they were also deemed ritually impure (Lannoy, 60).

As a reflection of changes in the theological landscape, temple construction in India also moved away from below-ground quarried artificial caves to above-ground constructions. From the eighth to the fifteenth centuries, there was a period of large above-ground construction of numerous large temples, often reaching great heights. The Hindu temples were constructed according to the strict cannons of architecture called \textit{silpa-sastra} (Basham, 356). Underneath the towering pyramid-shaped structures was the main shrine hall for the presiding deity, surrounded by smaller shrines of various other deities, all of whose good will was essential for any successful undertaking. The sanctum or heart of the temple was the womb-like dark shrine called \textit{garbha graha}, containing the stone image of the presiding deity. The \textit{garbha graha} was adjoined by a hall for worshippers (\textit{mandapa}), which was approached by a porch (\textit{ardhamandapa}). The central pyramidal shaped tower above the \textit{garbha graha} was complimented by lesser lower towers that adorned other parts of the temple complex.

Medieval Hindu society was dominated by an alliance of the Brahmin priests and the Kshatriya, the ruling elite of the court. Therefore, temple imagery and sacred scenery also tended to reflect the values, tastes, and lifestyles of the ruling elite, who funded and financed their undertaking. In these palaces of the gods the central temple imagery was modelled upon the court rituals of medieval Hindu kingship, where the presiding deity was clothed as a Hindu ruler surrounded by all the royal paraphernalia that accompanied a monarch (Lannoy, 62–63).

Two major temple styles emerged during this period; one was the North Indian Nagara style and the other was the South Indian Dravidian style. The Nagara style generally had a central tower or \textit{sikhara} (mountain peak) with a rounded top and a plain curvilinear outline. The Dravidian \textit{sikhara} (locally
known as *vimana*) was shaped in the form of a rectangular truncated pyramid and tend to be highly ornate. South India contains a greater number of medieval temples; many northern temples were sacked and destroyed by the Huns and other Turkish invaders from Central Asia, while others were razed by the deliberate policies of the more zealous medieval Islamic rulers. In medieval South India, temple buildings developed further under the patronage of the Chola emperors. The Siva temple at Tanjore, built by the great Chola ruler Raja Raja the Great (r. 985–1014), was the largest temple *sikhara* built in India until that time. Like many other medieval monuments, it was built to commemorate Raja Raja’s major victories over neighboring rulers. The base of the temple sanctum housed a giant stone linga, which symbolized the unmanifest and formless Siva; it was covered by a roof and topped by the central *sikhara*. The *sikhara* at Tanjore temple is far higher than its Pallava shore temple prototype, reaching nearly 200 feet tall. It is conical in shape with a hollow structure that is divided into thirteen horizontal stages. This tall Dravidian style *sikhara* set the standard for subsequent tall South Indian temples, and the modern variation of this temple style is still being built.

An elaborate temple architectural style also developed in Central India, under the rule of the Chaulokya, Rastrakuta, and Hoysala dynasties. Early Chaulokya temples resemble the style of the Guptas and later became increasingly elaborate and developed the distinct Central Indian or Vesara style *sikhara* that was a synthesis of both the Nagara and Dravidian styles. This synthesis had images and scenes from Hindu epics intermingled with repetitive sculptures of decorated stone elephants and armed horsemen from Indian royal pageantry. During this post-Gupta Period the fierce decorative motif known as “Kirttimuka” mask emerged as a commonly used decorative architectural feature in Hindu temples. Kirttimuka or “face of glory” is a grotesque face that was believed to be the remains of a demon created by Siva as the supreme destructive power in the universe, but whose uncontrollable hunger even consumed his own body. Kirttimuka is seen as a symbol of Siva’s destructive powers and commonly placed over the entrances of Hindu Sivaite temples as an auspicious and protective symbol (Craven, 164). The Kirttimuka motif was also enthusiastically adapted by Southeast Asian Hindu artists and temple builders and became a standard feature of Indonesian and Cambodian architecture (Basham, 358).

A good example of North Indian medieval temple architecture is the temple of Khajuraho. The temple complex at Khajuraho may originally have housed some 85 temples, of which only 25 survive; the remains of another 25 can be traced. Most were built between 954 and 1035. Unlike their South Indian counterparts, these temples are not large, but they are certainly the most elegant examples of the North Indian style. The temples consist of three horizontal zones. First, a high solid basement rises above the terrace and requires a steep flight of stairs to enter. This is followed by the interior compartments of the temple, which contain the sanctum and various halls and are topped by a group of pyramidal *sikharas*. Each interior unit of the temple has its own successively taller *sikharas* rising toward the highest *sikhara* above the shrine. This design element was intentional; the imagery of the various smaller towers rising toward the main sikhara suggests a stylized version of the minor mountain ranges that surround Siva’s Mount Kailasa, the most sacred mountain for Hindus. This style also makes the temple seem natural and organic and gives
it a visual unity with its surroundings (Basham, 362). The best known of the Khajuraho temples is the Siva Temple of Kandariya-Mahadeo. This complex is only half the height of the Tanjore Siva temple and, like most northern temple towers, is curvilinear.

The midsection of the outer walls of the Khajuraho temples are made into a series of projections and recesses that provide space to carve a profusion of sculptured images in horizontal bands while still retaining the temple’s sense of balance and proportion. The Kandariya-Mahadavi has three such horizontal bands of sculpture that comprise about 650 half-life-size images. The deities and celestials are carved in deep relief giving a three-dimensional feeling. Originally, they would have been richly plastered and painted, giving them a life-like quality like some of the sculptures in modern Hindu temples. Some of the images, like some of their modern counterparts, had highly sensual and erotic poses that must have captured the attention of the most profane devotees. A combination of factors and ideas likely explain Khajuraho’s erotic imagery, including the philosophical idea of a mystic union of the human soul with the Brahman (the infinite or the ultimate reality). The monistic Hindu doctrines of the Upanishads explain that the human soul emanates from the Brahman and is not a distinct entity; as the soul ends its earthly tenure, it returns and merges again with the Brahman. This doctrine stresses the unity of the apparent duality; the idea is sculpturally expressed with the graphic sexual symbolism of an orgasmic union, which medieval sculptors no doubt found a fitting and universal expression for depicting this profound philosophical principle. The profusion of sculptures on the exterior of the temple complex is a great medieval artistic innovation.

A second temple group illustrating the best of North Indian temple architecture is in Orissa, which may have the greatest concentration of temples in India. Many of these date to the tenth and thirteenth centuries and were built during the period of Islamic invasions from Central Asia. The two most important temples of the Orissan group are the temples of Vishnu Jagannatha (lord of the universe) at Puri, which is still an important functional temple famous for its annual rath yatra or towering temple cart-pulling festival, and the other is the great sun temple at Kanarak, built in the thirteenth century.

At Puri, the giant Jagannatha temple is a major Vishnavite center. Surrounded by an outer wall, this compound comprises a collection of over one hundred temple complexes and shrines. The rituals of this temple are quite spectacular and the size of the Jagannatha Temple cart must have amazed early British visitors. It is from Jagannatha that we get the English term juggernaut, which is today used as a general term for any unstoppable political force that crushes opponents. In medieval times, the piety of the devotees of the Jagannatha Shrine was of such fervor that many are said to have thrown themselves under the huge wheels of the cart to be crushed, a sacrifice they believed would ensure them a place in Vishnavite heaven (or Vaikuntam).

The Sun Temple located at Konarak, a small town in Orissa, is an unfinished temple built by Narasimhadeva (r. 1238–1264) of the Ganga dynasty. At the time of its construction, it was one of the largest temples in India, with its central sikhara reaching over 223 feet, making it the highest during the thirteenth century. This tall sikhara has long since collapsed, but its assembly hall remains. In Indo-Aryan mythology, the sun god Suriya rides across the heavens in a chariot drawn by seven horses bringing light and warmth. In Konarak, the
sanctum and the hall of the temple represent a gigantic stone chariot, an earthly representation of the one driven across the sky by the sun god. The wheels of this giant chariot are beautifully carved along the sides; the entire monument includes twenty-four giant 10-foot wheels, perhaps in reference to the twelve months of the solar year. The entire cultural imagery is dominated by the erotic maithuna figures that may have been vividly painted. Depictions of couples embracing and performing various forms of sexual intercourse in a place of worship naturally shocked Victorian British visitors to the site and gave them a strongly unfavorable view of Hinduism in general.

Some later authors saw the imagery as being purely symbolic, expressing the aforementioned mystic union of the soul with the Brahman. Another theory contrasts the everyday world of flesh on the exterior of the temple with the structure’s bare and austere interior, which symbolizes the deeper world of the spirit that the temple represents (Basham, 362). Other authors saw the figures as having something to do with sexual mysticism or the tantric cults that dominated this region and were patronized by local rulers. Another view sees the figures as simply images of fertility, which are appropriate for a temple dedicated to the sun god. If the recently discovered Baya Cakada manuscript is authentic, the Sun temple took 6 years to plan and hundreds of craftsmen working for 12 years to complete; its dedication ceremonies were held in 1258. The Sun temple at Konarak was the last of the major Hindu temple projects undertaken in North India. From the thirteenth century, political power in North India shifted to Islamic dynasties and henceforth until modern period, it was the minaret and not the sikhara that would occupy the prominent place in the skyline of medieval North India (Dehejia, 182).

The literary equivalent of this sculptural eroticism is the celebrated erotic poem Gita Govinda, a twelfth-century work by Jeyadeva, a well-known poet born in Puri who lived during the time of the Ganga dynasty. The Gangas controlled what is today Orissa and are credited with building the large Jagannath Temple in Puri as well as the Konarak Sun Temple. The theme of Gita Govinda is the relationship between the god Krishna and his devoted paramour, a gopi (cowgirl) named Radha. The aim of this erotic poem is to show that a divinity such as Krishna transgresses all human rules of moral propriety or rules of human reason to achieve a blissful state of oneness and ecstatic unity with his beloved devotee (Lannoy, 64).

Likewise, the medieval tantric cults also saw that the surest way to achieve divine ecstasy was to get away from the normal sexual routine with one’s spouse and go against the moral propriety of society. Because normal sexual union is often associated with procreation, a superior ecstatic transfiguring union could be attained easily by having abnormal sexual relations, which may be of an adulterous or incestuous nature. Because concern for the utility of intercourse is no longer present, the act itself becomes a purging catharsis to achieve pure ecstasy and a moment of union and oneness with the divine. For this reason, the erotic Hindu temple murals and sculptures portray what seems to us to be abnormal or unnatural acts of sex (Lannoy, 64).

A number of Hindu and Jain temples were built between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries in Gujarat. For religious reasons, Jains took mainly to trading rather than agriculture and benefited from the Indian Ocean trade that flowed through the ports of Gujarat (Dehejia, 172). The famous Jain temples at Mount Abu were built by Vimala, the devout Jain minister of the powerful
Solanki dynasty ruler Bhima I (r. 1022-1063). The Solanki dynasty was a branch of the Chalukya dynasty, which dominated this region from the sixth to the twelfth centuries. Bhima I was instrumental in defending this area against the armies of Sultan Muhmud of Gazani and also in reconstructing the Hindu temple of Somanath, which was destroyed by Sultan Muhmud in 1026. The Jain temple at Mount Abu sponsored by his minister Vimala was completed in 1032. In their style, Jain temples are similar to the Khajuraho Hindu temples but without the sexual allegories of intertwined couples. The central sikhara over the shrine also has a number of miniature towers. In Khajuraho, each major temple carried three distinctive ceilings; at Abu there are fifty-five ceilings. Three belong to the main temple unit while the others cover the roofs of the fifty-two small courtyard shrines, each with its own portico (Dehejia, 170).

Unlike the other rock-carved and stone and brick temple structures, the Jain shrines were built of pure white marble quarried and transported from nearby hills. Another thing that distinguishes this Jain temple at Mount Abu is the intricate details of its designs and carvings in the ceilings; each one is unique. The temple also includes a great variety of floral geometric designs with pillars decorated with stylized dancing celestials, large elephant sculptures, and intricately carved delicate marble garlands and festoons that extend from the pillars to the roof in its interior. The original temple was badly damaged by the armies of Sultan Allauddin Khilji of the Delhi sultanate and the new one was reconstructed as a faithful copy of the original around 1300. The steep wall that surrounds this temple is a testament to the constant danger posed by invasions during the medieval period.

South India, in late Chola and Pandya Periods during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, saw newer forms of architectural innovation. One of the main changes was the shift of emphasis from the sikhara tower above the shrine to a tall tower above the entrance of the surrounding wall. The tall walls surrounding these South Indian temples may have been done in imitation of those surrounding the king’s palaces, with gates on all four sides. The need to create large sikhara around the outer walls may have been necessitated by the need to expand the shrine to a large proportion, something required by changes in Hindu religious ideology concerning the expanded role of the presiding deity and how deity should be presented to its devotees. Earlier notions of a distant aloof temple divinity were replaced by one that parallels an earthly monarch. This idea included giving audiences, inspecting the temple premises, and taking a more active role in temple rituals, including celebrating birthdays and marriage anniversaries (Dehejia, 233). Tradition stated that it was improper to demolish an existing shrine so the only alternative was to encase it within large walls and add impressive sikhara to the entrance (Dehejia, 232).

One argument is that these new style sikhara may have been inspired by the existing watch towers and gatehouses characteristic of palace architecture of this period (Basham, 358). The resulting change in temple architecture resulted in the familiar oblong pyramid-shaped tower with a barrel vaulted roof crowned by a single tall or row of small multiple pot shaped finials, the entire structure is called a gopuram (or vimana), which is far taller than the smaller sikhara over the central shrine and that dominate the skylines of today’s South Indian temple towns. A large temple complex may have more than one gopuram; often one stood over each of its main gateways and all being the same size. This tall oblong gopuram became a distinct feature of...
Tamil country temple architecture, and currently its image is the state’s official seal. The necessity of carrying the deity around the temple premises also led to the construction of portable bronze images of 2 or 3 feet in height that could be easily carried in procession. Each temple would commission up to seventy such bronzes because the appropriate form or manifestation of the deity was needed on each occasion, and most were used only once a year and stored in the temple complex. As temple rituals and celebrations were publicly enacted, there was also a need for larger halls within the temple complex, and each temple ritual needed a suitable hall for celebration where devotees assembled to witness the rituals and partake in the communal feasts cooked in the temple kitchen. This led to construction of large pillared halls and pavilions often done in a random manner within the temple complex (Dehejia, 234).

Except in cases of major temple ceremonies, the day-to-day Hindu mode of worship is an individual form of worship differing significantly from the Buddhist or Christian modes of communal worship. This fact can be seen in the nature of Hindu temple architecture built during this period. In spite of their major expansion in space, these large South Indian temples, with a number of minor shrines, was not one fully integrated place of worship but rather a collection of individual shrines patronized by various castes and classes and housed within a single sacred space. This lack of unity also mirrored the core values of the Hindu social order: separation and hierarchy. This hierarchically based interdependency in South Indian social spheres was architecturally reproduced by tall symmetrical temple gopuram and its collections of individual smaller shrines. Although they are architecturally enclosed within the sacred space of a single compound, they are nevertheless distinct, thereby symbolizing the prevailing social idea of hierarchy and interdependence, coexisting in harmony (Lannoy, 60).

The next phase of temple construction developed under the Rayas of the Vijayanagar Empire (1336–1565) and its secondary state under the Nayaks of Madura (1529–1736). They combined the Tamil country gopuram that evolved under Chola and Pandya rule with other regional styles, such as those of the vesara style sikhara of the Hosala kingdom of Karnatika. The elaborate carvings of the Hosalas were further developed and blended with the Chola-Pandya style gopuram and reached its present-day oblong-shaped tower in the form a multistoried structure with rows of detailed painted sculptures retelling sacred episodes from the Hindu puranas. These could be seen at the major temple complexes in Madurai and Srirangam built under the Nayaka kingdom during the seventeenth century (Basham, 358).

Every important temple in South India also had a shrine for the chief consort (or Amman-mother) of the presiding deity; by the sixteenth century the temple of the chief consort was as large as the temple of the presiding deity, again reflecting changes in the popular religious landscape. The icon of the god and goddess were being ceremonially united in a wedding ritual that became a major annual ceremonial event in the South Indian ritual calendar. This celestial wedding ritual was held in a large spacious pillared marriage hall, or Kalyana Mandapam. The pillars of this hall were profusely decorated with ornate carvings of racing horses, armed warriors, and other detailed sculptured figures and decorative motifs that have never been excelled architecturally within Hindu India (Basham, 359).
Islamic Architecture

Islam first arrived in India with the Arab invasion of 712 C.E. under Muhammad bin Qasim, a relatively minor incursion into Northwest India. The main thrust of Islamic armies into the plains of Northwest India, in the form of Turkish Afghan raiders, came many centuries later. A succession of Islamic polities that dominated North India became centered on the former Rajput citadel of Delhi, where a sultanate was formally established in 1206. The Islamic dominance of North India lasted until the late eighteenth century.

To commemorate his victory over the Hindus of North India, Sultan Muhammad of Ghor erected the first Islamic mosque on North Indian soil, which was built in Delhi by his general Qutb al-Din Aybak, in the late twelfth century. Built on a former Rajput fort, the mosque was named Quwwat ul Islam, or “the might of Islam.” Mosque architecture is distinct from any previous India architectural tradition and is supposed to have taken its inspiration or model from the house of the prophet Muhammad in Medina, where the first Muslims met for prayer. The prophet’s house was a rudimentary structure built of adobe bricks and had a colonnade of palm trunks holding a palm front for shade that also served as the prayer hall. The muezzin (announcer) called for prayer from the rooftop of the house and later a large tower was added to amplify this call to prayer (Dehejia, 252).

All future mosques were based on this model, with colonnades on three sides and a main courtyard open to the sky; the wall at the fourth side, the qibla or the front, marked the direction of Mecca. The center of this wall had a shallow empty niche called a mihrab to mark its distinction. The minaret, which was a later addition, came to symbolize an Islamic center (Craven, 252). In sticking to the idea that the victory was temporal as well as spiritual, Qutb al-Din Aybak is said to have pillaged twenty-seven Hindu temples to construct the mosque. It had pillared galleries, and its qible wall was built from stones and broken sculptures taken from Hindu and Jain temples. Because the Hindu pillars lacked the height needed for taller mosque pillars, they were stacked one on top of the other to meet the required height (Craven, 195). No two architectures could have been so diametrically opposite in their symbolic meanings as the Hindu temple and the Islamic mosque. The center of the Hindu temple complex, the sanctum, is an enclosed room with a single door; its interior is dark and mysterious, a restrictive space open only to the presiding ritually pure priest. Meanwhile, the mosque’s well-lit interiors could be approached from any direction and were open to all believers (Dehejia, 353).

Aybak’s mosque was built in 1192 to 1196 using local Hindu artisans. It had a 212-foot by 150-foot open courtyard used for communal prayer. The Mecca side of the courtyard was dominated by a hall with five arches; the central one was 45 feet high. These arches were meant to resemble Persian prototypes. But the Indian artisans who constructed them had not yet mastered the true arch, which was common to Middle Eastern and European architecture, so they used the traditional corbelling techniques of erecting from both sides of the gateway successive stones slightly projecting further then the previous one until they meet at the apex.

On the Southeast side of this courtyard was a tall minaret, the Qutb Minar, which was originally 238 feet high, one of the tallest brick minarets in the world. It was seen by its medieval builders as Islam’s tower of victory over
Hindu India. As if to reinforce this message and to legitimize their rule in India, the inscription on the minaret proclaims, “To cast the long shadow of god over the conquered city of the Hindus.” The architectural model for the Qutb Minar mosque comes from the mosque architecture of Ghazni, Afghanistan, but the building also has a number of distinctly Hindu elements because the builders were local Hindu craftsmen. They employed traditional Hindu building techniques and designs in constructing what must have been to them an entirely new style of architecture. Although decorated with bands of sacred Arabic calligraphy and leafy arabesques that were common design elements of Islamic architecture, the mosque also had carved Qur’anic verses intermingled with Hindu floral motifs creating a hybrid style that was to become the hallmark of Indian Islamic architecture. Another novel form of architecture was the Muslim tomb. Sultan Shams al-Din Ilutmish (1211–1236), the third Delhi sultan, built himself a magnificent tomb behind the mosque with a corbelled dome. The dome had a plain exterior but an interior richly caved with verses from the Qur’an. This is a deviation from early Islamic practice that reinvented the pre-Islamic tradition of glorifying the personage of the ruler (Dehejia, 258). Other Muslim rulers of India imitated this practice in building magnificent funerary architectures.

Sultan Allauddin Khilji (r. 1296–1316) further expanded the Qutb mosque adding a ceremonial gateway with a true arch form, indicating that by now local artisans had mastered the art of constructing the true arch and dome. Another decorative innovation in the façade of this gateway was the carved and decorated red sandstone intermixed with white marble; this was to develop into a major decorative art form in later Muslim times. Within the context of Islam, these design elements have a deeper spiritual meaning of the singleness of God and his presence everywhere as well a reaffirmation that God is the source of all matter (Dehejia, 259).

Between the coming of the first Islamic Turkish and Afghan rulers in the twelfth century and the arrival of the Mughuls in the sixteenth century, various Islamic dynasties ruled over North India and adapted various architectural styles from outside India. In the late thirteenth century, the Tughluqs built their buildings in Afghan style while the Lodhi sultans in Delhi brought Persian court culture and architecture to India (Craven, 197). The Persian architectural style was also influenced by the North Indian religious and secular architecture of the Great Mughals, who overthrew the Lodhi dynasty in 1526, and were to be the last and greatest Islamic dynasty to rule North India. Their hybrid style architecture became the symbol of the modern Indian state, such as the Delhi Red Fort and the Taj Mahal at Agra. See also Documents 1, 2, 5, 7, 8, and 16.

**Further Reading**


5. SOCIETY

One of the most detailed and also earliest accounts of Indian society during the Middle Ages was written by the Chinese Buddhist scholar monk Xuanzang (602–664 C.E.), who came to India during the reign of Emperor Harsha, or Harsha Vardana (590–647 C.E.). Xuanzang stayed in India for nearly 13 years and visited many kingdoms, including Harsha’s capital Kanauj, and returned to China in 645. Upon his return, he translated some seventy-three Buddhist works and, in addition, also produced a voluminous record of his travels in In-tu, or India, known as “the records of the western regions” or Su-Yu-Ki. This text gives us a vivid verbal portrait of India during the midseventh century. Xuanzang notes the following about Indian towns:

The towns and villages of India have gates and surrounding walls that are broad and high; the streets and the lanes are narrow and crooked. The thoroughfares are dirty and stalls are managed on both sides of the road with appropriate signs. Butchers, fishermen, actors, executioners, scavengers and so on have their dwellings outside the city. Incoming and outgoing these persons are bound to keep on the left side of the road till they arrive at their homes (as the right side is used for relieving oneself, and as communal toilets. (Beal, 73–74)

Xuanzang’s street-side details, such as why certain professionals are kept outside the city gates and in dirty surroundings, illustrate the underlying nature of Indian society, its customs, and taboos; especially those concerning notions of purity and pollution, which colored all aspects of Indian society.

Xuanzang also talks about clothing and the everyday fashions and customs of seventh-century India. Both sexes wore long unstitched plain rectangular garments wrapped around the body and made of cotton, silk, hemp, or fine goat-hair wool, depending on the status of the individual and the season of the year. White is the preferred color for clothing; brightly dyed or ornamental designs were inappropriate as public attire. Most males wound their garment through their midsection; it was then gathered under the armpits and loosely hung over their right shoulder leaving the left shoulder and lower calves exposed. During cold seasons, males wore a short close-fitting jacket, which may have been recently introduced from Central Asia. As head cover, men wore “hats” (possibly turbans) and adorned themselves with heavy jeweled necklaces as status markers. In public, most women completely covered their shoulders and their robes reached the ground. The female hair style then in vogue was tying a small circular bun at the crown with the rest of the hair let loose and adorned with fresh fragrant flowers. Most men wore their facial hair in the form mustaches; a few shaved or had styles that reflected individuals’ status, personal taste, caste custom, or a denominational identity (Beal, 75).
The Indian propensity for personal cleanliness that is detailed by Xuanzang had as much to do with prevailing ideas about purity and pollution as with hygiene. He states that “All wash themselves before eating and never use that had been left over (from a former meal): they do not pass the dishes. Wooden or stone vessels, when used, must be destroyed . . . After eating they cleanse their teeth with a willow stick (tooth brush) and wash their hands and mouth. Until these abolutions are finished they do not touch each other” (Beal, 77).

Another traveller who wrote extensively about India was Abu Raihan Muhammad ibn Ahmad Alberuni (973–1048), the great Persian-speaking scholar from Khwarezm (Uzbekistan), who travelled to India in the early tenth century, nearly five centuries after Xuanzang’s epic pilgrimage. Alberuni has left us a monumental account of Indian culture in a work titled Tahqiq ma lil-hind, popularly known as Alberuni’s India. It was written at a time of ruthless military campaigns by the Turkish Afghan monarch Sultan Mahmud of Ghazani. These conquests led to a still-resonant resentment toward the foreign Muslim invader and his faith among the Hindus of Northwest India. Alberuni wrote the following unique eyewitness account of the impact of the early invasions:

Mahmud utterly ruined the prosperity of the country . . . and the Hindus became like atoms of dust scattered in all directions. They developed the most inveterate aversion towards all Muslims. This is also the reason why Hindu sciences have retired far away from these parts of the country conquered by us and have fled to places which our hand cannot yet reach, to Kashmir, Benaras, and other places. And the antagonism between them and all foreigners receive more and more nourishment both from political and religious sources. (Scahav, 22)

Commenting on the draped tradition of Indian male garments, Alberuni makes a rather surprising statement that Hindus use their turbans for their trousers (Robinson, 490). He describes Brahminical Hindu society as a self-assured, narrow-minded, and arrogant—a society smug in its self-centered worldview and its hostility toward foreigners. This worldview is perhaps a xenophobic reaction resulting from 30 years of Muslim raids. Alberuni elaborates as follows:

Hindus believe that there is no country like theirs, no nation like theirs, no things like theirs, no religion like theirs, and no science like theirs. They are haughty, foolishly vain, self-conceited and stolid. They are, by nature, niggardly in communicating that which they know, and they take the greatest possible care to withhold it from men of another caste among their own people, still much more, of course, from any foreigner . . . . There haughtiness is such that, if you tell them of any science or scholar in Khurasam and Persis (Persia), they think you to be both an ignoramus and a liar. If they travelled and mixed with other nations, they could soon change their mind, for their ancestors were not as narrow-minded as the present generation is. (Scahav, 23–23)

**Castes in Medieval India**

Alberuni also gives a vivid picture of that quintessentially Indian social institution: the caste system. He notes that social hierarchy pervades all Hindu social institutions. Muslim society and religion stood entirely on the other side of such values, considering that all men are equal, and this, as Alberuni saw it,
was the greatest obstacle that prevented any direct approach or understanding between Hindus and Muslims.

According to Alberuni, the “Hindus call their castes as *varnas,* (colours) and from a genealogical point of view they call them *jataka (jati),* i.e., births” (Scha-hav, v. 1, 100–101). Alberuni notes that the castes were four in number and then gives the rational behind the status of each of these four castes as narrated in the Hindu creation story:

1. The highest caste is the (priestly) Brahmana (Brahmin caste); of whom the sacred books of the Hindus tell they were created from the head of Brahman (i.e., the all-prevailing godhead). And as Brahman is only a name for the force called nature, and as the head is the highest part of the body, the Brahmana (Brahmin caste) are given the choice part of the entire community. Therefore, the Hindus venerate themselves as the very best of mankind.
2. The next caste is the Kshatriyas, who were created . . . from the shoulders and hands of Brahman. Their status is not much below that of the priestly Brahmin caste.
3. They are followed by the Vaisyas, who were created from the thigh of Brahman.
4. Finally the Sudras, who were created from his feet.

Much, however, as these two later classes differ from each other, they lived together in the same houses and lodgings (Scha-hav, v. 1, 100–101).

The origins of this novel system, according to most historians, go back to the time of the early Indo-European nomads, called Aryans, who migrated to India some time around 1500 B.C.E. and established their cultural dominance over the indigenous populations. This four-fold division of society, called the *varna,* was sanctified by Aryan sacred texts and considered to be divinely ordained. Similar types of social divisions are also found in ancient Iran, from where the Aryans had migrated. As noted by Alberuni, the ancient four-fold social division that distinguished Indian society comprised the Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya, and Sudra castes. According to the legal code of Ancient Hindu lawgiver Manu, the Brahmin’s duty was priesthood and scholarship. The Brahmins are ritual specialists and revered as worthy teachers. The Kshatriya are warriors and administrators whose duty is to protect the common people. The Vaisya were cattle breeders and estate owners, and people involved in all forms of commercial activity. The Sudras were agricultural laborers or serfs.

There was no sharp social division between the Brahmin, Kshatriya, and Vaisya castes, which were considered the twice-born. These castes had an initiation ceremony, during which they received a sacred thread that marked them off as distinct from the lower Sudra castes. This sharp social division between the twice-born and the Sudra meant the latter was to serve the other three. According to the codes of Manu, it is better to do one’s caste duty badly than to do another caste’s duty well. Therefore, in an ideal sense, each individual is expected to fulfill only his assigned duty, and his place in society is fixed. This was a Brahmin-centric model, because nearly all early sacred texts were authored by Brahmins, who preferred to see the world around them ordered in this way. However, the Indian reality was far more complex, and this ideal precept of the four-fold caste was rarely ever fully carried out in practice.
These ideals were often seriously compromised in the ancient and medieval periods. For example, the law books do not favor the Brahmin caste engaging in agriculture because it inflicts injury on small life forms. But such prescriptive rules were widely ignored in practice. In reality, Brahmans, like other castes, pursued all manner of trade and professions, and several royal families and generals were members of the Brahmin caste.

Even Hindu sacred texts are not in accord concerning caste duties and roles. Although the Bhagavad Gita, one of the most authoritative and revered Hindu religious texts, seems to sanction the four-fold division of Hindu society and urges each caste to adhere to its allotted duties. However, it does so in an advisory, not a commanding tone; one should do so for the sake of one’s own best interest, not to adhere to an inflexible socioreligious code. With respect to the varna categories, the Gita notes that the four-fold division of society was created by the creator, according to the distribution of the individual’s own “gunas” (qualities or tendencies) and past actions (karma), but the creator is not responsible for the results derived from it (Gita, 4.13). The Gita also seems to reiterate Manu’s legal dictum that a person should act in accordance with one’s own nature, even if in doing so one may appear faulty: “It is better performing one’s won duty than engaging in any other duties, however well you might attend to them. It is better to die engaging in accordance with one’s own nature, for others’ duties invite peril” (Gita, 3.35) (Swami B.T. Tripurari, 120, 145).

In medieval Hindu India, the Brahmin generally lived under the patronage of a king, often in segregated settlements, and were granted tax-free lands by the state. These lands were farmed by local peasants who paid taxes or portions of their harvest directly to the Brahmin. There were also large Brahmin estate holders who cultivated their tax-free land using hired laborers. The Brahmin also had a highly respected position at court or served and earned his livelihood as a teacher in all branches of medieval learning. The Brahmins of the period also founded Hindu monastic orders based on earlier Buddhist models.

The duty of the second class, the Kshatriya, was to defend and protect the Hindu social order. It was possible, in historic times, for a martial caste or tribe to claim Kshatriya status by the role they played, such as the ancestors of the present Rajputs of Rajasthan, who descended from Central Asian invaders.

The Vaisya varna included estate holders and cattle breeders but generally meant all commercial classes. Most were wealthy and organized into powerful merchant guilds (sreni). Wealthy Vaisyas were respected by kings, and many were also patrons of arts and sponsored large religious causes. In ancient India, a number of inscriptions record great donations made by Vaisya merchants to religious causes, especially to Buddhist monasteries. These merchant guilds were politically important and self-governing. They had their own laws, which the king was expected to recognize and respect. The guild acted as a social safety net for all members of the caste.

The Sudras or serfs were not twice-born and were treated as second-class citizens, being on the fringes of Indo-European-speaking society. Although, in practice, there was no bar to the free mobility of labor, there was also a strong stigma attached to certain professions, such as butchers, meat sellers, hunters, leather manufacturers, barbers, undertakers, hangmen, sweepers, and garbage collectors. Those who performed these professions were considered ritually polluted, because all these professions had to deal with handling articles that were deemed impure.
Alberuni notes that, after the Sudra varna, are people called Antyaja—those outside the varna system or outcastes—who rendered various kinds of menial services. During his visits, Alberuni found eight kinds of outcastes, as defined by their professions, within Indian society: fuller, shoemaker, juggler, basket and shield maker, sailor, fisherman, hunter, and the weaver. The four varnas do not live among the outcastes, which reside outside the villages or towns or the four varna. Other groups, called Doma and Chandala, were also not part of the four-fold division of the Hindu social order. The people did the dirtiest work, like cleaning the village latrines and getting rid of carcasses. They were considered a separate class and distinguished by their unclean occupations.

These people were the medieval equivalent to present-day outcastes, or untouchables. They were called the fifth class and were not allowed to live near the settlement of the four clean varnas, but in special quarters outside the towns and villages. The main task of the Chandala was the carrying and cremation of corpses; they also served as royal executioners. Any person of the upper caste who had any close relation with a Chandala was likely to lose his status.

At this period, the Chandalas, who may have accounted for a little over 6 percent of the Indian population, led a very demeaning life. Their presence, even the very sight of them, was considered inauspicious or polluting to members of other varnas. None of the other varnas would touch, let alone eat food either handled or prepared by the Chandala.

A major social change that took place in the medieval period was a shift in focus from the division of the four varnas to the development within them of a number of social groups or jati. The relations between the jati groups were governed by three basic rules: (1) rule of endogamy (marriage within the group), (2) commensality (food only received by members of the same or a higher group), and (3) craft exclusiveness (each man lives by the trade of his profession). It is the jati group that is known to outsiders as “caste.” The word caste itself derived from the Portuguese term casta or something that is not mixed. It comes from the Latin root castus or chaste. This word was applied in India in the midfifteenth century by the Portuguese and may have been used by the Portuguese in the same sense as race, as they saw Indian society divided into a number of separate groups. Indian historian D. D. Kosombi, in his work An Introduction to the Study of Indian History, elaborates this view that castes did not arise out of the internal division in the original Vedic Aryan society but from an external process of coming together of various populations.

The entire course of Indian history shows tribal elements being fused to the dominant general society. This factor is the basis for the foundation of the most distinct feature of Indian society, the caste system. The term jati implies tribes. Tribes tend to be endogenous; and, as they entered the general society, they also carried their endogenous customs. And, if the tribe was already an agricultural community, once it became a jati group, it would become the peasant caste of that region. Over time, a number of small primitive hunter-gather groups, living in forest areas, would lose their traditional livelihood due to the relentless advance of the peasant community. If these hunter-gather groups were subjugated by the peasant agriculturalists, they might also be reduced to the status of the lowest jatis and outside the four varnas altogether.

One of the earliest accounts of Chandalas came from the Chinese scholar monk Faxian, who visited India during the early Gupta Period, some time
between 399 and 414 C.E. (see Gupta Empire). As to the Chandalas, Faxian noted the following:

Through the country the people kill no living thing nor drink wine, no do they eat garlic or onions, with the exception on Chandalas only. The Chandalas are named “evil men” and dwell apart form others; if they enter town or market, they sound a piece of wood to (announce their presence and to) separate themselves; then men, knowing who they are; avoid coming in to contact with then. . . . (Only the) Chandalas hunt and sell flesh. (Beal, 1969, xxxvii–xxxviii)

The Chandalas, a name that is synonymous with the earliest untouchable castes, were once categorized as hunter-gathers in ancient texts. Later, they were barred from becoming peasant cultivators and forced to be a part of a large pool of landless manual seasonal laborers. Historians also see the period between 500 B.C.E. to 400 C.E. as the period of the Indian caste system and its supporting ideology (Habib, 161–179).

Just as in the case with trade guilds, the existence of caste also emerged out of social necessity. This caste-based social organization gave its members a sense of mutual and collective security, a refuge for destitute members and orphans (a form of social safety net), and fostered a sense of order and control over their affairs and autonomy at a period that was often marked by political turmoil.

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This system of separate, discrete social groups was to permeate South Asia with the spread of Brahminical Hindu ideology. In the Tamil country at the eastern tip of South India, we have no evidence of the four varnas and discrete social groups before the arrival of Brahminical Hinduism. By the tenth century, the Chola Period, the caste system, based on Brahminical ritual domination, was an integral part of the Tamil social landscape. Largely due to its late introduction, the varnas in Tamil country are mainly Brahmans, who were considered migrants from the north, and Sudras, or the agricultural Tamil castes and untouchables. Two rival confederacies called the “left hand” and “right hand” caste groups formed in Tamil country during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. These new landholding castes may have emerged from such former martial and pastoral tribal groups, such as the Palli and Srigopala, who were either new migrants or had previously lived in peripheral areas. These new land holding castes were in direct competition with the older established landholding groups (Grewal, 209).

The animosity and feuds between them lasted nearly 1,000 years. The majority of the cultivating and laboring castes, along with traders and weavers, belonged to the right-hand section while the left included a large number of craftsmen, but few agricultural castes, and thus are seen as recent migrants to Tamil country.

The organization of castes and the severe sanctions as well as the threat of social sanctions for violation of caste rules were instrumental in allowing Hindu India to preserve its core cultural traditions in the face of nearly 1,000 years of repeated conquests and long periods of foreign rule. Many medieval Indian reformist spiritual guides saw the hierarchical and inclusive nature of castes as morally repugnant to their inclusive egalitarian religious agendas of social equality and brotherhood. These reform movements belonging to either Hindu denominational (Saivaite or Vishnavite) Bhakti sects, such as that of Bhagat Ramanand (1366–1467), or those seeking interfaith unity, such that of Kibir (1398–1448), who sought Hindu Islamic synthesis and tried to abolish caste divisions among his followers, began over time to acquire the characteristics
of a distinct new caste, and some even divided into separate hieratical castes, like social groupings, among themselves.

In many ways, the beginning of the thirteenth century marks a break in traditional Indian society, partly due to the intrusions of Islam and large-scale urbanization and craft specialization. The Islamic legal system did not recognize caste, but only the status differentiations between a free man and a slave. In spite of this, the general attitude of Muslims toward a caste-based social order was one of tolerant indifference. Muslim rulers allowed the continuation of earlier caste-based restrictions, and did not ideologically challenge it, as they had condemned Hindu polytheism and idol worship. The Indian Marxist historian Irfan Habib has suggested that “in so far as the caste system had helped to generate larger revenues from villages and lower the wages in the cities, the Indo-Muslim regime had every reason to protect it, however indifferent, if not hostile, they may have been for the Brahmin idol worshippers” (172–173).

Muslims also brought new technology and products, such as paper manufacturing, bitumen and lime cement, horseshoes, and the spinning wheel, and all these new products led to the creation of new professions, such as paper manufacturing, lime mixing, and the creation of new castes. Many groups that chose to take up these new occupations also converted to Islam, thereby over time creating a large Muslim population. In spite of such conversions, previous caste practices continued to influence these converted communities, which practiced endogenous marriage and segregated and looked down on untouchables. However, there were also sections of the Muslim population whose caste rules were weak and allowed for more flexible marriage patterns and occupational mobility (Habib, 172–174).

Religious prejudices and caste taboos were strong between Hindu and Muslim communities. Alberuni noted that all outsiders and non-Hindus were considered mleccha or unclean by the conventions of Hindu caste rules. Ibn Battuta (1304–1368), a fourteenth-century Berber traveller from Tangier, Morocco, who also briefly sought employment as a quadi (sharia judge) in Delhi under Muhammad bin Tughluq (1325–1351) gives us some insight into Hindu-Muslim relationships. He informs us that Muslims were not allowed into Hindu homes or to use Hindu utensils.

The infidels of India would neither admit Muslims into their homes nor give food and water in their own utensils, although they will not hurt or insult them. Occasionally, we were compelled to ask some of the Hindus of India to cook meat for us. They used to bring it in their own cooking pots, and sit at a distance from us. They placed the food on a disposable banana leaf, and whatever remained was eaten by the dogs for birds. If any innocent child happened to pick anything from that remnant, they would beat him and compel him to eat cow dung which, according to their beliefs, purifies. [However] Muslims had no objection to accepting eatables made and offered by the Hindus. (Mahdi Husain, 34)

It may well be that the Muslims of this area took every opportunity to mingle with Hindus and did not like to be treated as untouchables by being socially ostracized. But for the Hindus, any close association with Muslims brought with it the danger of ritual pollution, and the threat of losing one’s caste status. In spite of this uneasy relationship, the bitter communal tension and riots that became common in later colonial and postcolonial times was never a notable part of medieval urban life under Muslim rule. Hindus also showed devotion to Muslim saints, whose tombs were venerated by both committees.
Caste-based marriage taboos were another complication in the North Indian caste system. The institutions of _gotra_ and _pravara_ existed usually among the Brahmin castes but also among some of the twice-born castes. The term _gotra_ means cowshed and roughly corresponds to the territory of a clan group that holds to the belief that all its members trace their descent from a legendary sage. All members of the _gotra_ are forbidden to marry persons of the same _gotra_. The _pravara_ refers to any other _gotra_ that shares a remote relationship with another _gotra_’s founding sage ancestor; members of this _gotra_ are also forbidden as marriage partners to the related _gotra_. By the early Middle Ages, this system had become rigid and castes had become fully endogenous.

**The Indian Joint Family and the Four Stages of Hindu Life**

Just below the caste is the family, and the Indian family was, and still is in rural India, a joint family. That is, members of a number of generations and, in its full sense, uncles, cousins, and brothers live under one roof with their aged parents. The senior active member is generally the head of the household. Within the joint family, there was no sense of individual property but the right of maintenance is granted to all male family heads and their families. All married women become members of their husband’s household.

Left to itself, a joint family will increase in size until it becomes so large that it becomes unmanageable and breaks up. More commonly, such a partition takes place after the death of the head of the household, and his property is divided among his sons.

Just as the Hindu social order was divided into four _varnas_, the ideal life of an upper caste Hindu is likewise divided into four stages. For the twice-born, a ceremony marks the transition from childhood to studenthood (brahmacarin), where a twice-born individual leads a celibate life under the guidance of a teacher, often living with him as a junior member of the household. After getting his education, the individual returns to his family to lead the life of a householder (grahasta) after entering an arranged marriage. After having children, and in his late middle age, he becomes a forest hermit (vanaprastha) free from any material attachment and lives a life of reflection and meditation. At his ripe old age, he becomes a wandering mendicant, or _sannyasin_. These stages are only an ideal prescription, and few Hindus ever honor it to its full extent. Most genuine _sannyasins_ in India are men who omitted the householder stage.

**Modern Discourse Concerning the Caste System**

No modern discourse about the Indian caste system is ever complete without looking at the major work of French structural anthropologist Louis Dumont (1911–1998) about the deeper underlying logic behind Indian castes. In the mid-1960s, as a novel way to explain this unique Indian social institution, Dumont contrasted the Indian caste-based system with the Western European social system. He noted that the Indian caste system is different from the European social system in its central ideology as the caste system is an extreme form of social stratification. In relation to its core ideology, the values of the Indian caste system could be directly contrasted with an egalitarian society, which at least in theory, the West holds. The two cardinal Western European ideals of liberty and equality follow from the conception that a human being is
an individual, and all humans should be free and equal. The caste system, on the other hand, is centered on a system of hierarchy, which divides the entire society into large number of hereditary groups distinguished from one another and connected together by the following three principles:

2. Division of labor (where each group has, by theory or tradition, a profession from which their members come to depend only within certain limits).
3. Hierarchy (which ranks the groups as relatively superior or inferior to one another). This is the main characteristic of this system.

Dumont further noted that caste is also a “state of mind” and a pan-Indian institution of ideas and values. The three principles of separation, division of labor, and hierarchy rest on one fundamental concept, or one that is reducible to a single principle, which is the opposition of the pure to the impure.

As for the first principle of separation, it is the result of this opposition, or the idea that pure and impure must be separate. Castes separate themselves from one another by prohibiting marriage outside the group just as they prohibit contact and dining between persons belonging to different groups. For the second principle of division of labor the underlying idea is that pure and impure occupations must be kept apart and, likewise, the third principle of hierarchy is based on the same premise that pure is superior to impure. The entire system is founded on “the necessary and the hierarchical coexistence of the two opposites.” Dumont further stated that this opposition between pure and impure as the basic foundation of the caste system is true only in an intellectual sense. It is by reference to this opposition that the entire society of castes appears consistent and rational to those who live by it (Dumont, 43–44).

The caste system, for Dumont, comprises specialization and interdependence of the groups of castes that constitute it. Specialization leads to separation between these groups, but it is also oriented toward the needs of the entire group. This relationship to the entire group must be emphasized, and it is this that links the division of labor with the hierarchy. It also distinguishes this Indian social division of labor from a modern economic division of labor, which is oriented mainly toward the individual’s profit, subject to market forces, which is not so in the case of castes, where the majority of relationships are personal and are in reference to the hierarchical collectivity of the system.

In his book *Homo Hierarchicus: Essai sur le système des castes* (1966), Dumont saw the hierarchical principle as being at the very core of the caste system; without it there would be no caste. For Dumont, the caste system must be identified in terms of Hindu religious ideology and not as the result of economic or social forces. Other sociologists had long challenged this all-encompassing symmetrical model as too narrow, because it ignores crucial economic factors. They point out that Dumont’s elegant interpretation and appealing theoretical framework is built on false premises to explain what India is, and Dumont’s contrast between hierarchical India and egalitarian West is too simplistic and seriously flawed. Dumont’s critics point out that he fails to see the economic forces that have radically altered the basis of the caste system in the last 100 years. The hereditary division of labor that was the system’s foundation is now nearly gone, and what Dumont sees as primary, the religious or personal element, is only its surviving residue and not a crucial economic one (Habib, 161–164).
The Sacred Cows of Hindu India

An offshoot of Dumont’s all-encompassing analysis of the Indian caste system is his explanation of Hindu dietary taboos. There is no Hindu dietary rule that evokes more wonder and puzzlement than the taboo against beef consumption. Even Alberuni commented on this taboo. He noted that cattle served humans by carrying loads, ploughing fields, and providing milk for food and dung for fuel. Therefore, the cow was worth far more alive than dead; this economic factor was, for Alberuni, the key behind the prohibition of killing and eating cattle.

For Dumont, this taboo could be logically explained by the Hindu ideas of purity and pollution. Since the time of the Vedic Aryans, some 3,500 years ago, cattle were storehouses of wealth and providers of ritually pure food. For other reasons, they were venerated and held sacred. But there was no taboo against cow sacrifice, which was often the high point of Aryan rituals, and the sacrificed cattle were consumed communally as concentrated food. So this taboo was a late development that must have arisen sometime during the late classical period. During the early part of the first millennium C.E., the formerly Jain and Buddhist ideology of not killing, or ahimsa, also became a core value of Hinduism (see Jainism). This meant that vegetarianism was considered superior to meat eating. Now, eating meat is not only a consumption of a less pure or polluting food but also a sinful food. The cow being the most venerated of all animals, it was also equated with the ritual purity of the Brahmin. With the taboo against consumption of beef, a dead cow is now the sole responsibility of an untouchable, who is the appointed remover of pollution. Because his ritual opposite the Brahmin was now being equated with the purity of a live cow, killing a cow is considered the moral equivalent of killing a Brahmin (Dumont, 146–151). This, according to Dumont, explains the killing of a cow, and the aversion toward eating it.

All products of a live cow are considered pure and are utilized, including its bodily waste. Alberuni and Xuanzang inform us that cow dung was used in various capacities in medieval Indian society, as is still done today in village India. Fresh cow dung is a mineral-rich slur with an earthy fragrance and has a number of practical usages, including as a floor coating. A floor coated with cow dung stays cooler and is water absorbent. Xuanzang reported that the floor of the average Indian home was regularly plastered with a cow dung and mud mixture to smoothen and harden it and then sprinkled with flowers. Such a coating was also believed to possess insect repellant and antiseptic properties, which explains Alberuni’s report that cow dung was used to cleanse and purify eating spaces: “Hindus eat singly, one by one on table cloth of dung” (eating space coated with fresh cow dung). He also described the everyday precautions taken to safeguard against food-related pollution: “They do not make use of the remainder of a meal, and the plates from which they have eaten are thrown away if they are earthen” (Sachau, vol. I, 180).

Sexual Relations in the Middle Ages

Despite the rather puritanical tone of Hindu public life and its sacred texts, having regular sexual relations with his wife was considered a husband’s essential religious duty. The sexual relationship between couples was also considered the best among all available pleasures. The physical act of intercourse and its
variations are celebrated in graphic detail in Hindu sacred iconography carved on some temple exteriors. The ideal of feminine beauty in India is a slim waist with large breasts and hips (Basham, 171). One of the earliest surviving guidebooks for sex in world literature is the *Kamasutra*, composed by Mallanaga Vatsayana some time between fourth and sixth centuries C.E. during the Gupta era. It was based on earlier manuals that had long since vanished. Although, in modern times, the *Kamasutra* has become the most famous sex manual in history and is synonymous with various sexual positions during intercourse, this is a misunderstanding of the content and purpose of the text. It was written mainly to serve as a guidebook for refined living among upper-caste individuals, where sex is only one among the various pleasures and activities for a complete life. A study of this text gives us an idea of the ideal prescriptive lifestyle of a medieval sophisticated urbanite.

Apart from art and literature, the use of sex for more profound and lofty needs also permeates Indian spirituality. During the late Middle Ages, especially in Hinduism, we find the growth of heterodox tantric sects, which also use sexual intercourse as a means to achieve a higher level of spirituality and as an aid for spiritual salvation (Basham, 337).

The erotic life in ancient and medieval India was generally heterosexual. This does not rule out the presence of all other forms of sexual relations such as homosexuality. Still, anything other than heterosexual relations was not considered legitimate pleasure, and the *Kamasutra* treats homosexual acts more or less in a clinical fashion and not with genuine enthusiasm (Basham, 172).

**Lives of Hindu Women in Medieval India**

In relation to the early Vedic Period, the condition of Hindu upper caste woman in medieval India was one of subordination, with little personal freedom either within or without the household. Women in medieval India lacked the right to make free choices about their personal life and were under the authority of their fathers during childhood, their husbands during adulthood, and their appointed guardians during widowhood. They did, however, have limited property rights, which, if they were widows, were not available during earlier periods. Movable property, such as cash, jewellery, and clothing, were given to a bride as her own share of the family fortune. A husband might exercise certain rights over his wife’s property but it was considered as belonging to her and was passed on to her daughters and not to her husband. In comparison to other medieval civilizations, Hindu women’s property rights were far greater (Basham). As today, the intellectual life of medieval Indian women varied according to caste and class. Upper-class women took an active interest in arts and sciences; but for the vast majority in rural India, a woman’s life revolved around household or farm work.

By the first century C.E., there is a gradual hardening of the role of women within the orthodox Hindu tradition. Although women were expected to be pious, they could not become priests nor were they encouraged to take the up the life of asceticism. However, in heterodox traditions, women still had important roles. This is especially true in Hindu Tantric sects of this period, where female devotees played a major role and women had important places in the Tantric priesthood and Tantric orders of female ascetics.
The primary role of women within Hindu tradition was to marry—unlike men they could only marry once—and to take care of the family. Their duties were to wait on their husbands, to cook the family meals, and to produce male offspring. A virtuous woman was expected to put her husband’s and her children’s welfare before her own. Girls married at an early age, and the birth of a male child was one of the most important events in the life of a married woman. Members of a household were often married early by their parents and marriage was a family affair and not the concern of an individual couple (Grewal, 444). Affluent household members could have more than one wife, but, because the average Hindu could not afford to maintain more than one spouse, monogamy was the norm. The great model of femininity in medieval India, as today, was Princess Sita, the heroine of the grand epic *Ramayana*, who faithfully followed her hero husband Prince Rama into the wilderness to endure a life of exile and hardship without any remorse or regret.

Apart from religiously sanctioned norms and restrictions, women’s own biological differences were used to maintain their subordinate status within a Hindu household. The Hindu obsession with purity and pollution created disabilities for a woman, who, during the time of menstruation, was regarded as impure and her husband was not allowed to come near her. Similarly, just after childbirth, women are not allowed to touch any vessels, and meals were consumed elsewhere and never within the house because it were considered a polluted area. The duration of this period of impurity varied form caste to caste—8 days for Brahmin households and 30 for those categorized as Sudra. But those outside the caste system had no fixed times for such social quarantine (Grewal, 448).

The right of a widow to inherit her husband’s property was not recognized in Hindu legal texts until the third century B.C.E. Earlier, only males had the right to inherit family property, while the women were granted only maintenance. In medieval times, there was an increased recognition of the widow’s right. The dictums of the Hindu law of inheritance, noted Alberuni, gave the daughter one-fourth of the family’s wealth in relation to a son, and this was spent on her before her marriage and was also given as part of her dowry. After marriage, she received no income from her father’s household. Alberuni based his information mainly on Hindu legal texts; but one of the dangers in using the ancient normative codes listed in Hindu legal texts is that there was great deal of regional variation within India. And these Hindu legal codes written by Brahmin jurists only had a prescriptive function; they were neglected altogether by most of the lower castes. The status of a Hindu widow varied not only over time but regionally and also from caste to caste as well as her position within the household. If the widow was young and childless she did not inherit any property of her husband, but the heirs of her deceased husband had the social obligation to provide her with basic sustenance and clothing as long as she lived. But the widow’s rights over her husband’s estate did grow over time and, by late middle ages, reformist Hindu jurists even gave widows a limited right to dispose of a husband’s estate if a suitable heir was lacking, although in practice this right varied regionally. This represented a major expansion of the widow’s right, because in earlier days the proceeds of the property in all such cases were given to charity or assumed by the state.

By the late Middle Ages, women also had a greater say in the disposal of family property. A temple inscription dated to the thirteenth century in Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu, records the sale of a property where a senior Brahmin
widow and her daughter-in-laws had equal rights in the sale proceedings with her two sons and grandsons, and all the women had to give their consent for disposal of the family property, although the senior male members acted as signatories and as guardians who undertook the transactions (Nagaswami, 84–88). In spite of these reforms in widow’s inheritance, in terms of customs and institutions, the late medieval period (1200–1800) was the most conservative time in Indian history, when Hindu widows had no right to remarry, and the wife was separated from her husband only by death, because Hindus have no divorce.

When North India fell under the rule of Islamic dynasties in the eleventh century, Hindu elites emulated the upper-class Muslim practice of female segregation or purda by instituting their own system of female seclusion, which shielded women of the household from the sight of any man, other than family members or close relatives. In later Hindu empires, such as Vijayanagar, royal women travelled in covered litters or palanquins in the manor of elite Muslim women of the Delhi sultanate. In spite of these restrictions, during the medieval period, aristocratic and upper-class Hindu women had freer mobility than women had in contemporary Islamic courts and the elaborate institutionalized purdah in India was mainly restricted to Muslim households in areas under direct Muslim rule (Grewal, 450). Hindu queens accompanied male rulers in temple rituals and on military campaigns. Medieval Arab travellers remarked in wondrous and disapproving tones about seeing queens in Hindu royal courts without veils (Basham, 179).

The only class of women outside such rules and restrictions comprised courtesans and temple dancers. Some royal courtesans were well accomplished, with great wealth and prestige; they even paid taxes to the state. These upper-crust courtesans were seen more as patrons of the arts and also resided in the most prestigious sections of the city, choosing the best accommodations available. Respected men could be seen in the company of such courtesans without facing social disapproval and visiting their homes regularly had no stigma attached to it. These women were also granted the rare privilege of being allowed to chew betel leaves with the queen (Grewal, 450). Their social position and fame is analogous to our modern-day mass media entertainers. The practice of using professional dancers as an essential part of temple ritual was common in South India until the early twentieth century, and this was certainly a medieval social development (Basham, 185). In medieval period, most major Hindu temples had groups of temple dancers called devadasis. They were born and reared in the temple either as children of one of the temple dancers or were donated to the temple deity by their parents as a pious offering. They attended temple functions as dancers, performed other duties in the temple, and were paid from temple funds. Those among them who became courtesans to the wealthy and powerful were associated with the elite and some even had literary, poetic talents and were known for their scholarship as well as for being accomplished dancers. But they were still not as socially respected as married women of similar stature (Grewal, 450).

Colonial and medieval accounts give credence to the view that lower ranking devadasis functioned as ordinary prostitutes to support themselves and to provide funds for their temple. A fourteenth-century Arab source mentions a temple with sixty women who earned their money through prostitution and even offered services to travellers free of charge. Side-stepping the issue as
whether such traveller’s tales were of the same genre as the *Arabian Nights*,
one thing seems clear: sex outside the conjugal setting was not viewed with
disfavor in medieval Hindu society. The prostitute was recognized by the
Hindu state, and to be regarded as a professional prostitute a woman had to
be registered as such and only then had all the rights belonging to that profes-
sion. Prostitutes were said to be found in every town in medieval India, as Al-
beruni noted disapprovingly: “Hindus were not very severe in punishing
whoredom (and) the fault laid with their kings.” Alberuni also saw an eco-
nomic incentive behind the toleration of the public sale of sex: “[Hindu] kings
made them an attraction for their cities due to financial reasons [because] . . .
yield to recover the expenditure on the army by the revenues that they
derived from the business of temple girls both as fines and as taxes” (Grewal,
448). Outside this structured setting any women freelancing as a prostitute
risked serious social sanctions; she would be forced to sever all ties with her
household. In status, the freelancer was lower than the professional prostitute,
who could even appear as a witness in a legal case. Professional prostitutes
also were expected to abide by their own code of ethics and had to be seen as
trustworthy in fulfilling their side of the agreement (Grewal, 453). In spite of this
general tolerance toward courtesans and the prevalence of prostitution, adultery
by women was not tolerated in Hindu India. Alberuni noted that an adulteress
was driven from the husband’s household and banished (Grewal, 448).

The Practice of Sati in Medieval India

In medieval India, if a Hindu wife lost her husband, she could not remarry.
She had only two choices: perpetual widowhood or, as was the custom among
certain castes, burning herself with honor. If a young upper-caste Hindu women
chose widowhood she had to remain in the humiliating status of a widow as
long as she lived. Under such status, she was expected to shave her hair; wear
no jewellery or perfumes; eat one meal a day without meat, wine, or salt; and
wear only white garments to mark her widowhood. Her days were passed in
prayer and religious rituals, and she had to maintain an austere lifestyle until
her death. Her only solace was the hope of being remarried to her husband in
the next birth by her virtuous deeds. Alberuni noted that *sati* or self-immola-
tion was preferable for many, because the widow was ill treated as long as she
lived. They were considered inauspicious to everyone except their children.
They were barred from attending any family festivals, and their presence was
considered an ill omen to the household. As a result, a widow was shunned
even by family servants and her life, if she was young; was a long period of
continuous misery.

*sati* was mainly practiced by the Brahmin or Kshatriya castes in Bengal or
Rajesthan. This custom became common only in the Middle Ages. Some histori-
ans believe it received a boost after the early nomadic invasions because similar
practices existed among the Sakas of Central Asia. There are numerous *sati*
stones in Rajasthan and other parts of India commemorating wives who chose
self-immolation upon the funeral pyre of their dead husbands. Among upper-
caste women, the practice of *sati* was in theory a voluntary act, but it is possible
that family pressure often drove a high-caste widow to self-immolation. But the
act of *sati* is obligatory for the wives of Hindu Rajput royalty because it revolves
around the notions of honor and virtue that are cardinal values for the martial Rajputs and other upper castes. For Rajputs, death is preferable to dishonor and humiliation at the hands of the victors. Alberuni noted "as regards the wives of kings, they are in the habit of burning themselves whether the woman wishes it or not. By which they desire to prevent any of them by chance, committing something unworthy of the illustrious husband. They made an exception only for women of advanced years and those who have children, for the son is the responsible protector of his mother" (Sachau, v. 2, 155).

Noclo dei Conti, a fifteenth-century Italian traveller, stated that as many as three-thousand wives and concubines of the king of Vijayanagar had pledged themselves to be burnt in the event of the ruler’s death. Some South Indian kings were not only accompanied in death by their wives, but also by male courtiers, ministers, and palace servants. Criticism of the practice of sati appeared in medieval writings, especially among the Tantric schools of Hinduism. One Tantric writer wrote that a woman burning herself on her husband’s pyre went straight to hell. But in spite of such heterodox views, the practice of female self-immolation received approval and support from orthodox medieval Hindu writers.

Lives of Muslim Women in Medieval India

We have little information about Islamic women during the early medieval period. Although there was no Muslim equal to the Hindu practice of sati, the Turkish Muslim invaders did bring with them similar notions of family honor. But the Muslims had different values concerning the idea of the family, and those pertaining to female inheritance and divorce. Because the Qur’an advocates the continuation of the family after the event of divorce or death, medieval Muslim women had a religious sanction to seek divorce and remarriage. Islamic religious codes also allow a divorced couple to seek reconciliation and remarriage. During the medieval period, Qur’anic statements concerning the position of women were far more advanced than those adhered to by any contemporary Hindu societies because they gave women better access to a religious life, property rights, and divorce. This does not necessarily mean that there was parity between males and females in medieval Islamic India, for the Qur’an also upholds many of the earlier patriarchal values and social structure and expects male members of the household to manage the social and economic affairs of women (Grewal, 454).

As regards family inheritance, the Qur’an emphasizes male child as equivalent to two females. The widow is given one-eighth of her husband’s share of property if he has children and if not she receives one-fourth, whereas a widower gets nearly double in similar circumstances from his wife’s property (Grewal, 454). These Qur’anic injunctions were only prescriptive and did not have legal sanctions. Within India, each Muslim community implemented its inheritance rules differently according to prevailing local customs, and there were wide variations. Among a few Muslim commercial families from India’s west coast port city of Surat, female household heads did own and manage properties and directly managed their husband’s business affairs after his death. And there are instances among the Muslim elites when the widow did gain control of the properties that were bequeathed to her late husband as trust. Many of the Islamic practices in India also have their roots in older pre-Islamic practices of
Persia and may have been adapted by the Persio-phile Muslim ruling elites in India to develop attitudes toward women that were highly prejudicial.

Muslim royalty in India did not neglect formal education for the female members of royal households; however, facilities for female education for commoners were generally lacking in Muslim religious schools or madrasas. But there were exceptions, as the Moroccan-born traveller Ibn Battuta recalled of the existence of thirteen schools for girls and nearly twice as many for boys at the commercial center of Hinawar in western India. However, he saw this as a local anomaly because he found no other schools for Muslim girls during his travels through India. This was probably due to prevailing Muslim attitudes concerning purdah and, as a result, the vast majority of Muslim women, like Hindu women, were illiterate. Among the Muslim upper classes, women played an important role in politics from behind the throne and even on occasion directly controlled the reins of power as in the case of Princess Raziya al Din (r. 1236–1240), who ruled as sultana in Delhi. She reportedly preferred to wear men’s clothing and abandoned the dictates of purdah when conducting state affairs. But the conditions that led to her rule were exceptional, and her short reign ended tragically because she was seen as flaunting long-established customs and the ethnic and gender prejudices of the ruling Turkish elite.

The sultans maintained large numbers of wives and concubines within their harems, which also included all female members of their households. All female members of the harem were expected to rigidly maintain the laws of purdah when venturing outside and were thus shielded from public gaze. This rule of female seclusion was also followed by other member of the Muslim aristocracy. A respected aristocratic lady was expected to move in a covered litter while poor Muslim commoners wore a burqa (an all-enveloping garment that covered the entire body) (Grewal, 446). Living in purdah and inside harems was associated with wealth, good reputation, family honor, female virtue, and chastity.

Not surprisingly, these cherished notions of female chastity and modesty coexisted with the practice of prostitution and the culture of maintaining courtesans. Under the Muslim sultanates, the state’s attitude toward the sale of sex was pragmatic, and no attempt was made to abolish houses of prostitution. The practice was perhaps seen as a safety valve to maintain public order and as an additional source of state revenue. Under the rule of Allaudin Khalji, one of the most powerful sultans of the Delhi sultanate, there were scheduled rates set for sexual services by prostitutes, whose houses became the favorite haunts of all classes of soldiers. Thus the city’s commercial sale of sex was regulated for the service of the state (Grewal, 447). Courtesans, who were an essential part of royal celebrations even under Islamic rule, entertained the elite with songs and dances. Whole colonies of dancing girls and musicians, known as “tarabadad” (abode of pleasures), were present at city of Delhi during the time of Allaudin Khalji (Grewal, 456–457).

Domestic servitude and the institution of slavery were widely prevalent in the Muslim sultanates. Islam accepted the status of slavery as legally binding, and the master had rights of ownership. Most slaves were war captives and were seen as legitimate war booty, and the success of military campaigns was judged by how many captives it produced (at times as many fifty thousand were taken as slaves). With so many slaves available, even those with modest incomes could afford to keep slaves, and the number of slaves held by the nobles and sultans could be enormous. Sultan Firuz Shah Tughluq (1351–1388) is
said to have owned as many as 180,000 slaves, with twelve thousand working in the craft industry. Apart from doing much of the domestic and craftwork, the slaves also engaged in commerce in the interest of their masters and functioned as agricultural laborers. (Grewal, 432–434). Female slaves were procured either as domestic help or as concubines. The price of an average Indian slave girl during this period varied, and those selected as domestics were generally considered cheap, but those with education, physical beauty, training, and charms attracted a great fortune as concubines. Slaves were also imported from East and Central Asia. The popular perceptions among the Muslim elite of the period vested the female slaves of different ethnic groups with different innate characters and abilities. Central Asian Turkish female slaves were usually preferred for hard outside work and obedience; Indian female slaves were employed as domestics and for wet-nursing, while Persian female slaves were chosen as companions. Both male and female slaves, whether foreign or domestic, were considered personal property of the master but did have certain basic rights granted by the Quran (Grewal, 447, 453). See also Documents 4 and 19.

Further Reading

Raman N. Seylon

6. SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Science, the historian David Pingree reminds us, is a product of culture and not a single unified entity: “Therefore, a historian of pre modern scientific
texts—whether they be written in [Greek, Latin, Arabic, or Sanskrit] . . . must avoid the temptation to conceive of these sciences as more or less clumsy attempts to express scientific ideas. They must be undertaken and appreciated as what their practitioners believed them to be. The historian is interested in the truthfulness of this own understanding of the various sciences, not in the truth or falsehood of the science itself” (45). More or less in line with this ideal vision, this essay presents medieval Indian science as an aspect of Indian culture and not something outside it. Rather than just sampling key developments in various medieval Indian sciences, this essay points out how science was fostered by other facets of Indian culture.

Although medieval Indians may have lacked the precision, tools, and knowledge of the modern world, they did not lack imagination. In fact, some of their ultimate technological quests seem remarkably similar to our own. For instance, our modern quest for renewable sources of energy had a medieval counterpart—the idea of perpetual motion, which was said to have been originated in medieval India, and could be seen as a product of medieval Indian “scientific” imagination. It was certainly an appealing idea that spread to medieval Europe through Arab intermediaries. It set an ideal for the best European mechanical minds of the period. But the quest for perpetual motion proved just as illusive for medieval European thinkers as the attempt to turn base metals into gold for medieval alchemists. But other Indian discoveries did make profound and lasting contributions to the development of modern science.

The Indian Middle Ages begin with the Gupta Empire (c. 320–550). The Gupta era is considered the golden age of India in the development of Sanskrit literature and of ancient science, including early advances in Indian mathematics. Despite its lack of political unity, the post-Gupta Period was a time of tremendous advances in a number of fields; these revolutionary developments in the world of science and philosophy emerged out of a number of institutions of higher learning located in various parts of medieval India. Since the Gupta era, a primary center of higher learning existed in the city of Nalanda. During its peak, Nalanda University, which was reported to house three separate libraries with rare manuscripts, had several thousand students, some from such distant parts of Asia as Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Korea, and China. It is said that the demanding entrance exams eliminated two-thirds of the applicants. The university was supported by various private endowments, some from overseas Buddhist sources, and by grants from the state, including the revenue of two-hundred villages. The tuition was free for those who passed the entrance exam.

The standard subjects taught in Nalanda were geared toward Buddhist scholarship and included topics in philosophy, logic, and Sanskrit grammar. The university had a large faculty, numbering over 1,000 teachers, who gave lectures or conducted group discussions. Being a Buddhist institution, the majority of teachers were Buddhist monks, but there were also Hindu scholars, an indication of a broad, eclectic, and tolerant religious atmosphere. Nagarjuna (150–250 C.E.), one of the greatest Buddhist philosophers of ancient India, taught at Nalanda. Nagarjuna was the founder of the Madhyamika (“middle way”) school, which differed from the mainstream Buddhist view of the cosmos. Most Buddhist schools believed that the entire universe was in a state of flux with momentary but interdependent events following one another in such a way as to evoke the illusion of stability and duration. Nagarjuna showed, by very subtle arguments, that in the final analysis this cosmic flux
Indian Mathematics

The Gupta era, which gave us such abstract philosophical thinking, also was a world of practical knowledge, such as mathematics. During the Gupta Period, India was at a higher level than was the study of mathematics in any other part of the world. At centers of high education, like Nalanda, Indian mathematics developed the early forms of algebra. This development facilitated more complex calculations than was possible for the ancient Greeks or Romans, who had used separate symbols for tens and hundreds and thousands (X, C, M), and had no symbol for zero. The Indians developed the modern decimal system of nine digits and zero. The Indian decimal system goes all the way back to the Indus Valley civilization (3000–1500 B.C.E.), some 4,000 years ago; its use could be deduced from the ratio of Indus weights that had been unearthed and identified by archaeologists. Were we to analyze the weights found in the Indus site at Harraspur their relation corresponds to our equivalent of 0.05, 0.1, 0.2, 0.5, 1, 2, 10, 20, 50, 100, 200, and 500 ratio scales.

The Vedic Period (1500–500 B.C.E.), which followed the demise of the Indus Valley civilization, also made its contribution to Indian mathematics. Of major importance to historians of mathematics are the ancient instructional texts called the Sulva-Sutras (800–500 B.C.E.), which deal with the construction of sacrificial altars in Vedic rituals. These also laid the foundation for the Indian geometry of later times by specifying correct geometric ratios for various parts of the altars and buildings in general. The texts state that to obtain a diagonal of a square (dvi-karani) we should “increase the measures by its third part, and again by the fourth part (of the third part) less the thirty-fourth part of itself (of the fourth part).” This will give you the approximation of the square root of 2 as in the formula 1 + 1/3 + 1/3.4 - 1/3.4.34 or as 1.4142156, only differing from our modern calculations at the sixth decimal place (Basham, 147; Garratt, 34).

Equally interesting is the discussion on squaring a circle in the Sulva-Sutra, which states that, to square a circle, divide its diameter into eight parts, then divide one of these parts into twenty-nine parts and leave out twenty-eight of them, as well as the sixth part of the previous division less the eighth part of this last one. Formulas to calculate the relation between the radius of a circle and the two sides of an equivalent square were also given as \( a = r - r/8 + r/8.29 - r/8.29.6 \).
The construction of altars for fire rituals, an essential part of early Vedic Hinduism, required a number of bricks of different sizes and shapes to construct complicated designs (such as the large falcon-shaped fire altar upon which the rituals were undertaken). The Vedic Aryans in their effort to fulfill their ritual demands (by constructing the perfect sacrificial platforms with all their geometric complexities to ensure success in their sacrifices) were also laying the early foundations of modern mathematics.

What is widely recognized as the greatest contribution of India to the world of mathematics is the decimal system of numbers, which is the ancestor of our own number system. Historically, Indians were not the only people to invent and use the decimal system. But the Indian system was far more elegant and the first one to be widely used as well as having the abstraction needed for an accurate notational system (Basham, 495). According to mathematician George Joseph, the Indian system far surpassed those of the Babylonians, Mayans, and Chinese, because it is inextricably tied up with the Indian concept of zero. This idea of zero finds its origins in Indian philosophy. The Sanskrit word for zero is sunya, meaning “void” or “empty.” It is related to the Indian spiritual practice of emptying the mind of all impressions as found in the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness called “sunyata” (Teresi, 308). Because system reached medieval Europe through the Arab middlemen, the modern decimal number system is called “Arabic numbers” in the West. But the Arabs themselves call “Hindisat,” or Indian art (Basham, 496).

From the fifth century onward, a major mathematical revolution took place in India. One of the earliest documentary evidences to surface is the Bahkshali manuscript, currently stored at the University of Oxford. A farmer accidentally discovered this manuscript in 1881 while he was digging for treasure in a mound in the Peshawar district in Northwest India. He found some seventy leafs of birch bark manuscript written in the old Sarada characters in a dialect that combines Sanskrit and Prakrit. Although the manuscript had been seriously damaged by early careless handling, it retained sufficient data to suggest the earliest trends in Indian mathematical development. Although the manuscript itself is dated as late as the twelfth century, the mathematics it contains date to the third century. The manuscript covers such topics as fractions, square roots, simultaneous equations, and arithmetic and geometric progression; it is one of the few surviving manuscripts on medieval Indian science.

The earliest mention of zero, in the text Chandahsutra of Pingala, dates to the third century B.C.E. The earliest documented inscription of the decimal number system in India, which was found in Gwalior, dates to around 876. Most early developments may have been either transmitted orally or composed on perishable materials, such as palm leaves, and would have long ago turned to dust. The greatest medieval mathematical discovery, the number zero, was first noted down as a dot (bindu) and is also found in stone inscriptions in Southeast Asia (Cambodia [604 C.E.], Champa [609 C.E.], and Java [732 C.E.]); it was later depicted as a closed ring or “chidra” hole in an inscription on Banka Island in southern Sumatra and dated to be around 686. In all these places, there are clear indications of earlier Indian influences (Basham, 157). These developments spread further westward with the aid of the Arabs, and the Indian number system reached Baghdad, the capital of the Arab Abbasid dynasty,
around 773 with the diplomatic mission from Sind in northwestern India (a present-day southern province of Pakistan), which had been under Arab rule since the early eighth century (Teresi, 381).

The mathematical developments in the Gupta Period won praise from the medieval Syrian writer, Severus Sebokht, who, writing around 662, noted the following:

the subtle discoveries of the Hindus in astronomy, discoveries that are more ingenious than that of the Greeks and Babylonians, and of their invaluable methods of calculation which surpass description. I wish only to say computation is done by means of nine symbols. If those things were known by those who believe that they alone had mastered all the sciences because they speak Greek, and they had arrived at the limits of science then they would be convinced, though even at this late hour, that there are other folks, men of different tongue who also know something of value. (Garratt, 360)

This high acclaim from Sebokht, who was also the Christian bishop of Mesopotamia, was to underline the significance of this medieval Indian mathematical development, which, according to historian A. L. Basham, was the greatest contribution of medieval India to world civilization. In the West, the awkward Roman numbers posed serious obstacles for complex development in certain branches of mathematics, whereas in ancient India everything seemed to be in place for such a development. First, there was the use of versions of the decimal system since the time of the Indus culture. Second, there was the pioneering work of the ancient grammarian Panini (sixth century B.C.E.) in the field of Sanskrit grammar and linguistics. The text Asthadhoyani illustrates the algebraic origins of Indian mathematics arising from preexisting developments in the linguistic analysis of the Sanskrit language. In fact, Panini’s grammatical work provided an example of a scientific notational model that could have influenced later mathematicians to use abstract notations in characterizing algebraic equations and algebraic theorems and their results. Whereas the mathematics of ancient Greece grew out of philosophy, in ancient India, it was partly an outcome of studies in linguistics. The developments in the Indian decimal system also gave rise to rapid progress in arithmetic and algebra. The decimal system and fractions were discovered and multiplication as well as square root (√), cube and cube root, and the tables of sine were formulated as well as the use of the letters of the alphabet to denote the unknown.

Simple multiplications and divisions that would have taken seconds for us to calculate using the Indian system would have posed a major challenge for any one using the cumbersome and painstaking methods employed by the Roman number system. In the Roman system, all multiplication involves a succession of doubling and adding the results (Teresi, 23–24). For example, using our modern number system, the answer to nine times by nine would be a simple operation. But using the Roman number system something as simple as finding the answer for nine multiplied by nine would have resulted in the following cumbersome steps:

9 times 1 = 9 (1x)
Double it = 18 (2x)
Double it = 36 (4x)
Double it = 72 (8x)
Now add up the combination of multiples in the right-hand column that add up to the correct multiplier. That is, by adding 8X with 1X we get 9 where 8X = 72 and 1X = 9 and adding these together we get the answer 81. Likewise, division involves the equally cumbersome process of halving the divisor until you arrive at the divider or one close approximation to it (Teresi, 24).

Another peculiarity of medieval Indian mathematics was a deep interest in immeasurably large units based on the decimal system and the smallest units or the minutest spans. The ancient Hindu epics Ramayana and Mahabharata, and other sacred texts, express these large powers as eons of time, a case where mystical insights formed in Hindu sacred texts seem to parallel Indian scientific thinking.

The two names that are usually associated with medieval Indian mathematics are Brahmagupta and Aryabhata I. Brahmagupta was the leading astronomer in the city of Ujjayini, which was the primary mathematical center of India. Brahmagupta wrote two major texts. The earlier text, composed around 628, was titled the Brahmasphuta-Siddhata (“the opening of the universe”). It had twenty-five chapters, of which two cover various aspects of mathematics; the rest deal with issues concerning astronomy, including lunar and solar eclipses, planetary conjunction, and methods to determine the position of a planet. The other text, composed 39 years later when Brahmagupta was nearly 67 years old, was titled Khandakhakyaka. Brahmagupta investigated the concept of zero in great detail and defined zero by the equation \( x - x = 0 \). And, as the first person to define zero mathematically, he also provided insights into the world of abstract numbers. In Brahmagupta’s Brahmagupta-Siddhata, the number zero is treated as a separate entity having neither positive nor negative qualities. This treatment implies that sunya, or zero, is on the boundary line between two kinds of numbers. Brahmagupta had stated that a number, whether it is positive or negative, remains unchanged when zero is added, as in the case of \( -x + x = 0 \), \( x + 0 = x \), and \( 0 + 0 = 0 \). According to Brahmagupta, subtraction rules that involved zero worked as follows:

\[
\begin{align*}
0 - (-x) &= x \text{ (a negative number subtracted from zero is positive)} \\
0 - (x) &= -x \text{ (a positive number subtracted from zero is negative)} \\
-x - (0) &= -x \text{ (zero subtracted from a positive number is positive)} \\
0 - 0 &= 0 \text{ (zero subtracted from zero is zero)}
\end{align*}
\]

In multiplication, a number multiplied by zero is zero and, when zero is divided by zero or some other number, it is also zero. The square root of zero is zero and \( 0^2 \) is zero (Teresi, 83). Hence, the medieval Indians realized zero was more than just a placeholder or a sign, and the study of zero was conducted with great thoroughness.

Brahmagupta’s work was preceded by the work of Aryabhata I (476–550). Born in what is today the South Indian state of Kerala, he presented his insights into the worlds of mathematics and astronomy in the treatise Aryabhatiya (499 c.e.). Aryabhata I is often seen as the greatest Indian mathematician of the middle ages. In his works, Aryabhata I dealt with such topics as square and cube roots, areas, volumes, properties of circles, and the basic foundations of algebra. Aryabhata I gave \( \pi \) the modern approximation of 3.1416, and had expressed it in the form of a fraction as 62832/20000. This value was more accurate and precise than any earlier value for \( \pi \), including those by ancient
Greek mathematicians, who obviously lacked the advantage of a decimal system of numbers. Aryabhata I’s calculation was further refined to nine decimal points by later Indian mathematicians.

Following the conventions of the time, the *Aryabhatiya* was written in verse couplets that cover aspects of astronomy, arithmetic, algebra and spherical trigonometry (which deals with triangles on the surface of a sphere—an essential for astronomical calculations), and plane trigonometry (which deals with triangles in a single plane). The thirty-three surviving verses of Aryabhata’s work may well be only a small portion of his total work. In spite of this, Aryabhata I is more influential than any other medieval mathematician, and Indian astronomers were commenting on his work as late as 1430, nearly 1,000 years after his death. The condensed shorthand form he used for his formulas became the standard manner to transmit such formulas.

In the year 830, some two centuries after Brahmagupta’s ground-breaking discoveries, the mathematician Mahavira composed a mathematical treatise *Ganita-Sara-Samgraha*, which updated Brahmagupta’s pioneering work concerning the definition of zero. Mahavira noted that a number multiplied by zero is zero or \( X \times 0 = 0 \). The number remained the same if zero is subtracted from it or \( X - 0 = 0 \). But Brahmagupta also seems to have made a number of errors when he tried to divide by zero. He noted, as follows, that a positive or negative number divided by zero is a fraction with zero as the denominator:

\[
\frac{X}{0} = \frac{X}{0} \text{ (what doesn’t say much)}
\]

\[
\text{Or } \frac{0}{0} = 0 \text{ (which is erroneous by the standards of modern mathematics)}
\]

Mahavira, in his attempts to improve upon Brahmagupta’s statement on dividing by zero also seems to have made an error when he states that a number remains unchanged when divided by zero as \( X/0 = 0 \) (which is also erroneous).

According to traditional Arabic accounts, an Indian scholar by the name of Kankah or Mankah had brought with him a major mathematical treatise in the year 773 to Bait al-Hikma or the “House of Wisdom,” a library and a translation institute set up by the second Abbasid Caliph al-Mansur in Baghdad. The Arabs called this text *Sindhind*, which may be a corruption of the Sanskrit *Shadhan* and more likely *Surya-siddhana*, an early textbook on Indian astronomy written around 400 C.E. This and other translated Indian texts were further developed by Abbasid-era Arabic scholars such as al-Khwarizami, who died in 850; his work titled in English, *Arithmetic*, is the first Arab text to deal with these new Indian numerals. These Indian texts revolutionized Arab astronomy and mathematics, and the resulting Arab works were later translated into medieval Latin in Islamic Spain and from there spread to the rest of Europe (Garratt, 366–367, Teresi, 381).

The *Sindhind* text was to remain an important scientific work in medieval Arabic astronomy for many centuries as indicated by the fact that Arab astronomers measured their longitudinal from the meridian of Arin, which is a distortion of the Indian town Ujjayini, the math and astronomy capital of medieval India from whose meridian medieval Indians calculated their longitude. *Surya Siddhana* also contained other Indian ideas largely overlooked by medieval Arab translators, such as the view that “strings of air” either pushed or pulled the planets in their irregular motion. Some modern scholars saw this as an early pondering about the force of gravitation. The Sanskrit word for gravitation is
gurutvakarshan (where akarshan means attracted), an indication the nature of this force was presumed to be similar to that of attraction (Teresi, 131).

Another noteworthy medieval Indian mathematician was Bhaskara Archaria or Bhaskara II (not to be confused with the seventh-century mathematician Bhaskara I). Bhaskara II (1114–1185), who was born in Karnataka in South India, became the head of the astronomical observatory at Ujjayini, where Brahmagupta and Varahamihira had earlier worked. Bhaskara’s *Siddhanta-Siromani* (“Head Jewel of Accuracy”) is perhaps last great work in Indian astronomy, detailing his astronomical observations and mathematics. As in modern algebra, Bhaskara II used letters to represent the unknown quantities and filled many gaps left in the earlier works by Brahmagupta. The Indian decimal number system reached its full maturity in the works of Bhaskara II. In spite of these developments, it should also be noted that between the time of Aryabhata in the fifth century and that of Bhaskara II in the twelfth century, there seems to be little in the way of theoretical development in Indian mathematics and methods of calculation remained much the same. Aryabhata’s theory that the earth rotates on its own axis remained undeveloped by later mathematicians (Garrett, 350).

**Medieval Indian Astronomy**

By the early Common Era, Indian astronomers realized that the shape of the earth, as prescribed by earlier religious views, was false. But such views still colored the popular mythic and religious view. Indians, like the ancient Greeks, came to see the earth as spherical. Various estimates were made about the size of the globe, the most popular one being the one made by Brahmagupta (598–665), who gave the circumference of the earth as 500 yognas. One yogna is about 4.3 miles. Therefore, this estimate of the earth’s circumference is 21,500 miles. The actual modern measurement of the earth’s circumference is 22,901.6 miles, so Brahmagupta’s calculation was not that far off. A more accurate measurement would be 533 yognas, which would have made it 22,919 miles.

Although Brahmagupta excelled as a mathematician, Aryabhata I had a greater influence on Indian astronomy. In his treatise, Aryabhata dealt with plane and spherical trigonometry, arithmetic, and astronomy. The major objective of his text was to simplify the mathematics involved in Indian astronomy to make the prediction and forecast of eclipses and the movements of planets needed in the Hindu ritual calendar.

On the basis of his observations, he offered a dramatic new interpretation of our solar system. He suggested that the earth was a giant sphere that revolved on its axis. This explained the apparent rotation of the heavens. These views seemed so blasphemous and so radically different from the then accepted wisdom that future commentators and editors changed the text of Aryabhata I to save him from making what they believed to be gross errors (Teresi, 133). Aryabhata’s view was rediscovered only more than 1,000 years later in the sixteenth century by the European astronomer-monk Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543), who also challenged the accepted Biblically based cosmology that saw the earth as the center of the universe.

Aryabhata I also explained that the glow of the moon and the planets was the result of reflected sunlight. He was also the first to predict that the orbit of the
planets was an ellipsis, 1,000 odd years before Johannes Kepler (1571–1630) came to the same conclusion (Teresi, 134). Aryabhata I also wrote that the cause of lunar eclipses was the shadow of the earth. This was contrary to the popular Hindu mythic version that eclipses were caused by a demon called Radhu trying to swallow the sun, a view that was rejected by medieval texts and scholars. Aryabhata’s calculation for the length of a solar year was 365 days, 6 hours, 12 minutes, and 30 seconds, or 365.358680. But this is a slight overestimation by modern calculations; the true value is slightly lower than 365 days and 8 hours.

Aryabhata I was unique among medieval Indian astronomers because he did not compromise the scientific study of astronomy to the demands of religion and tradition. The key works of Aryabhata I were first translated into Latin only in the late thirteenth century. Through this translation, Western mathematicians found a means to calculate the volume of spheres and to calculate squares and square roots. But by the time Western astronomers had begun seriously to look at Aryabhata’s explanations of such things as eclipses, his ideas had already been confirmed by Copernicus and Galileo. Therefore, Aryabhata’s work failed to make a major impact on the European scientific community of that period, even though his discoveries were made in the fifth century, nearly 1,000 years earlier.

Fifty years after the completion of Aryabhata’s major treatise Aryabhatiya, another major philosopher-astronomer named Varahamihara wrote the text Panca-Siddhantitaka, or five treatises, which was a compendium of all the astronomical knowledge from various sources, including Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and Indian astronomy. Varahamihara, like Aryabhata I, conceptualized earth as a sphere with an attractive force keeping bodies stuck on earth, another early reflection on the idea of a gravitational force (Teresi, 134). But, unlike the more objective Aryabhata I, later astronomers, including Varahamihara, seem to have compromised their objective investigations to cater to the prevailing Hindu orthodox notions about astrology and horoscope. This compromise of the quest for scientific knowledge to the demands of popular tradition undermined later Indian astronomy (Garratt, 350).

A major impediment to Indian astronomy was the lack of precise measuring instruments other than the eyes of the astronomer (Basham, 491). Medieval astronomers seem to have perfected such instruments, which allowed for more accurate measurements and calculations. The Indian decimal system also aided the accuracy of measurement. Astronomical instruments from the Islamic world or even from ancient Ptolemaic Egypt may have been introduced into India. These may well have been the predecessors of the five gigantic masonry observatories in Delhi, Jaipur, Ujjayini, Varanasi (Benares), and Mathura, which were constructed by the astronomer prince of Rajasthan, Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh II of Ambar (1686–1743) in the 1730s. These specially constructed astrological observatories used a measuring scale designed to maximize its accuracy, while their enormous scale was meant to minimize errors. But they were by the eighteenth century well behind the times in relation to Western European astronomical observatories.

**Medieval Indian Physics**

Among the early civilizations, the ideas developed in India come closest to our ideas of modern atomic theory and quantum physics. India developed its
theory of atoms very early. An atomic theory was taught by Paukudha-Katayama, a contemporary of the Buddha (fifth century B.C.E.), who thus pre-dated Democritus, the father of Greek atomic theory.

In spite of the fact that medieval Indians lacked the experimental sophistication of the ancient Chinese or medieval Arabs or Europeans since the Renaissance, they had reached new heights in scientific inquiry relying solely on logic and mathematics to devise novel theories of the basic nature of the visible universe. The ancient Indians explained the visible universe in terms of minute indivisible units called “anu” (i.e., atoms). In the Indian definition, an “anu” or atom is not only the smallest unit but also one that could not be created or destroyed (Teresi, 213). Although this is similar to the Greek notion, the India’s logical arguments to come this conclusion seemed to differ. According to Democritus, a wedge of cheese cannot be cut into smaller and smaller pieces forever; eventually an undividable piece—the atom—will be reached. Indian scientific philosophers came to a similar understanding using a different logical route. Compare a mountain and a molehill they said, which has more particles? The answer: If the particle that makes them up is infinite, then the mountain has the same number as the molehill. This conclusion does not make any logical sense, which also proves the existence of a limit to the size a particle could attain and this is the atom. Most Indian philosophical schools also believed that the universe could be classified under five basic elements: earth, wind, fire, water, and space or akasa (which is also translated as ether). These schools also believed that four of these five elements could be composed of atoms. The Jains believed that all atoms, or “anu,” were identical and the differences in the character of the elements is the way the atoms are combined. Other schools believed that each separate element is made up of a particular type of atom.

Many Indian philosophical schools believed atoms to be eternal and defined them as the tiniest objects occupying the tiniest space. Some schools of Buddhism believed that atoms not only occupy the minutest space but also the minutest time. In essence, they disappear the instant they are created only to be succeeded by another atom caused by the first, much like Max Planck’s (1858–1947) early theories of quantum physics.

All these Indian philosophical schools shared a few common assumptions: that atoms are invisible and had no independent character; that they assumed a particular character; and that they assumed a particular character only when they combined with other atoms to form material objects in combinations of two or three. The school of Ajivakas, along with the Buddhists, believed that under normal conditions atoms did not exist in pure form, but only as mixtures or combinations of the four basic elements in different proportions. This meant that the characteristic of an atom is based on the predominance of the particular elements present and the property of matter is dependent on the type of atoms that made it up. Matter could also be composed of two or more kinds of atoms and thereby exhibit the characteristic of more than one element. Wax, for example, might melt and also burn because it contained proportions of the elements of water and fire. Mercury, which contained equal proportions of earth and water, was solid and liquid at the same time.

Indian atomic theories were accepted throughout the Middle Ages and were based on intuition or logic and never on any experiments. But, like Indian theories of cosmology, they were not universally shared by every Indian philosophical school. However, these theories developed in the ancient and medieval
periods, and they offered imaginative explanations for understanding the basic properties that make up our natural world without resorting to the usual supernatural explanations. It is pure coincidence that there are instances in which they seem to agree with the insights derived from modern quantum physics.

**Indian Cosmology**

Just like ancient Indian theories concerning the atom, ancient Indian theories concerning the cosmos also endured and were accepted throughout the Middle Ages and were influenced by the Indian fascination with enormously large numbers. Indian theories saw the universe as an extremely vast space going through infinite cycles of evolution and dissolution. These ideas seem to be based purely on speculations and not on experimentation and were often colored by popular mythic views. Accordingly, the entire cosmos was believed to have passed through cycles for all eternity. The basic cycle was the Kalpa of 4.32 billion years (4,320 million years), which is one Brahma day. Within each of these Kalpa are secondary cycles (Manu-Antaras or Manuvantaras) each lasting 306,720,000 years with long intervals between them. After each interval, the earth was freshly re-created and a new Manu (father of humanity) was also created. According to this view, we are in the seventh Manuvantara of the present Kalpa. Each of these secondary cycles or Manuvantaras contains 71 Mahayuga or Aeons (1,000 Maha Yuga is one Kalpa).

Each of these yugas represents a progressive decline in morality, strength, longevity, and happiness. We, according to Hindu cosmology, the present era is Kaliyuga (“the chaotic dark age of Kali”), which, according to traditional accounts, began precisely at 3102 B.C.E., the year of traditional dating for the epic Mahabharata war. The end of the Kaliyuga is to be marked by confusion of classes, the overthrow of the established order, the cessation of ancient rituals, and domination by cruel alien rulers.

The largest cycle in the Indian cosmology is a Brahma century, which is 72,000 Kalpas or 311,040 billion years or 311 trillion years, when the entire cosmos collapses to a formless nothingness until it evolves again. The cosmology of the various Hindu and Buddhist philosophical schools could be summarized as follows:

1. The universe is unfathomably old.
2. Its evolution and decline are cyclical and repeated forever ad infinitum.
3. It is enormously large.
4. There are parallel universes and other universes beyond our own.

Although the cosmic schemes of the Buddhists differ from the Hindus in many details, the basic fundamentals are the same. A critical difference came from Jainism, at times a bitter rival to medieval devotional Hinduism, especially in Tamil-speaking South India (see Tamil Country). Jains rejected the idea of a cyclical created universe found in Hindu cosmology. The Jain monk Jinasena (ninth century C.E.) made the clearest rebuttal of the idea of a cyclical universe when he wrote the following:

Some foolish men declare that Creator made the world. If god created the world, where was he before creation? If you say he was transcendent then, where is he
now? No single being had the skill to make the world—for how can an immate-
rial god create that which is material? How could god have made the world
without any raw material? If you say he made this first, and then the world, you
are face with an endless regression. If you declare that the raw material arose
naturally you fall into another fallacy, for the whole universe might thus have
been its own creator, and have risen equally naturally. (Teresi, 2003, 177-178)

And after making a logical argument refuting every notion that the world was
created by god, Jinasena ended his discourse by stating that the world is un-
created and indestructible as time itself, without beginning or end and en-
dures by the property of it own nature.

Medieval Indian Metallurgy

Metal casting and smelting technology reached a high point during Gupta
and post-Gupta India, reaching a height never to be achieved until the modern
period. Two major artifacts to be produced during the period are the iron pillar
of Delhi and the copper colossus Buddha of Sultanganj. The iron pillar of Delhi
is made of a rust resistant iron and measures 23 feet 8 inches. It has a bell-shaped
capital. Its diameter varies from 16.4 to 12.5 inches and weighs nearly 6 tons.

An inscription commemorates the pillar as the lofty standard of the divine
Vishnu. The pillar commemorates the military conquests of a ruler named
Chandra, who is hailed as the “supreme world conqueror.” But, unfortunately,
the inscription offers no date, and most scholars assume the Chandra in this
inscription to be Chandra Gupta II (c. 346–415 C.E.), one of the great Gupta
kings who, like his predecessor, expanded Gupta rule. The pillar is remarkable
for its technological achievement. It is cast from a single piece of iron. In an
article written in 1881, “The Economic Geology of India,” the writer declared
that production of such a pillar would have been an impossibility before the
nineteenth-century introduction of British industrial technology, and even
then such a singularly large object could have been cast only in the largest
foundries in the world. The pillar was obviously prepared with care and most
authorities agree it was made by some form of welding process.

The Sultanganj copper icon of a colossal Buddha was accidentally unearthed
in 1862 during railway construction at the town of Sultanganj in Bihar, which
is a major center of Buddhism. The railways used stones from abandoned
buildings as ballast (a common practice well into the twentieth century, which,
unfortunately, led to the destruction of important archeological sites). This
Buddha icon was dated to the sixth to eighth centuries C.E. and was the largest
metal figure of its kind. It was found buried upside down, presumably to pro-
tect it from looters or vandals, by the monks when the monastery came under
serious threat. The Sultanganj Buddha weighs 1,100 pounds and is about 7.5
feet high, cast by what is called a lost wax process; it is a good example of the
classical Gupta style of sculpture. The monastic robe of this sculpture seems to
cling tightly to the body as if the Buddha had been drenched by a downpour.
The Buddha sculpture’s raised right hand is a mark of offering of spiritual
protection to the devotee, while his left hand makes a gesture granting the
worshipper a special favor. Currently, the Sultanganj Buddha is housed in Bir-
mingham Museum, where it occupies a special place as the largest metal
standing Buddha sculpture from the Gupta Period.
Indian Medicine

The ancient and medieval science of Indian medicine is called Ayurveda. The term *ayur* could be translated as “life.” It also implies that the role of a physician is not one of purely curing illness but also one of promoting a holistic and healthy lifestyle. The term *veda* could be translated as “knowledge.” The foundation of this medieval system is the premise that the health of an individual lies in the balance of three primary fluids, or “dosas,” in the body. These fluids are wind (*vata*), gall (*pitta*), and mucus (*kupha*). Furthermore, there are five separate breaths, or winds, which control bodily functions. When all these vital forces and the bodily fluids are within their correct proportion, the body is in a state of good health. Their imbalance, due to improper diet, leads to ill health and disease. Similar ideas also prevailed in European classical and medieval systems of medicine, but it is yet unclear whether the foundations of Indian medicine were from external influences or purely local independent developments.

The key point here is the underlying textual view that the functioning of the human body was a result of natural laws and that diseases were not due to supernatural forces, either evil demons or angry malevolent gods. Because humans are a microcosm of the universe, they too are subject to natural laws of cause and effect and disease is a by-product of such transactions. This is not to say, at the popular level down to the present day, major epidemic diseases, such as smallpox, were not seen as a visitation of a special pox goddess, but such folk ideas are rejected by the authors of authoritative ayurvedic medical texts such as Caraka, a first-century C.E. physician and author of the earliest medical text called *Caraka Samhita*. Caraka is believed to have been the court physician of King Kaniska of the Kusana dynasty of the first and second centuries C.E. The other major physicians are Susruta, Vagbhata, and Madhava. The ayurvedic system reached its classical form in the early centuries of the first millennium C.E. during the height of the Gupta Empire (Basham, 1975, 21).

The ayurvedic understanding that the environment had a major impact on the individual also led to the study of local pharmacopoeia to restore the bodily balance. The central purpose of this medical system is not only to cure illness but to preserve good health, which meant that proper diet played a major role in the ayurvedic system and how one should adapt to the climatic changes in the Indian environment. Emphasis on diet and physical exercise along with proper positive mental attitude are essential for the maintenance of good health. Although Ayurveda does not contradict the basic Hindu-Buddhist premise that the life and health of an individual is partly the result of good and evil deeds of this or past lives (karma), it also emphasizes that the health of an individual can be maintained by human actions and is not necessarily predetermined. The physician in the ayurvedic system is called the *vaidya*, which term also derives from the Sanskrit word for “knowledge” (the English word *doctor* is also semantically analogous as well as the Arabic word for physician, *hakim*, which is related to the term “hikma” or “knowledge”). In the ancient and medieval period, the *vaidya* were members of a practicing craft, and not a separate caste but generally tended to be members of the three clean castes: Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishyas (see Caste System). The training of a future physician was by apprenticeship, living at the home of a noted ayurvedic practitioner as a junior member of the household. This form of training could
last up to 7 years. After this training, the *vaidya* was expected to increase his knowledge by his own personal observation, while treating his patients.

The omission of purification rituals in Indian medical texts also suggests that physicians took these Hindu religious taboos lightly. In the course of his practice, a physician may have to enter into the households of low castes and may touch excreta or sip a drop of urine for diagnostic purposes, practices that under normal circumstances would have brought forth strong ritual pollution. Taboos in dead animals were less than in humans, and a *vaidya*, as a student, may practice dentistry by extracting the teeth of dead animals, or learn to use a scalpel by making incisions on a dead animal (Basham, 1975, 27).

The medical profession promised rich material rewards and being such it was also filled with dangerous quacks and charlatans intent only on making money. During the Gupta Period, steps were also taken to prevent widespread quackery by a system of licensing, where a physician was sanctioned by the ruler. The state was considered responsible for maintaining competent physicians. Hindu legal texts prescribed that a competent doctor shall not be held responsible for the death of his patient, but an incompetent and negligent quack should be punished, perhaps even by death.

The earliest Indian medical text to be preserved was found in the wastes of Chinese Turkistan in 1890 and could be dated to be about fourth century C.E. This text was probably based on an earlier work, and its discovery suggests the existence of a well-developed Indian school of medicine during the late Gupta Period. The earliest preserved works belonged to Charaka and Susruta, who was another ancient legendary author whose name is attributed to many books. By late Gupta Period, the works of both these authors had become standards (Garrett, 352). These works were translated into Arabic around 800. About 16 other Indian works were known to the Arabs through translations. Because it was these Arabic texts that served as the chief guiding principles of European physicians as late as the seventeenth century, it could be said that the Indian medical texts also long indirectly influenced the practice of medicine in Europe (Garrett, 352).

Earliest ayurvedic medical texts make no mention of surgery. Ancient Indian ideas of physiology were thoroughly inaccurate by modern standards. This may be due to strong Hindu taboos on the handling of corpses. There were no clear ideas about the function of the brain, or the workings of the lungs, and it was believed that the seat of human consciousness was the human heart and not the brain. However, there seems to be a better understanding of the abdominal organs, perhaps due to the importance placed on proper dietary practices.

The strong taboo on contact with the dead prevented any clear anatomical knowledge well into modern times. The complete ignorance of the nature and functions of various organs of the human body, even among the best-educated Indian physicians, was a serious defect in ancient and medieval systems of Indian medicine.

In spite of these obvious shortcomings, a medieval Indian surgeon could remove calculi from the bladder and restitch exposed bowels as a result of wounds. The most brilliant aspect of Indian medical achievement was in the field of plastic surgery, and it was unsurpassed anywhere else until the eighteenth century, when European physicians, after studying the Indian technique of plastic surgery, began to apply it to their patients (Basham, 27). Another major development in medieval Indian medicine was the use of inoculation to prevent smallpox,
notably in Bengal. It is not clear whether this was a result of local discovery or something that was borrowed from traditional Chinese medicine.

Indian hospitals, staffed by *vaidya*, were mentioned by the Chinese scholar-monk Faxian, who visited India during the Gupta era in the fifth century and saw hospitals in Pataliputra, the Gupta capital. Here physicians offered free treatment to the poor who were housed and fed until they recovered. These establishments were not funded by the state, but by wealthy private benefactors. There is no evidence of such free hospitals being found in smaller towns. The Chinese scholar-monk Xuanzang, who visited India during the reign of Emperor Harsha (590–647), does not mention free hospitals but does mention rest houses erected by Harsha along major highways. Here free meals and drinks were given to travelers, and physicians dispensed free medications to travelers and the poor.

Indian medicine was known in western Asia long before the Islamic Arab invasion in the eighth century. The Persian court physician of Emperor Knusrav Anusharvan of the pre-Islamic Sasassian dynasty of Iran had traveled to India in search of rare drugs and medical texts and tried to recruit famous Indian physicians as teachers for the medical schools of Gundi Shapur. After the Arab conquest of Northwest India, a number of major Indian medical manuals were translated into Arabic. There are also instances when Indian physicians, such as Manka, treated Arab rulers, such as the Abbasid Caliph Harun al-Rashid (763–809), and served as physician in major hospitals in Baghdad, the capital of the Arab Abbasid dynasty (750–1258) and one of the largest and most prosperous cities in the medieval world.

In spite of the fact that Islamic medicine was based on the early works of Galen and Avicenna and looked toward classical Europe, Muslim physicians (known as *hakim*, who practiced Unani or Greek medicine) did collaborate freely with ayurvedic physicians during the period of Islamic rule in medieval India. Because both were eager to learn from the other, their curiosity and mutual interest and respect overcame the bitter religious animosities and deep-rooted prejudices found among these two rival communities in their more mundane affairs. The medieval Indian ayurvedic medical system still has relevance in modern India as it is updated and offers an affordable and an alternate system of health care for certain types of common ailments in the general population.

**Further Reading**


**Raman N. Seylon**

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**7. GLOBAL TIES**

**India and Southeast Asia**

Religious and political ideologies found their way from India to Southeast Asia through the port cities and were transmitted by Indian traders and priests.
Religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and even Islam, entered Southeast Asia with merchants and missionaries from India (see “Religion” section). While, at the same time, Indian political and cultural ideologies gradually influenced the civilizations of Southeast Asia. This was largely a product of the Indian Ocean trade (see “Economy” section).

Earlier increases in demand for spices from ancient Rome, which India was unable to supply, led Indian merchants to venture into Southeast Asia. India acted as the middleman for the spice trade from Southeast Asia to the very area that later came to be known as Spice Island, the present-day islands of Indonesia.

Just as geography facilitated trade, it also allowed for the spread of culture and religious ideology. In the eastern parts of the Indian Ocean, Indian culture and religious institutions created changes in Southeast Asian societies. Indian political ideology aided the formation of large empires such as the Mayapahit Empire in Central Java, the Sumatran kingdom of Sri Vijaya, and the Khamer kingdom in Cambodia by legitimizing the paramount position of former tribal chieftains as “divine kings.” Indian architectural forms also gave inspiration for the construction of impressive monumental architecture, such as the temples and palaces of Angor Wat in Cambodia in the twelfth century and Barobadur in Java in the ninth century, which is the largest Buddhist Mandela-shaped structure and, according to one authority, “An expression in stone of the doctrines of Mahayana Buddhism.”

The Southeast Asian states remained independent and were not provinces of an India-based empire, and the transmission of culture also preceded peacefully, largely spread by traders and priests. In fact, Indian Ocean traders and Sufi teachers, followers of a form of mystical Islam from India, spread Islam in Southeast Asia. The beginning of mass conversion came only in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries by Sufi teachers just when the first traders arrived on the coast of Indonesia. As a result, Malaysia and Indonesia became overwhelmingly Muslim, except the island of Bali, which remained Hindu-Buddhist.

Land and People

The dominant ethnic groups in Southeast Asia originally migrated from mainland China before recorded history, either as refugees fleeing invasions or as migrants. But culturally all, except the Vietnamese, were influenced by aspects of Indian culture. Many terms, concepts, and ideologies of the Malays, Javanese, Thais, and Cambodians originated in India. Although the languages spoken by Thais, Cambodians, and Burmese belong to the Sino-Tibetan family of languages, their writing system was based on Indian-derived script. Only in Vietnam did Chinese models dominate. In spite of the continuing spread of Indian and Chinese influences, Southeast Asians also preserved their own clearly recognizable social and cultural forms. The Indian-derived epics, such as Ramayana and Mahabharata, are still popular in Java and Bali. They are retold through wayang puppet theatres and gamelan orchestras of gongs, drums, bamboo flutes, xylophones, and bells, which are pre-Indian aspects of Javanese culture.

Therefore, it is not correct to see the early Southeast Asian societies purely as an instance of cultural borrowing from various areas of India. Even in the case of architecture, which seems quintessentially Indian, there are no analogous Indian prototypes, so the architecture of the region is more than just
copies of Indian originals. In fact, there is nothing in the Indian archaeological records that is similar to these monuments of Southeast Asia. They should be seen as structures in their own right based on selectively borrowed concepts that are peculiar to Southeast Asia.

Current evidence indicates that contact between India and Southeast Asia is more than 2,000 years old. There is no evidence of a large-scale migration to Southeast Asia from India, but, by the fifth century C.E., Indian culture began to appear not only in areas of Cambodia, Vietnam, and Java, but also in remote, isolated, and sparsely settled areas. Indian prosperity, since the early centuries of C.E., sprang partly from the productivity of Indian society (see “Society” section). But it also depended on the vast wealth circulating in the commercial world of the Indian Ocean basin. The sea provided opportunities for commercial, religious, and political influences far beyond India, certainly since the time of Alexander the Great in the fourth century B.C.E.

By the first century B.C.E., sailors in the Indian Ocean began to exploit the seasonal shift in the direction of the monsoon wind pattern. According to tradition, this discovery was made by a single Greek captain named Happalus. This story is unlikely to be true. It is all the more likely that this seasonal shift of winds was known intuitively to inhabitants of the Indian Ocean basin. This practical knowledge was put to use in satisfying the economic demands of the Mediterranean basin centred in Rome and Alexandria for spices and medicine from India and Indonesia and silk and porcelain from China. The dangers and expense of the land route and better deep-water ship design were extra stimuli to the increase in oceanic shipping.

During the first millennia C.E., the Red Sea and Persian Gulf had become integrated with the commercial arteries of the Roman world. By the second century, merchants from the Mediterranean were also visiting the lands further east to the ports of India, Sri Lanka, and parts of mainland Southeast Asia. In this process, by the early Common Era, Southeast Asia was already part of the maritime luxury trade that linked the ports of the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean basin to the Mediterranean. India played a key role in this Eurasian trade. It is not clear if these trade routes to Southeast Asia existed prior to the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern demand for Southeast Asian and Chinese products, or whether it was this demand that brought Indian mariners to the shores of Southeast Asia.

The French historian George Coedes, whose influential book about the commercial and cultural link between India and Southeast Asia, *The Indianized States of South East Asia*, sees the reconstruction of Indian commercial interest eastward as due to changing political conditions in the Mediterranean basin and Central Asia. The Roman emperor Vespasian’s prohibition (r. 69–79 C.E.) on exchanging gold for Eastern spices and luxury items in conjunction with nomadic disturbances in Central Asia cut India off both from African and Siberian gold. This situation led to a scarcity of gold in India and prompted Indian merchants to turn east to the legendary regions known as *Swarnadvipa* (islands of gold) or *Suvannabhumi* (land of gold), India’s El Dorado. Here legend has it that gold could be picked up from the ground, and luxury trade items such as rare spices and aromatics could be obtained.

Two major developments seemed to have gone hand in hand to stimulate this development. The first is technological, the other ideological. On the technological front was the innovation in ship construction that originated in the
Persian Gulf and spread to India. This innovation included the use of a rig that allowed the vessels to sail closer to the wind. The ships were also larger and could carry two-hundred men, as witnessed by the Chinese scholar-monk Faxian. Other ships were many times larger and alleged to have the capacity to carry 300 tons of cargo and transport some six-hundred to seven-hundred men at a travel time of 2 months from South China to Southeast Asia. The ideological development was the spread of Buddhism, which rejected Hindu ideas of pollution relating to foreign travel and did much to encourage Indian seamen to travel overseas. This greater freedom to travel to foreign lands is also illustrated by archaeological evidence in India, where has been excavated an image of Buddha as Dipamkara, or “calmer of waters,” a favorite talisman of Indian seamen (Wheatley, 279).

During these early prehistoric periods, Southeast Asia had diverse cultures ranging from nomadic hunter-gathers to complex agrarian systems based on wet rice cultivation (see Agriculture). At the lower end were small bands of hunter-gathers made up of loosely linked families while at the higher end were tribes and political entities, nearly on the verge of true statehood, with a high degree of centralization and hereditary hierarchical status-based societies. The region had an economic system that extracted the surplus from the rice fields for the support of hereditary chieftains who were competing against each other for labor rights. According to Wheatley, by replacing the old tribal god with a new Indian-derived deity, and by exalting the power of this new deity with whom he was closely associated, the chief promoted his own kin group to the highest level in the control hierarchy of his chiefdom. Then, using this exalted position, the ruler was able to rearrange and fill the high positions of his chiefdom with the members of other prominent kin groups. By this process, the chieftain’s created a class-like stratum of court officials, while the chieftain took on the role of a theocratic ruler. The powerful integrative force that maintained this new reordering of society was the consensus among all groups within the population as to the validity of the chieftain’s claims of his newly sanctified status and the attraction of an elaborate ritualized court life as well as the economic opportunities that the privileged nobles gained by the opportunity to siphon off the economic surplus at each successive level of the administrative hierarchy, along with the rewards and gifts from the paramount ruler in the form of land, commodities, status, privileges, and titles. The role of theocracies in Southeast Asia, in the development of state-like institutions and political centralization, is an attractive and compelling model for state formation due to the absence of any alternative, especially one that used coercive force (Wheatley, 325–326).

In this context, the transmission of Indian-derived political and social systems becomes significant. It came without military conquest and was entirely voluntary and peaceful, something which none of the other civilizations was able to achieve. As aspects of Indian political and social systems spread to various regions of Southeast Asia, it stimulated the reorganization of Southeast Asian societies as well as providing a market for Indian goods and a greater integration of Southeast Asia with the commercial world of the Indian Ocean basin.

Merchants, largely from the southern coast of India, supplied these Southeast Asian markets in return for gold, spices, and Chinese trade items that were in great demand in India. The following discussion of the mechanism of the transmission to and transformation of Southeast Asia by Indian cultural
norms explains how, at the beginning of the Common Era, the only type of representative was the seasonal Indian merchant mariner but several centuries later there were divine kings in Southeast Asia claiming to reign over the four varnas, follow the Vedas, and observe the dharma (Wheatley, 273).

According to George Coedes, the Indianization of parts of Southeast Asia is essentially the continuation across the Bay of Bengal of the process of “Sanskritization,” which had its beginnings in northwest India and spread eastward and southwards over centuries (Wheatley, 328). Sanskritization, a term coined by Indian sociologist M.N. Srinivas, is a process of adaptation of great traditions of Hinduism and its values that continues to this day.

Theories on the Transmission of Indian Culture to Southeast Asia

Modern historians have developed several competing theories regarding the transmission of Indian culture to South East Asia: Kshatriya theory, the Vaishya theory, and the Brahmana theory.

The Kshatriya Theory

The Kshatriya theory states that Indian warriors colonized parts of Southeast Asia. This view has now been rejected by most historians, but it was popular among the Indian Nationalist School of historians during the early and middle twentieth century. It owed its origins to the nationalist passions unleashed by the Indian Freedom Movement in the early twentieth century. Indian historians of this period were painfully aware of the stigma of their own colonial subjugation and tried to intellectually compensate for it by creating a parallel golden era of India’s colonial heritage in ancient times. In 1926, “The Great India Society” was founded in Calcutta, the capital of British India until 1911. This school maintained the view that Indian kings and rulers had established colonies in Southeast Asia, and the Sanskrit names of ancient Southeast Asian rulers tend to support this evidence. The most influential proponent of this view was the Indian historian R.C. Majumdar, who published a series of scholarly articles titled Ancient Indian Colonies in the Far East. Such new interest in Southeast Asia, through the lens of Indian nationalism, did generate further research on the links between India and Southeast Asia. But this hypothesis also alienated scholars of Southeast Asia, who rejected the idea of being a colony of “Greater India.”

As further archaeological research progressed, little evidence was found to support any direct Indian political control over any area of Southeast Asia. It was also demonstrated that the Southeast Asian rulers had adopted Sanskrit names voluntarily. Therefore, the mere presence of Sanskrit names could not be taken as evidence of the presence of Indian kings in a broad sense, although there may be a few rare exceptions to this rule.

Vaishya Theory

The Vaishya theory attributes the spread of Indian culture to Indian merchants. This theory is more solidly based on available evidence, because trade was the driving force behind many Indian-Southeast Asian contacts. Inscriptions also showed that Indian merchants had established outposts in many parts of Southeast Asia. Some of these inscriptions were written in major South Indian languages such as Tamil (Kulke and Rothermund, 144).
However, a number of problems raised serious doubts about the validity of the thesis that merchants were the major transmitters of Indian culture to Southeast Asia. First, if Indian merchants had been the chief agents of transmission of Indian culture, then all Indian regional languages should have also left their impact in Southeast Asian languages, not just Sanskrit. So, in spite of the fact that the Vaishya theory is more plausible than the Kshatriya theory, it fails to account for the large number of Sanskrit loan-words found in Southeast Asian languages. Although Indian merchants certainly played an important role in being a major vehicle for all kinds of cultural influences, they did not play the critical role. One of the important arguments against the Vaishya theory of cultural transmission is that some of the earliest traces of Indianized states are not found in the coastal areas usually frequented by Indian traders, but were located in out-of-the-way places, such as mountains in the interior.

Brahmin Theory

The Brahmin hypothesis credits Brahmins as playing a major role in the transmission of Indian culture. This theory is similar to the process that took place in South India, where Brahmins, Jains, and Buddhist were a critical factor in the spread of ideals and styles of the great tradition of Hindu kinship (see Jainism). Brahmins, unlike the Vaishyas and Kshatriyas, were well familiar with key Sanskrit texts concerning the law, such as Dharmasastra, or the art of statecraft, such as in Arthasastra, and the art of architecture as found in Silpasastra. Taking a modern analogy, we could say that the Brahmins may well have functioned in the role of development experts from abroad in different departments of the administration of Southeast Asian rulers, who were on the verge of becoming full-fledged states.

The question could be asked as to the role played by the local Southeast Asian population in this cultural borrowing. Are they passive recipients, or did they play an active role in this cultural transfer? The passive recipients theory was actively advanced by the “Greater India School” as well as by Western scholars belonging to the ruling European colonial powers of Southeast Asia. They saw the social reality of the times and projected it onto an earlier epoch. Their concept of the Indianization of Southeast Asia, therefore, closely parallels the Westernization under colonial rule. But recent research seems to validate the view that Indian influences alone could no longer be seen as the prime cause for cultural development in Southeast Asia. It is more likely to be a consequence, or by-product, of political and social development that was already taking place.

Epigraphical evidence from early Indonesia indicates that there was already considerable development of regional trade and social differentiation before the arrival of Indian influences. However, the local travel organization was egalitarian and stood in the way of the development of complex political organization or the idea that political organizations required a basic administrative set up, and the legitimating of the hierarchical, political organization, in the eyes of the local population. It is on this point that the local chieftain needed the assistance of Indian Brahmins.

Although Indian trade may have initially helped to provide the necessary information, the actual motives and initiatives came from the local Southeast Asian chieftain. The chieftain found a number of advantages in using an outsider such as the South Indian Brahmin. The invited Brahmin, being an outsider,
was isolated from the local scene by culture and status and linked only to their patrons. In this manner, a “royal style” emerged just as it had occurred earlier in parts of South India. A good example of this kind of political development is provided in the earliest Sanskrit inscriptions in Indonesia from East Borneo, dating to around 400 C.E. Several inscriptions on a large megalith mention a local ruler named Kundunga. The name does not seem to have the slightest trace of Sanskrit influence (Kulke and Rothermund, 154).

The son of Kundunga assumes the Sanskrit name of Ashva Varman and founded a dynasty (Vamsa). A grandson of Kundunga, Mula Varman, who is the author of the inscription, celebrates a great Vedic sacrifice and gives valuable gifts to Brahmins. It is written on this megalith that the “Brahmin had come here,” and the most likely place is from somewhere in India. It is further revealed, after performing this grand consecration of sacrificial rituals brought by Brahmins from India, that Mula Varman subjugated the neighboring rulers and made them tribute-bearing vassals in the manner of an Indian maharajah (Kulke and Rothermund, 154).

We could interpret this inscription as a history of an Indianized kingship in early Indonesia, and the foundation of a Sanskritized dynasty. The dynasty was founded by a son of a clan chief without the aid of Indian Brahmins. It is only in the third generation that Indian Brahmins are invited to aid in the celebration of the consecration sacrificial ritual. The presence of the Brahmin guests no doubt provided the necessary moral and scriptural support and the administrative know-how to create an Indian-style tributary relationship with his weaker neighbors. This kind of sociopolitical transformation also happened in parts of Central and South India.

What is important here is that in the early stages of development of the Indian-style kingship the initiative and intentions came as a result of local dynamics. The Brahminical presence only helped to legitimize and crystallize the sociopolitical process that had already been set in motion. It is likely that by the middle of the first millennium C.E. several such Indianized states in Southeast Asia had emerged in this fashion, and most were likely to have had a short life span. There must have been of great deal of competition among the many petty rajahs to be recognized as maharajah, with all its trappings of Sanskrit rituals, and the accompanying pageantry (Kulke and Rothermund, 146).

Indian influences increased in this way; and, by the second half of the first millennium C.E., we find hectic temple building in Java and Cambodia where these large Indian-style kingdoms emerged. But, as always, there are exceptions to such broad and sweeping theories. Although it is generally accepted that the Southeast Asian rulers played an active role in the process of state formation, we cannot rule out entirely the occasional direct input by Indian adventurers who may have come to Southeast Asia to seek their fortune.

The most important example of this kind of activity is found in the dynastic origin story of the Indianized state of Funan, at the mouth of the Mekong River in Vietnam. Origin stories, although their details are in formulaic composition and panegyric, cannot be entirely dismissed as fictions, because they do capture the historical realities in their broadest contours. According to Chinese sources, there was an Indian Brahmin named Kaundinya who was led to take a perilous journey to Funan in a dream. There he won the hand of the local Naga princess in a contest of archery and married her and founded the first Indianized political dynasty in Funan in the first century C.E.
This story is further confirmed by Chinese accounts that can be dated to the fourth century C.E., which describes the Indian dynasty of Funan as founded by an Indian usurper to the throne. The Chinese version lists the name as Chuchan-tan. The term Chu is used to denote a person of Indian origin. According to the account found in the Chinese version, Chandana was a Brahmin who obeyed his inner voice and arrived at P’an-P’an, the southern part of Funan. The people of Funan enthusiastically chose him to be their king. He, accordingly, altered the laws of the land to conform to the norms existing in India. The story may well be an allegorical account about the sociocultural transformation that was already taking place in this part of Southeast Asia. It is during this period (fifth century C.E.) that we also note a major increase in Indian influence, including the earliest Sanskrit inscriptions in parts of Southeast Asia.

Here, again, we should note that there is no direct military involvement, but rather an invitation by the local population. The adventurer Kaundinya stayed at P’an-P’an, which is located on the isthmus of Siam, which was, at this period, under the control of Funan. Later, he was invited by nobles from the court of Funan to ascend the throne at a time of political upheaval to bring peace and stability. Whether the story is based on actual historical events, or a general sociological statement made using a familiar formulaic narrative, cannot be known with any certainty from the available evidence.

Finally, it must also be taken into consideration that Indian culture was changed or modified, as it was transferred to Southeast Asia. One of the most interesting examples of such modifications concerns the nature of kingship. The notion of the “god king” (deva rajah) was cultivated by rulers in parts of Southeast Asia. They may have been influenced by minor Sanskrit political tracts such as Nandhismriti. Southeast Asian rulers of the vast Khamer Empire, centered in what is present-day Cambodia, were able to construct vast palace-temple complexes, such as Angor Wat, using Indian norms and perhaps models. But nothing of this scale was ever attempted in India. Such a powerful interpretation of the role of kingship was something that was not adopted by medieval Indian rulers, but rather something more modest. The medieval Indian rulers considered themselves only as pious devotees of the dominant Hindu deities, such as Siva, Vishnu, or the goddess Durga.

Further Reading

Raman N. Seylon
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Agriculture

In ancient and medieval times, wheat and barley were the staple crops in cooler North India, whereas rice prevailed in hotter and wetter South India. Millet was grown in the dryer lands of the Deccan plateau. In South India, rice was cooked by boiling it or it was ground and left to ferment overnight to make either dosa, a pancake-like crepe, or idlis, rice cakes that were eaten either for breakfast or dinner. Lentils, beans, and peas were widely grown and essential ingredients in Indian cooking. Sesame was indigenous to India and was widely cultivated for extraction of edible oil, which was used for cooking. Cotton, another indigenous crop cultivated primarily for textile production, became one of India’s leading exports during the late Middle Ages.

Food is an essential component in Hindu rites of passage and other religious rituals. Auspicious rituals, such as birth and marriage ceremonies, call for elaborate feasts, whereas inauspicious rituals, such as funerals, call for prohibitions of certain foods. Marriage feasts reflect one’s caste status, wealth, prestige, and family honor and thus are important and sensitive social affairs. Spices, herbs, and fruits constitute the heart of South Asian cooking. Such ingredients as turmeric, tamarind, coriander, fenugreek, cumin, ginger, cardamom, and pepper flavored Indian cuisine. Curiously, a few essential spices and vegetables in modern Indian dishes, such as red chili pepper, potato, tomato, or cauliflower were not present in India before the sixteenth century, hence the taste of medieval Indian food would have differed. Apart from these European introductions, the modern Indian dish also shows Persian and Central Asian influences. Each region in India specializes in dishes shaped by local ecology and culture. South India specializes in rice and lentil-based vegetarian dishes, such as dosa, idlis, sambar, and a great variety of curries; whereas eastern India specializes in rice and fish curry; Central Asian and Persian influences blended with Indian cooking in North India to develop naan, buriyani, tandoori, samosa, and halva.

When the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Faxian visited India in the early fifth century, most members of the upper and middle castes were vegetarians; meat eating was confined to the lower castes. The seventh-century Chinese traveler Xuanzang reported that fish, mutton, gazelle, and deer were eaten and sometimes salted, but the flesh of oxen, asses, elephants, horses, pigs, dogs, and all manner of hairy beasts was forbidden as food and anyone who ate them was scorned and faced social sanctions. Such a person would be driven out of the city and forced to reside outside the city gates. Along with meat eating, some
Hindu texts list eating garlic and onions as polluting, although there was no religious sanction to back this up. Xuanzang noted that anyone caught using onion and garlic as food items within the city gates also faced severe social sanctions and was expelled from the city.

Meat and vegetables were seasoned in curried stews and eaten with rice. Fried flat unleavened wheat bread was eaten, and water, milk, buttermilk, and curd were drunk with meals. Cooking ingredients sometimes differed according to wealth; the rich fried their dishes with ghee or clarified butter while the poor substituted sesame seed oil. Xuanzang also noted that although the Indians had stew and saucepans, they cooked their rice by boiling it and (unlike the Chinese) had not learned how to use their pans as steamers for cooking rice. He also observed that the Indians used no spoons or chopsticks and ate with their hands from one vessel mixing all sorts of curries and condiments together. Indians also generally did not use their own cups for drinking water, which was poured directly into the mouth using a small copper pitcher or lota without the lips ever touching the surface of the vessel. The only time they used drinking cups made of copper was when they were sick. Most of these practices involved Hindu notions of purity and pollution and are still maintained by orthodox Hindu households.

The Islamic food system was ideologically different from the Hindu system. Unlike Hindus, most Muslims ate meat but also followed various food taboos, such as not eating pork, blood, and meat not slaughtered according to the strict Islamic ritual guidelines or *halal*. The absence of daylight food plays a major in Ramadan, which is a month-long fasting ritual practiced by devout Muslims the world over. The Muslim nighttime *iftar* meal, which ended the daytime Ramadan fast, was communally shared. In many ways, the Islamic communal eating practices were ideologically opposed to upper-caste Hindu food rituals.

Sugar was a major cash crop in ancient and medieval India; Indians had refined the techniques of making sugar from sugar cane juice, or jaggery, into a crystalline form. The very term *sugar* derived from the Sanskrit root *sharkara* and the term *candy* also derived from a Sanskrit root, *khandakati*, or pieces of hardened sugar. Xuanzang listed sugar and sugar candy as the most usual food items consumed in India. Sugar was also known to the Mediterranean basin since the time of Alexander’s invasion of Northwest India in the fourth century B.C.E., and the ancient Greeks called it “solid honey” or “Indian salt.” In the Middle Ages, India exported sugar to the Mediterranean basin, where it was something of a luxury item. Fruits, sweets, and sweet meats were popular, but many popular sweets eaten in North India today, such as *jelebi*, were brought originally from the Near East by Muslims. As for fruits, the fourteenth-century Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta noted that mango was a highly prized fruit grown in orchards. Banana was grown in damper areas of India, from which it spread to the Middle East soon after the Arab conquest of the Sind. Currently, India produces nearly one-fourth of the world’s bananas. The banana plant possibly originated in Southeast Asia as did the coconut palm, which may have been introduced to India during the first century C.E. In coastal South India, the common Palmyra palm provided India’s staple writing material—Palmyra leaves; it was also used to produce a popular alcoholic drink known as toddy or arrack, which was frequently mentioned in early Tamil literature. Another valued palm plant was the areca or betel nut, which is used as a stimulant. The betel nut was dried, chopped, mixed with lime,
wrapped in a leaf of the betel vine and then chewed; it was used for a variety of formal and informal social functions, including marriage ceremonies and various Hindu religious rituals.

Cattle were reared all across medieval India and used for plowing or transport; one’s ownership of cattle was a measure of wealth. For plowing, a peasant used wooden plowshares (although iron plowshares were known) pulled by a pair of oxen, which were also used for thrashing the grain. Oxen also provided the milk need to produce to essentials of Indian diet—ghee (clarified butter) and yogurt. Other domestic animals included the water buffalo, which was second in importance to the ox. Water buffalo were also used for plowing and for pulling the large carts needed to haul heavy stone for building large temples or palace complexes. During the Middle Ages, when goddess worship became popular, water buffalo were the favorite sacrificial animals for the Goddess Durga. Goats and sheep were reared, the latter generally in cooler areas. Pigs were reared but did not play an important in the Hindu diet. Chicken was the most important fowl and was first known to have been domesticated in India. However, eggs played only a small part in the Indian diet. Peacocks were a favorite dish of the aristocracy and the wealthy.

As in modern India, drinking alcoholic beverages was taboo in Hinduism and Islam; today, those who drink regularly are either Westernized elites or members of low castes. Faxian tells wrote most respectable Indians did not drink, but drunkenness is mentioned in Tamil literature and depicted in sculptures, which indicates that this taboo was not particularly strong or uniform in medieval times (see Tamil Country). Xuanzang listed various kinds of wine and liquors and different kinds of alcoholic beverages consumed by different castes. The juice of the grape (wine) and sugar cane (rum) were drunk by the warrior caste. The merchant castes drank strong drinks; Brahmins and Jains drank syrup made from grapes or sugar cane juice but refrained from taking any fermented alcoholic drinks (see Jainism).

Managing meals and proper diet were important features of the ancient Indian ayurvedic medical system. A healthy body meant having a balance between the three dosas or bodily humors or vital fluids, such as the vata (wind), pitta (gall), and kapha (mucus). A careful regulation of diet sought balance between “hot,” “neutral,” and “cold” foods. If, for instance, a patient had a common cold, the ayurvedic prescription would be to avoid cold foods such as cheese, fruit juice, yogurt, radishes, or unboiled milk. The patient should instead take “hot” foods to aid in digestion. “Hot” foods included apples, hot soup, hot milk, herbal tea, or cooked rice or vegetables seasoned with hot spices, such as ginger or cumin to heat the body and regain its humoral equilibrium. An entire classificatory list of foods marking them as hot, cold, or neutral existed in the ayurvedic health care system as guidelines for patients to maintain a balanced diet for better health.

Further Reading


Raman N. Seylon
Aybak, Qutb al-Din (d. 1210)

A former slave of the Ghaurid prince Mu'izz al-Din Muhammad, who conquered North India for the Muslim Ghaurid Empire of Afghanistan, Qutb al-Din Aibek is believed to have proclaimed himself independent as sultan of Delhi upon Muhammad Ghauri's death in 1206. Aibak's proclamation is usually considered by modern historians to be the beginning of the Delhi sultanate, which became the first significant Muslim kingdom on Indian soil and the dominant state of North India.

After his defeat of the Hindu ruler Prithviraja III at the Second Battle of Tarain in 1192, Muhammad Ghauri named Aibak governor of the newly conquered territories of North India. Headquartering himself in Delhi, which held out for some time against the Ghaurid forces, Aibak secured a letter of manumission from Muhammad Ghauri and written authority to govern the Indian provinces. Although there is no direct contemporary evidence that Aibak declared himself an independent ruler upon his former master's assassination, his actions in allying himself with other regional governors in the Ghaurid Empire suggest that he did so.

His marriage to the daughter of Taj al-Din Yildiz, who succeeded Muhammad Ghauri as governor at Ghazni in Afghanistan, looks like an attempt to forestall opposition within the empire to his acquisition of independent status. He married his own daughter and sister, respectively, to two other former slave officers—Shams al-Din Ilutmish, who was the Ghaurid command at Baran (modern Bulandshahr) and Nasir al-Din Qubacha, who was commander at Multan. He also forged an alliance with Ali bin Mardan, who took power in Bengal after Muhammad Ghauri's death. Although he ruled for only 4 years, dying in an accident at Lahore in 1210, Aibak was successful in imposing his authority over defeated Hindu rulers and in securing his effective independence from the Ghaurid state. He was succeeded by his son-in-law Shams al-Din Ilutmish.

Further Reading

John A. Wagner

Allauddin Khilji (d. 1316)

During the reign of Allauddin Khilji (1296–1316), second ruler of the Khilji dynasty, the Delhi sultanate reached the height of its political and military power and achieved its greatest geographic extent.

Allauddin served as a provincial governor under his uncle Jalal al-Din Firuz Shah, whom Allauddin overthrew in 1296. After 1298, Allauddin successfully foiled a series of Mongol invasions, which underscored the importance of maintaining the size and strength of the army. To afford a larger military establishment, Allauddin paid his men according to a prescribed wage scale,
which barely met a soldier’s daily needs but that allowed for the hiring of more troops. To maintain morale, the sultan fixed prices for basic commodities at low rates. The *kharaj* (land tax) was set at one-half of a landholder’s crop, which share was taken immediately upon harvest by government grain dealers who delivered what they collected to state granaries for sale to soldiers and others in urban centers at the fixed prices. Through this regulation of the market, Allauddin was able to increase and stabilize the revenue from land, upon which depended the supply of the army, as well as decrease the power of local Hindu chiefs and magistrates, who now had less control of the produce of their area and less scope for plotting rebellion.

To quell any possible disaffection within the Muslim nobility and the army, Allauddin ordered the creation and maintenance of rolls listing the military resources in horses and manpower of each province, and the occasional muster of local military contingents, practices aimed at limiting the opportunities of local magnates to report false returns and thereby build private military forces that could threaten the state. Allauddin also strictly enforced the Islamic prohibition against the use of alcohol and forbade private gatherings of court officials and military officers, restrictions that were unpopular but successfully overseen by spies.

In 1297, Allauddin annexed the Gujarat, and, by 1303, had extended his authority into eastern Rajasthan, where his forces captured the important strongholds of Ranthambhor and Chitor. By 1311, most of the *Deccan* had submitted to the sultan, whose power was now felt throughout much of southern India up to the area around Durasamuda (the modern city of Mysore) and along the Coromandal coast in the southeast. The sultan entrusted leadership of his armies to Malik Kafur, an Indian eunuch who was originally a prisoner of war. However, upon his conversion to Islam, Malik Kafur, for whom the sultan supposedly felt a strong physical attraction, became the leader of several successful military campaigns into South India. Upon Allauddin’s death in 1316, Malik Kafur tried unsuccessfully to seize power but was killed by his own men. The throne then passed to one of Allauddin’s sons, Qutb-ud-din Mubarak, who sought to ameliorate some of his father’s harsher restrictions. Qutb-ud-din Mubarak was overthrown in 1320 by the former slave Tughluq, founder of the Tughluq dynasty.

**Further Reading**


John A. Wagner

**Babur (1483–1530)**

At the end of the Middle Ages, Asia was dominated by three Turkish empires. The Ottomans conquered the Byzantine Empire, taking over the age-old city of Constantinople. The Safavids ruled in Persia, and the Mughals established their rule in India. All three were Islamic empires, and all three based their
military success on the use of gunpowder, a technology that signaled the end of the medieval world. The Mughal Empire in India was founded by Zahir al-Din Muhammad, known as Babur (“the Tiger”).

Babur claimed descent from Chinggis (Genghis) Khan and Timur, and like his forefathers, he dreamed of transforming his inheritance of a small kingdom in Turkestan into an empire. He began by attacking Afghanistan and capturing Kabul in 1504, then he crossed the mountains into Hindustan and attacked the Delhi sultanate. Babur brought gunpowder weapons, including artillery and firearm, which gave him a large advantage over the more-numerous Indians. In 1526, at the Battle of Panipat, his small army of only twelve-thousand men defeated the sultan’s forces. He captured Agra and Delhi and established himself as sultan. He founded a dynasty called the Mughal, which is a Persian term for “Mongol.”

Babur seemed to care little for India. Many of his followers wanted to take their spoils of war and leave the hot, humid climate that ruined their bows and dampened their gunpowder, but the conqueror had decided to make India the center for a new empire. Babur was also unhappy to find no gardens in India like the ones he had known in Kabul, so he began construction of a magnificent Persian-style garden in Agra. Babur also had literary tastes and wrote an autobiography—that is called in English, *The Baburnama*. This remains a fascinating glimpse into the life of this complex, influential man.

He was not content with the conquest of the north, and by the time of his death in 1530, Babur had built a loosely knit empire that stretched from Kabul through the Punjab to the borders of Bengal. The empire he founded was known for its interaction with the Portuguese and the British, and for creating magnificent artistic gems like the great Taj Mahal. But these events belong to the modern age; Babur was the medieval link between the old and the new. See also Document 22.

Further Reading

Joyce E. Salisbury

Bahmani Kingdom

The Bahmani kingdom was a Muslim sultanate centered on the northern Deccan. The kingdom was established in 1347, when Hasan Gangu, governor of the southern provinces of the Delhi sultanate, then ruled by Sultan
Muhammad bin Tughluq, declared his independence with the support of the southern nobility. Ruling as Ala al-Din Hasan Shah Bahmani, Hasan Gangu founded a dynasty that lasted until 1538.

Until 1425, when the capital was moved northward to Bidar by Ahmad Shah (r. 1422–1435), the Bahmanis ruled from the city of Gulbarga over a large territory that extended from the Arabian Sea in the west across the northern Deccan and ran from Berar in the north to the Krishna River in the south. For much of its existence the Bahmani kingdom was at war with the Hindu Vijayanagar Empire to the south, a conflict embittered by the clash of religions. The kingdom reached its height in the late fifteenth century, but thereafter the authority of the central government weakened; after 1518, various provincial governors declared their independence, causing the Bahmani state to break up into five successor states—Ahmednagar, Berar, Bidar, Bijapur, and Golconda—known collectively as the Deccan sultanates.

The Bahmani state was divided into four provinces governed by regional commanders who had extensive powers. Assisting in provincial administration were military officers who drew their revenues from lands assigned to them, similar to the iqta system employed in the Delhi sultanate. Indeed, the central administration of the Bahmani state tended to mirror that of the Delhi sultanate, except for a more highly developed financial department and a stronger wazir, the officer who headed the civil administration and who often tended to dominate the central government under a weak sultan. The Bahmani state also tended to employ large numbers of foreigners, especially Iranians, as local military officers and magistrates. Under the later sultans, Hindu Brahmans also frequently held important local positions, a practice that may have initially arisen from a popular tradition that a Brahman had prophesied Hasan Gangu’s rise to power.

Further Reading

*John A. Wagner*

**Balban, Ghiyas al-Din (d. 1286)**

A former slave of Sultan Shams al-Din Iltutmish (r. 1210–1236), Ghiyas al-Din Balban was sultan of Delhi from 1266 to 1286. During his reign, Balban strengthened the hold of the central government over the provincial governors of the Delhi sultanate and sought to restrict high position to persons of noble birth, a distinct change in policy for the Mamluk or Ghulam dynasty, whose members were mainly Turkish ex-slaves.

Balban was born into the Ilbaris tribe, a large Turkish clan of Central Asia over which his father was chief. As a youth, Balban was captured by the Mongols
and sold into slavery, his first master being a rich merchant of Basra in what is now southern Iraq. His master took him to Delhi and sold him to Sultan Iltutmish, who made him a member of the *chihilganis*, the famous Corps of Forty, which consisted of Turkish slave military officers who each commanded a group of forty slave subordinates. Upon the sultan’s death in 1236, Balban supported his daughter *Raziya Sultan*, who made him her Lord of the Hunt. However, Balban eventually turned against her and joined the conspiracy of nobles that overthrew her in 1240. Under Raziya’s successors, Bahram Shah (r. 1240–1242) and Ala al-Din Mas’ud (r. 1242–1246), Balban served as commander of Rewari and Hansi and distinguished himself in campaigns against the Mongols.

During the reign of Nasir al-din Mahmud Shah (1246–1266), Balban served as *na’ib-i mamlkat*, or viceroy, running the central administration in the sultan’s behalf. This position gave him great power but also made him enemies, and he was overthrown in 1252 by a palace coup led by Imad al-Din Rehan; however, because his supplanter was an Indian Muslim, most of the Turkish nobility rallied behind him and he was restored to his position in 1254. As *na’ib-i mamlkat*, Balban conducted several successful campaigns against the Mongols. Upon the sultan’s death in 1266, Balban proclaimed himself sultan as Ghiyas al-Din.

Although he had risen from it, he considered the corps of Turkish slave officers to be the root cause of the political instability that had afflicted the Delhi sultanate since the death of Iltutmish. The *chihilganis* had displaced the nobility in the high offices of state and their intrigues and jealousies had disrupted the reigns of recent sultans. Balban thus eliminated the *chihilganis* and promoted men of noble birth. He continued to protect the northwest frontier from Mongol incursions and dealt harshly with any provincial governors, such as Toghril in *Bengal*, who opposed him. Balban died in 1266 and was succeeded by his grandson Muiz al-Din Qaiqabas (r. 1286–1290).

Further Reading

*John A. Wagner*

**Banabhatta (Bana) (fl. seventh century C.E.)**

Recognized as one of the great Sanskrit literary figures of medieval India, Banabhatta (also known as Bana) was the *asthana kavi* or court poet to the seventh-century North Indian ruler *Harsha* of Kanauj (r. 606–647). Banabhatta’s works were so well regarded that they gave rise to a famous Sanskrit pun, which states that while savoring his writing, readers “do not find interest in food.”

Little is known of Banabhatta’s life beyond what he says about himself in the opening chapters of the *Harsacarita* (“Deeds of Harsha”), his biography of
Harsha. Banabhatta was born in the village of Preetikoot into an important Brahmin family of the Vatsyayana clan. His mother died when he was very young and his father when he was about 14. He spent his youth traveling about North India with his half-brothers, visiting universities and royal courts and acquiring, through persistence and hard work, sufficient education to allow him to develop his skill at writing. Thanks to this skill, he was eventually called to the court of Harsha, who became his friend and patron.

Besides the Harsacarita, which is a valuable historical source, especially for the early years of Harsha’s reign, and the finest example of medieval Sanskrit biography, Banabhatta wrote a prose romance titled Kadambari, which describes the adventures of two sets of lovers through a series of incarnations. Banabhatta’s style is complex and elaborate, involving detailed descriptions, lengthy constructions, and many poetic devices. Both works were left unfinished, though Kadambari was completed by Banabhatta’s son, Bhusanabhatta. See also Document 8.

Further Reading


John A. Wagner

Bengal

Bengal is a historical and geographical region of northeastern India that today comprises the nation of Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal, as well as portions of the states of Bihar, Orissa, and Tripura. During the life of Gautama Buddha in the sixth century B.C.E., Bengal was the center of the kingdom of Magadha, then one of the most important Indian states. In the early medieval period, Magadha formed the core of the North Indian Gupta Empire.

Shashanka, the first known king of an independent Bengal, ruled in the early seventh century. The accounts of Banabhatta (Bana), court poet of the Emperor Harsha (r. 606–647), and of the Chinese monk Xuanzang, seem to indicate that Shashanka, whom they also accuse of being anti-Buddhist, had some responsibility for the death of Harsha’s elder brother Rajyavardhana, king of Thanesar, whose murder led to Harsha’s accession to his brother’s throne. Harsha, in alliance with other local rulers, launched a military campaign into Bengal, but the region does not appear to have come fully under Harsha’s control until after Shashanka’s death in about 625.

After a period of anarchy that followed the collapse of Harsha’s empire, Gopala (r. c. 750–770) founded the Buddhist Pala dynasty, which ruled most of Bengal and Bihar until the late eleventh century. His successors Dharmapala (r. 770–810) and Devapala (r. 810–850) expanded the Pala Empire across northern and eastern India. The Pala state was overthrown by the Hindu Sena dynasty in about 1095. Buddhism, which had heretofore been a powerful influence in Bengal, declined under the Hindu Senas, who introduced the caste system into the region in the late twelfth century. The Sena dynasty lasted until about 1230,
but parts of Bengal were conquered prior to that by the Muslim Delhi sultanate. The sultans of Delhi eventually controlled the entire region until the sultanate itself collapsed in the sixteenth century, when Bengal, like the rest of North India, was incorporated into the Muslim Mughal Empire.

Further Reading

John A. Wagner

Brahmagupta (c. 598–c. 660)

Brahmagupta was an astronomer and mathematician who was born around 598 in the town of Bhillamala (modern Bhinmal, near Mount Abu in Rajasthan). He moved to Ujjain, a town in the State of Gwalior in central India, which was then the center of Hindu mathematics and astronomy. It had the best observatory in India and also had a wonderful collection of the writings of ancient scientists, such as Hero of Alexandria (first century C.E.), Ptolemy (second century C.E.), and others from as far away as China. The young mathematician did more than study these ancients, he corrected their errors.

The Indian scientists in Ujjain wrote mathematical texts as poetry. Their view was that mathematical problems were undertaken for pleasure, so they were cloaked in poetry. Brahmagupta learned this style of writing and adopted it as his own. By the age of thirty, Brahmagupta had completed his masterwork, “The Improved Astronomical System of Brahma” (*Brahma sputa siddhanta*). The first ten chapters of this work deal with various astronomical issues, including the true longitudes of the planets, lunar and solar eclipses, and the lunar crescent and its conjunctions with the planets. The following thirteen chapters consider an analysis of previous work on astronomy, and chapters on mathematics and geometry. All but two of the chapters deal with astronomy, but modern scholars focus on two chapters (12 and 18, which deal with algebra and mathematics.

Although Brahmagupta dismissed his own work on mathematics as incidental to the study of the heavens, modern scholars are particularly interested in his work on indeterminate equations and the geometry of quadrilaterals. Brahmagupta found the formulas for the diagonals of a quadrilateral. He provided fairly accurate figures for the circumference of the earth and the length of the calendar year. For all his advances, he refused to believe that the earth revolved around the sun and spun on its axis, both ideas that were under discussion at the time.

Probably his most influential contribution was the introduction of negative numbers. These negative numbers were especially useful to merchants in representing debts, so they came into wide use. By 700, Hindu merchants had introduced Brahmagupta’s mathematics to the Arabs, and the entirety of his famous work was translated into Arabic by 775. Through these channels, the
great mathematician’s works influenced the history of mathematics throughout much of the world.

Further Reading

Joyce E. Salisbury

Caste System

The caste system was the traditional means of social organization in India. Its origins probably lay in ancient Indo-European settlements when invaders established rule over indigenous peoples and the rulers set themselves apart. The Indo-Europeans (also called Aryans) used the term *varna*, a Sanskrit word meaning “color,” to refer to the major social classes. The term does not refer to skin color, but instead a system of color symbolism that reflects the qualities that were present in members of the castes.

By about 1000 B.C.E., the Aryans recognized four *varnas*. The highest *varna* is that of the Brahmans, the scholars and priests. Their obligations were to study and teach, to perform sacrifices to the deities, and to receive gifts. Brahmans were associated with white, the color of purity and lightness.

The second *varna* is that of the warriors and aristocrats, called *Kshatriya*. These were charged with protecting everyone in the kingdom, including the priestly Brahman, who in return performed the sacrifices necessary to bring blessings on the rulers. The *Kshatriya* were associated with red, the color of passion and energy. The ancient Hindu holy books always wrote of a power-struggle between these two top *varnas*, which paralleled the medieval struggle in the West between pope and emperor.

The third *varna* is that of the *Vaisya*, who made a living from the land. These included farmers, herders, artisans, and merchants. *Vaisyas* are associated with yellow, the color of the earth, reminding them of their duty to tend the land. Members of the lowest *varna* are the *shudras*, servants, landless serfs, and those who perform menial tasks. *Shudras* are associated with black, the color of darkness and inertia.

The first three *varnas* are called “twice-born,” because the boys undergo an initiation ceremony: their “second birth.” Only the twice-born castes were allowed to hear the sacred scriptures, the Vedas, and only the Brahmans could recite the scriptures during rituals.

These four groups made up traditional Indian society, but they were by no means the only inhabitants. One group was called the Untouchables. These were excluded from the caste system—literally “outcastes”—either because they were foreign, or more likely because they performed tasks that were considered polluting, such as working with leather and sweeping excrement from the village. The untouchable classes certainly date from the first millennium B.C.E., and the medieval sources mention them as well. For example, the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim *Faxian* observed that untouchables had to strike a piece of wood before entering a town as a warning for people to avoid them (Giles, 21). Ascetics, Buddhists and Jains (see Jainism), may also be considered to be outside the *varna* system.
By the Middle Ages, the four varnas no longer adequately described society. As occupations became specialized and society more complex, a hierarchy of subcastes known as jati developed. The word jati means “birth,” which emphasizes that one is born into one’s status. Indeed one’s caste is a property of the body and cannot be removed. Only in another life could one hope to rise in caste. The term jati refers to all categories of beings. Insects, plants, domestic animals, and wild animals are all jatis suggesting that the difference among castes is as great as a difference among species. Occupation largely determined an individual’s jati, and to give a sense of the proliferation in complexity, by the eighteenth century, Brahmins divided themselves into some eighteen hundred jati.

The jati were supposed to keep the castes rigidly separate, with theoretical penalties imposed for crossing the caste barriers. However, the proliferation of jatis worked as a means of social mobility. Whole jatis might improve their status as a group, or a new one might develop. The whole caste system was so entrenched in the Middle Ages, that often individuals identified more closely with their jati than with their cities or states. Castes played a large role in maintaining social discipline in India. See also Document 4.

Further Reading

Joyce E. Salisbury

Chandra Gupta II Vikramaditya (r. c. 375–c. 415)

Chandra Gupta II, often referred to as Vikramaditya, was the greatest ruler of the Gupta Empire. He expanded the empire by annexing neighboring kingdoms, so he ended up controlling a vast state extending from the mouth of the Ganges River to the mouth of the Indus River, and from what is now North Pakistan in the north to the mouth of the Narmada River in Central India.

Historians use coins as significant sources of information on a given period, as testimony to the wealth of the age and to see the iconography of the period. Chandra Gupta II’s coins are particularly revealing. He issued a large number of gold coins showing the wealth of the Guptas during this period. However, he also started producing silver coins as well. Silver coins, worth less than gold, indicate that prosperity extended beyond the wealthiest rulers who could trade in gold. Silver exchange reveals the vibrant economy that marked the rule of the Gupta dynasty.

The Chinese pilgrim Faxian arrived in India during the reign of Chandra Gupta II, and his testimony reveals that the kingdom was prosperous and peaceful. Indeed, under Chandra Gupta II’s reign the dynasty reached its height in wealth and cultural achievements.
In addition to supporting Buddhism, Chandra Gupta II was a patron of literature. He gathered a group of poets to his court. This group was known as the “Nine Gems,” and the greatest among them was Kalidasa, who is often referred to as the Shakespeare of India. Kalidasa wrote three plays and four poems, which fuse together themes of nature and love within the framework of Hinduism. His works remain much read and reveal the courtly society of the times.

A tangible recollection of the greatness of Chandra Gupta’s reign is an iron pillar in Delhi dating to the fourth century. This pillar bears an inscription saying it was erected in honor of the Hindu god Vishnu in memory of Chandra Gupta II. It is made of 98 percent wrought iron and has stood more than 1,600 years without rusting or decomposing. This pillar serves as eloquent remembrance of a king whose reign embodied greatness in religion, literature, and a science that could produce such a gem of metallurgy.

Further Reading

Chaturanga

In the early sixth century C.E., Indians created a parlor game, called Chaturanga (four-fold division of the army), which mimicked the ancient Indian battlefield. It was a direct ancestor to the modern game of chess, but unlike chess it used chance (in the form of a dice throw) and skill. In the modern chess version of Chaturanga, the infantry is replaced by the pawn, the cavalry by the knight, the elephant by the bishop, the chariot by the rook, and the general by the queen. The original intention of the game as it related to the Indian battlefield could be seen by the manner in which each piece moved.

Further Reading

Deccan

The term Deccan traditionally refers to an ill-defined region of South India extending roughly from the Namada River in central India to the land between the Krishna and Tungbhadra Rivers in southern India (the Krishna-Tungbhadra Doab) and encompassing mainly the hill country and central plateau of the southern subcontinent. Throughout the medieval period, the Deccan provided a tempting target for expansion to the Hindu and Muslim powers of the North, who sough frequently to push their authority beyond the Namada River, the traditional boundary between North and South India.

In the twelfth century, the northern Deccan came under the sway of the Yadavas, a Hindu dynasty that ruled from Deogir. The Yadavas were overthrown in 1307, when an invasion led by Allauddin Khilji’s general Malik Kafur
brought the region under the control of the **Delhi sultanate** and opened the Deccan to Islamic cultural influence. Sultan **Muhammad bin Tughluq** completed the Islamic conquest of the Deccan in the 1330s, but by 1347 a revolt of the local nobility ended Delhi’s rule and resulted in the establishment of the **Bahmani kingdom**, an Islamic state that gradually expanded its authority across the Deccan at the expense of the Hindu states to the south. The Bahmani state lasted until the early sixteenth century, when it disintegrated into several smaller Muslim states that were gradually absorbed by the expanding Mughal Empire in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

From the 1330s, the southern Deccan was largely controlled by the Hindu **Vijayanagar Empire**, with its capital at the newly built city of Vijayanagar on the southern bank of the Tungbhadra River. Until its collapse in the sixteenth century, Vijayanagar prevented the expansion of the Bahmani kingdom and its Muslim successor states into South India. However, the military and cultural influence of the Islamic powers to the north was made clear by one Vijayanagar king’s assumption of the title “Sultan among Hindu Kings,” and by the presence of Muslim cavalry in the kingdom’s army.

**Further Reading**


**John A. Wagner**

**Delhi Sultanate**

Ruled by a series of Turkish and Afghan dynasties from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries, the sultanate centered on the North Indian city of Delhi was the first major Islamic state on Indian soil.

The foundation of the sultanate and its first dynasty, known as the Mamluk dynasty, is usually dated to 1206. In that year, following the murder of the Afghan invader Muhammad Ghori, Qutb-ud-din Aibak, a Turkish ex-slave and one of the late sultan’s commanders, is thought to have proclaimed himself first sultan of Delhi and ruler of Muhammad Ghauri’s recently conquered North Indian territories. Qutb-ud-din Aibak died in 1210 and was succeeded by Shams al-Din **Iltutmish** (r. 1210–1236), another Turkish ex-slave who married his predecessor’s daughter. He was succeeded by his daughter **Raziya**, who, as sultan from 1236 to 1240, was one of the few female rulers of medieval India. Iltutmish, who was formally recognized as sultan of Delhi in 1229 by the caliph of Baghdad, and Ghiyas al-Din **Balban** (r. 1266–1286), were the most capable of the Mamluk sultans.

In 1290, the Mamluks were overthrown by the Khalji dynasty, whose best-known member was Sultan **Allauddin Khilji** (r. 1296–1316). Allauddin extended his authority westward into Gujarat and southward into the **Deccan**, and during the course of the fourteenth century the sultanate came to control most of the Indian subcontinent. Under Allauddin, the armies of the sultanate drove back a series of **Mongol** invasions, thereby initiating a period of relative peace and order that allowed the development of an Indo-Muslim
culture that achieved significant advances in music, architecture, literature, and religion.

In 1320, Ghiyas al-Din Tughluq, seized the throne and the dynasty he founded, the Tughluqs, ruled until the early fifteenth century. During the reigns of Muhammad bin Tughluq (1325–1351) and Firuz Shah Tughluq (1351–1388), attempts were made to strengthen the authority of the central government in the provinces and to stabilize the food supply by improving irrigation in the area around Delhi. Muhammad bin Tughluq extended state patronage to non-Muslim institutions and took Hindus into his service, but Firuz Shah Tughluq imposed the jizaya tax on Hindu Brahmins and more strictly enforced Islamic law throughout the sultanate. In 1398, 10 years after Firuz Shah’s death, the Mongol-Turkish invader Timur captured and sacked Delhi, which event led to the fall of the Tughluq dynasty in 1412 and the fragmentation of the Tughluq state, with independent local sultanates being established in Bengal, Gujarat, and elsewhere. Although the sultanate revived briefly under the Lodi dynasty in the late fifteenth century, it was finally conquered by the first Mughal ruler, Babur, in 1526.

Further Reading

Faxian (d. c. 422)

Buddhism had begun in India but had spread widely through Asia into China during the centuries after the death of the Buddha. In particular, the Emperor Ashoka of Mauryan dynasty in about 260 B.C.E. became a devout Buddhist. Under his patronage, missionaries began to spread throughout Asia. By the Middle Ages, there were Buddhist monks in China, and this tradition led to a remarkable account by Faxian, a Chinese Buddhist who traveled to India to learn more about Buddhism in the land of its birth. In the process, he left an account that is a valuable source of information about medieval India.

Faxian, whose name means “illustrious master of the law,” had been orphaned at an early age. Instead of living with his uncle, he decided to follow the religious life. When he was age 25, Faxian wanted to learn about Buddhist traditions in India and to read authentic Buddhist writings, so he began an impressive pilgrimage. He made his way on foot across Xinjiang and the mountain passes, taking 6 years to reach India—from about 399–405 C.E. When he arrived at the capital of the Gupta Empire, he taught himself Sanskrit, procured texts, drawings, and relics, and then began his return journey by sea. He spent 2 years in Sri Lanka and also visited Java. Altogether, during the 15 years of his journey, he traveled a distance of some 8,000 miles. Once back in China, he devoted his life to translating the precious texts from Sanskrit. He died when he was about 88 years old.
Faxian’s description of the Gupta Empire is colored by his piety and his Buddhism, but nevertheless it is a fascinating first-hand account of the golden age of the Guptas. He wrote that Buddhism was flourishing but noted that all the Hindu cults were tolerated and there was no animosity among them. Throughout his account, he described monastic rituals and the locations of the relics of Buddha.

He also described secular aspects of society. He described how roads were well maintained and safe. He commented that taxes were relatively light, and there was no capital punishment. (Such observations may say more by contrast about the state of things in the China he knew than in India.) He also described with praise the tradition of state-supported charities that provided free hospitalization to residents and visiting foreigners alike. No doubt overstating his observations, he claimed that all Indians were vegetarians and never drank intoxicating beverages. Finally, he described “untouchable” castes, people whose presence was so polluting that they could have no contact with others.

Faxian’s travels were important for many reasons. Not only did he provide witness to medieval Indian society, but also he showed the enduring impact of cross-cultural contact between India and China. Furthermore, the texts he translated and preserved contributed to an invigorated Buddhist tradition in China. See also Documents 3 and 4.

Further Reading

Joyce E. Salisbury

Firuz Shah Tughluq (d. 1388)

Firuz Shah succeeded his cousin, Muhammad bin Tughluq, as ruler of the Dehli sultanate in 1351, when he was proclaimed sultan by the nobles who had accompanied the army into Sind, where Muhammad Tughluq had been on campaign when he died.

Upon returning to Delhi, Firuz Shah’s first act was the execution of his predecessor’s wazir, Ahmad bin Ayaz Khwaja Jahan, who had attempted to place a young puppet sultan on the throne in the army’s absence. Firuz Shah improved relations between the central government and the nobility by making the iqta, the assignment of revenue from a particular tract of land in lieu of a salary, hereditary, so that a son automatically inherited his father’s financial resources and local influence. The sultan also ceased any further attempts to reestablish Delhi’s control over the Deccan, Bengal, or Sind, thus reducing the pressure for men and supplies exerted by the central government on the magnates who administered the provinces.

In Delhi, Firuz Shah commenced an extensive building program, constructing new mosques, forts, dams, and canals. The latter constructions were an important part of the sultan’s attempt to improve irrigation in the region around Delhi, where famines were a common occurrence. Adhering strictly to Islamic law, Firuz Shah abolished the harsh punishments imposed by his
predecessors, especially on rebels, and eliminated various taxes not sanctioned by shari'a. However, he displayed little tolerance for Hinduism, extending the jiziya, a poll tax on non-Muslims, to the Brahmans, who had been exempt, and to Hindu residents of towns. He also demolished various Hindu temples, claiming that they had been constructed without permission in the reigns of previous sultans. The much more ancient Hindu temples at Puri and Kangra were destroyed during the course of a military campaign. Efforts were also made to encourage conversions to Islam. Voluntary Hindu converts received rich rewards, while enslaved Hindus from the provinces were forcibly converted and sent to Delhi, perhaps in an attempt to increase the city’s Muslim population as well as its support for the Sultanate against the Hindu majority.

Firuz Shah was the last strong sultan of Delhi. Following his death in 1388, the Delhi sultanate was weakened by a succession struggle, which allowed local nobles to free themselves from the authority of Delhi and to govern their territories as independent rulers. In 1398, the army of the Central Asian invader Timur the Lame (Tamerlane) captured and sacked Delhi itself.

Further Reading

John A. Wagner

Food. See Agriculture

Ghaurids

Emerging as a power in the early twelfth century, the Muslim Ghaurid dynasty was the ruling family of Ghaur, a mountainous region in what is now Afghanistan. In the 1190s, the Ghaurids invaded and conquered much of North India, thereby creating a conglomeration of territories that after 1206 became the core of the Delhi sultanate, the first powerful Muslim state in India.

In the early twelfth century, the Ghaurids, who had their capital at Firuz Koh, experienced frequent raids on their territory by the rulers of Ghazni. In 1149, the Ghaurid ruler Eiz-ad Din Hosayn was slain during an abortive attack on Ghazni. However, in 1150, Eiz-ad Din Hosayn’s son ‘Ala al-Din (r. 1149–1161) captured Ghazni and sacked the city so ruthlessly that he acquired the sobriquet Jahanosz (“world incendiary”). In 1163, the Ghaurid throne passed to ‘Ala al-Din’s nephew Ghiyas al-Din Muhammad bin Sam, who, in 1175, installed his younger brother, Mu’izz al-Din Muhammad Ghauri, as sultan at Ghazni, while he continued to rule in Firuz Koh. Ghiyas al-Din extended Ghaurid authority westward into Iran, where he posed as the champion of Sunnis
with the blessing of the Abbasid caliph in Baghdad. In the east, Muhammad Ghauri, leading an army comprising the hill people of Gaur and Turkish and Khilji cavalry (the Khiljis were an Afghan nomadic people), captured Multan, in northwestern India, in 1176, and Lahore, in the Punjab, in 1186. To govern the conquered territories outside Gaur, the two brothers recruited large numbers of Turkish slaves, who were given important administrative positions and military commands.

In 1191, Muhammad Ghauri, invaded North India, but was defeated by the Hindu ruler Prithviraja III at the First Battle of Tarain. In 1192, at the Second Battle of Tarain, Muhammad Ghauri defeated and killed Prithviraja, whose kingdom, which included Delhi, was largely overrun by the invaders. Administration of the new conquests was given to Muhammad Gauri’s former slave, Qutb al-Din Aybak, who established himself in Delhi. Upon Ghiyas al-din’s death in 1203, Muhammad Ghauri ruled the vast Gaurid Empire alone, until he was murdered in 1206, whereupon the Gaurid state collapsed. In Delhi, Qutb al-Din Aybak declared himself independent, thereby establishing the Delhi Sultanate in the Gaurid territories of North India, while Taj al-din Yildiz, another former slave of the Gaurids, seized power in Ghazni.

Further Reading

*John A. Wagner*

**Gupta Empire (320–550)**

Before the Middle Ages, northern India had been unified under the Mauryan dynasty. In 184 B.C.E., the last of the Mauryan kings was assassinated and northern India once again split into various kingdoms. Yet the Mauryan kingdom had left a legacy of the ideal of empire and a memory of how to administer an empire. Even as the subcontinent splintered into kingdoms that waged intermittent war among themselves, Indian society grew. The regional kingdoms provided stability within their realms, and commerce flourished. Merchants brought wealth into these kingdoms and periodically kings tried to emulate the Mauryans and create an empire. In 320 C.E., one king, Chandra Gupta I, succeeded. He strengthened his position by marriage with a neighboring dynasty.

Chandra Gupta’s son, Samudragupta (c. 330–c. 375) completed the conquest of the north and claimed tribute from southeastern Bengal and as far away as Nepal and Sri Lanka. He was a patron of poetry and music, establishing the Gupta dynasty’s continued patronage of the arts and culture. His grandson, Kumara Gupta (c. 415–455) probably founded the monastic community at Nalanda in the Ganges River valley near Pataliputra, the Gupta capital. At Nalanda, men could study not only Buddhism, but also the Vedas,
Hindu philosophy, logic, and medicine. People came from outside India to study at this famous center, which stood until it burned down in about 988.

Like the Mauryas, the center of Gupta power was Magadha, in the Ganges River valley. From there, they consolidated a kingdom over the eastern portion of northern India. They also established tributary alliances with others and ended up controlling much of the northern part of the subcontinent.

The Gupta emperors left local government and administration in the hands of local officials, creating a somewhat decentralized state, but they fostered economic policies that brought wealth into the royal coffers. The government controlled the working of precious metals and minting of coins, and had a monopoly on salt mining and weapons manufacture. Taxation included forced labor on public works and a fee for water used on irrigated lands. However, none of these impositions was so onerous that it interfered with the growth of agriculture and commerce.

The Guptas were also well placed to take advantage of international trade, and their empire became the center of exchange between China and the West through the important Silk Road that linked the Roman Empire with China. Through this prosperity, the Guptas introduced an era of relative peace that allowed Indian culture to flourish. The Gupta Period is regarded by many as the golden age of Indian culture.

The Gupta rulers served as patrons of magnificent architecture, sculpture, and painting. The wall paintings of Ajanta Cave, for example, are considered some of the most stunning of Indian art. They not only show the various lives of the Buddha, but also reveal elements of daily life in India at the time. This is only one of the architectural wonders built during the Gupta era.

The Mauryan rulers had fostered the spread of Buddhism, but the Guptas favored a reinvigorated Hinduism. Some of the great religious literature—for example, the *Puranas*—were written during the rule of this dynasty, and temples spread over the land. The Guptas and their successors bestowed grants of land on Hindu Brahmins and supported an educational system that promoted Hindu values. The Gupta educational establishments also fostered learning in mathematics, where scholars developed the concepts of zero and infinity (among other things). They also developed the numeric system that we use and call “Arabic numerals” in recollection of the fact that the West learned this system from Arabs who took it from the Guptas. Medicine was advanced by the establishment of free clinics. Outside the monastic schoolrooms, devotional Hinduism became more and more popular, becoming the dominant religion in India. By about 1000, Buddhism had noticeably declined in India; the Gupta patronage had effected a major shift in the land of the Buddha.

The Gupta Empire fell prey to invaders from the north. Beginning in the 400s, the Huns, a nomadic people from Central Asia, pushed across the Hindu Kush Mountains into India. For the first half of the fifth century, the Guptas repelled the Huns, but the effort weakened their resources. By 480, the Huns conquered the Guptas and took over northern India. Western India was overrun by 500, and the last of the Gupta kings, presiding over a diminished kingdom, died in 550. Not until the Mughal dynasty in the sixteenth century did any state rule as much of India as the Gupta Empire. Until then, medieval India remained made up of large regional kingdoms haunted by the memory of a united land. *See also Chandra Gupta II Vikramaditya* and Document 6.
Harsha (590–647)

Harsha-Vardana, younger son of Prabhakar Vardhan, was ruler of a seventh-century north Indian empire that at its height encompassed the entire Indo-Gangetic Plain, from Orissa and Bengal in the east to the Punjab in the west.

Upon the collapse of the Gupta Empire in the midsixth century, North India was divided among several small states and kingdoms, several of which were eventually brought under the control of the Vardhana dynasty by Harsha’s father. In 606, following the death of his elder brother Rajyavardhan, Harsha, though only 16, was acclaimed king by an assembly of nobles from the city of Kanya Kubja, or Kanauj, successor to the old Gupta capital of Pataliputra, and now the cultural center of North India. An able military leader and capable administrator, Harsha united his father’s kingdom with Kanya Kubja, to which he transferred his capital. He conquered Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa and extended his power in Gujarat, where he married his daughter to the local ruler. However, his attempts to push his kingdom to the south were defeated by the Chalukya ruler Pulakeshi II at a battle fought along the Narmada River in 620. The river thereafter marked the southern extent of Harsha’s empire. In 641, Harsha dispatched a diplomatic mission to China, thereby establishing the first formal diplomatic relations between China and an Indian ruler.

Thanks to a Sanskrit prose biography written by his court poet, Banabhatta (Bana), Harsha is the best-known Indian ruler of the period. Besides being one of the most important works of medieval Indian literature, Banabhatta’s Harshacarita is an important source for the period of Harsha’s rise to power. Although his kingdom was the most powerful North Indian state since the fall of the Guptas, Harsha was never able to recreate the order and stability that the Gupta Empire had established in the region. Because, unlike the Guptas, Harsha did not control the major trade routes of the Northwest, he lacked the financial resources to refashion the more centralized Gupta state and his officers and officials were compensated with grants of land over which they exercised local authority. The travel accounts of the Chinese Buddhist monk Xuanzang, who visited Harsha’s realm between 630 and 644, seem to indicate an increase in crime and political disorder in the last years of the reign, which also may have seen Harsha become more autocratic in his rule.

In religion, Harsha practiced broad tolerance for all faiths. He was so friendly to Buddhism, building many stupas and monasteries, that he is often claimed as a Buddhist, although, according to Bana, he was a Hindu of the Saivaite sect. Lasting more than 40 years, Harsha’s reign ended in 647, perhaps with the emperor’s assassination, although that is uncertain. Because Harsha apparently left no heir, his kingdom rapidly disintegrated into numerous successor states. See also Documents 8 and 9.
Further Reading

John A. Wagner

Huns

The Huns (or Hunas) were a nomadic Central Asian people, possibly of Turkic origin, who invaded India in the fifth and sixth centuries. How these Huns may have been related to the people, also known as Huns, who invaded Europe in the fifth century is uncertain. The Hun invasion of India in the early sixth century led to the collapse of the Guptan Empire, the weakening of Indian Buddhism, and the political fragmentation of North India into numerous small states and kingdoms.

From the midfifth century, various Hun groups sought to enter India from the northwest via the Khyber Pass. They were held in check by the Guptan ruler Kumara Gupta (r. 415–455) and by his son Skanda Gupta (r. 455–487), but thereafter, under their leader Toramana, the Huns conquered Persia in 484 and invaded India in the 490s. By 500, they controlled the Punjab, and by 515 Toramana’s son, Mihirakula, had overrun much of the Gangetic Plain, thereby virtually destroying the Guptan state. Mihirakula’s reign is remembered in Indian and Chinese histories for its extreme cruelty, especially as regards the treatment of Indian Buddhists, whose monasteries and shrines were particularly marked for destruction. The decline in Buddhism noted in the midseventh century by the visiting Chinese monk *Xuanzang* was in part a legacy of the Hun conquest.

In 528, Yasodharman, king of the central Indian state of Malwi defeated the Huns and checked their expansion. By 542, shortly before his death, Mihirakula had been driven back into the Punjab by a coalition of princes allied with the fading Guptan state, which finally disappeared around 550. Thereafter, North India split into various Hindu kingdoms, which were temporarily reunited under the rule of *Harsha* in the early seventh century.

Further Reading

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Ibn Battuta (1304–1369/1377)

A Berber born in Tangier, Morocco, Abu ‘Abdullah Muhammad Ibn Battuta was an Islamic scholar and jurist who is best known as a traveler and explorer who journeyed throughout almost the entire Muslim world in the fourteenth century. At the request of the sultan of Morocco, Ibn Battuta dictated a celebrated account of his travels entitled *A Gift to Those Who Contemplate the Wonders of the Cities and the Marvels of Traveling*, but popularly known simply as
Rihla or Journey. The Rihla, though appearing at times to be fictional, is virtually the only contemporary account available of life as it was in certain parts of the world in the fourteenth century, and is a valuable source for the history of the Delhi sultanate between 1333 and 1342.

Ibn Battuta’s journeys lasted for almost 30 years and covered nearly 75,000 miles, taking him to regions that comprise 44 modern nations. Besides India, he visited East Africa, the Middle East, China, Southeast Asia, Spain, North Africa, Turkey, eastern Europe, and Mali and Timbuktu in West Africa. Ibn Battuta began his travels upon completion of his education, in about 1325 when he was 21. He went on pilgrimage to Mecca, but then, instead of returning home, he continued eastward, coming to India in 1333. In Delhi, Sultan Muhammad bin Tughluq appointed him a qazi, a judicial magistrate who decided cases on the basis of Islamic law, a position he held for 7 years. He spent much time at court and accompanied the sultan on various trips and expeditions, including a prolonged stay at the Ganges River town of Swargadwari from 1339 to 1341.

Because of the sultan’s erratic behavior, Ibn Battuta position at court was tenuous, alternating between periods of high favor and periods during which he was under suspicion for treason and other crimes. He sought to leave by expressing his desire to make another pilgrimage to Mecca, but, in 1342, Muhammad bin Tughluq opened another opportunity by sending him on embassy to the Yuan or Mongol dynasty emperor of China. Happy to resume his travels, Ibn Battuta used the trip to China to explore the Coromandel Coast of southeastern India, as well as Malabar and Sri Lanka. Upon the completion of his mission, instead of returning to India, Ibn Battuta simply journeyed westward, going eventually back to Tangier, from which he launched his later travels to other parts of the Islamic world. See also Documents 17 and 18.

Further Reading

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Ilutmish, Shams al-Din (d. 1236)

A former slave of Sultan Qutb al-Din Aybak, Shams al-Din Ilutmish was sultan of Delhi from 1210 to 1236. During his reign, Ilutmish secured the independence of the Delhi sultanate, extended the authority of Delhi into the provinces, and avoided confrontation with the Mongol ruler Chinggis (Ghengis) Khan.

Born into a noble Turkish family of the Ilbari clan in Central Asia, Ilutmish, who was reportedly handsome and intelligent, excited the jealousy of his brothers, who supposedly sold him to a slave trader. His new master than sold him to Qutb al-Din Aibak, himself a slave officer in the service of Mu’izz al-din Muhammad Ghauri, the Ghaurid ruler of Ghazni in Afghanistan. Distinguishing himself as a soldier, especially in a campaign against Khokhar tribesmen in the Punjab, Ilutmish was manumitted by his master and eventually married Aibak’s daughter.

Upon the death of Mohammad Ghauri in 1206, Aibak proclaimed himself sultan of Delhi, making himself ruler of the Ghaurid territories in North India.
The new sultan appointed Iltutmish *muqti* of Baran (modern Bulandshahr); a *muqti* controlled a large territory as an *iqta* and was responsible for maintaining order in his holding. When Aibak died in 1210, the powerful corps of Turkish slave officers, the *chihilganis*, proclaimed Aram Shah as sultan, but his incompetence led to his rapid overthrow and replacement by Iltutmish.

The new sultan faced numerous challenges to his authority. In 1216, Iltutmish defeated Taj al-Din Yildiz, another former slave of Mohammad Ghauri, who proclaimed himself sultan at Ghazni on his master’s death and who then sought to extend his rule into Mohammad Ghauri’s former Indian territories. In 1227, Iltutmish defeated another claimant to his throne, Qubacha, the ruler of Sind in what is now southeastern Pakistan. In 1229, Iltutmish significantly bolstered his position by persuading the caliph of Baghdad to recognize him as sultan of Delhi.

In 1221, Iltutmish avoided a conflict with the Mongol conqueror Chinggis Khan, who had reached the banks of the Indus River in northwestern India while in pursuit of his defeated foe Jalal al-din Mingbarni. When Mingbarni crossed the river in hopes of finding refuge in the Delhi sultanate, Iltutmish refused to allow him to come to Delhi, thereby preventing a Mongol attack. Iltutmish also extended his authority in Hindu India, subjugating the rulers of Ranthambhor, Mandu, and Ujjain between 1226 and 1234. Iltutmish nominated his daughter Raziya as his successor, and, despite opposition from the nobility, she was able to assume the throne shortly after Iltutmish’s death in 1236. See also Document 11.

**Further Reading**


*John A. Wagner*

**Iqta**

In the *Delhi sultanate*, an *iqta* was a tract of land, varying in size from a single village to an entire province, that was granted by the sultan to nobles and military or civil officials in lieu of a cash salary. Unlike the feudal system in medieval Europe, under the *iqta* system, the land was not granted to the noble—ownership remained with its non-Muslim holder—only the revenue derived from the land. This revenue took the form of the *kharaj* or land tax on non-Muslims, collection of which was assigned to a particular individual in payment for his services to the state. The *iqta* system had developed in the Middle East in the ninth century as a method for paying military officers during periods between military campaigns when the amount of revenue flowing into the state treasury decreased.

The *iqta* system came to India via the Turks of Central Asia. It significantly increased revenue extraction from the Hindu countryside and allowed the central administration of the sultanate to effectively control rural surpluses without the need for an extensive and costly administrative structure. Because
the *iqta* holders made regular payments to the government of the tithes they
dowed as Muslims out of the revenue they collected, the sultan’s treasury
funded military forces for local defense in emergencies and for the mainte-
nance of order in the countryside. The *iqta* enabled the Delhi sultanate to main-
tain its large cavalry force during a period of threatened Mongol invasion and
to feed a large urban-based, non-agricultural population.

A large *iqta* was held by a *muqti*, who maintained the cavalry forces paid for
out of his revenue assignment and was responsible for law and order within
the territories in his charge. A soldier who held only a small assignment, a vil-
lage or part thereof, was called an *iqtadar*. Originally, *iqtas* were rotated among
holders to prevent any individual from developing a strong interest in or claim
to any particular territory. However, during the reign of Sultan Firuz Shah
Tughluq (1351–1388) *iqtas* became hereditary, passing from father to son.

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John A. Wagner

**Jainism**

In about 540 B.C.E., a religion was founded in India that grew from the roots
of Hinduism yet has been established as a separate religion on the subconti-
nent. The founder, Jnatrputra Vardhamana, who became known to his follow-
ers as Mahavira (“Great Hero”), was roughly a contemporary of the Buddha,
and like him he was a member of the warrior caste.

Like Buddha, Mahavira was disillusioned with classical Hinduism and its
pantheism of gods, and searched for enlightenment. Without clothes or a home,
he wandered for 12 years and was often attacked by suspicious villagers.
Eventually he experienced nirvana, a state of being free from ego and worldly
attachments. After that, he was known as a “Jina” or conqueror. The word Jain
means a follower of a Jina.

Once Mahavira achieved enlightenment, he spent his time in meditation, sit-
ting in a crossed-legged lotus position. A Jain community consisting of monks,
nuns, and laymen and women quickly rose up around him and numbered in
the tens of thousands. When he died in about 527 B.C.E., a number of kings cel-
brated a festival of lights to mark the passing of his internal light, which had
gone to nirvana. Jains believe that Mahavira is now in the blissful state of
ishatpragbhara, beyond life, death, and reincarnation. After his death, his mes-
 sage was left in the care of eleven disciples, who collected and translated his
scriptures into a canon known as the “Agamas.”

Jains share with Hinduism a belief in reincarnation in a universe without
beginning. Again, like Hinduism and Buddhism, Jains believe in karma, the
belief that a person’s thoughts and deeds are followed eventually by inevita-
ble consequences. In Hinduism, karma is an explanation for the caste sys-
tem; in Buddhism, karma is primarily psychological. In Jainism, however, it
is understood in physical terms. Mahavira taught that individual souls are entrapped into matter perpetuated by successive births. Because every action produces karma and karma adds weight to the chains of physical bondage, the only route to escape is to avoid action altogether. In Mahavira’s philosophy, an ideal life is one of extreme asceticism, culminating in death through self-starvation, a feat the master is alleged to have achieved.

Prominent in the Jain faith is the doctrine of *ahisma* or noninjury to living beings. Jains believe souls are entrapped in all living forms, from rats, to grasshoppers, to vegetables and weeds. In its extreme form of practice, holy men and women believe care should be taken to avoid taking life from any living thing. Water is strained to remove any creatures in it; masks are worn to avoid breathing small flies. Paths are swept before taking a step to clear insects, and the only acceptable *food* is that which does not cost a life. Therefore, holy people eat only fruit that has fallen naturally from trees.

Although Jainism does not acknowledge any deities, nevertheless it soon came to take on the trappings of other religions. Jains built temples for worshipers to meditate on the lives of “Tirthankaras” (pathfinders or ford builders), holy people like Mahavira, who have escaped the cycles of rebirth. Jains may also erect a Jina image and bathe it to demonstrate reverence. Some celebrate the birthday of Mahavira in the spring and his liberation in the fall.

Jainism has coexisted with Buddhism and Hinduism for millennia. The Jain view of life, with its respect for all creatures and its demand for nonviolence, has commanded much respect. It shares with Hinduism the law of karma and the cycle of rebirths. It shares with Buddhism the absence of deities, but, unlike the “middle way” of Buddhism, the renunciations of Jainism are more extreme.

**Further Reading**


*Joyce E. Salisbury*

**Jiziya**

The *jiziya* was a poll tax imposed by Islamic states on their non-Muslim subjects. The tax was levied on all able-bodied non-Muslim men of military age, and thus was a payment in lieu of military service. The tax was not to be imposed on women, children, slaves, or those unfit for military service through age or illness, though these restrictions were often ignored in later centuries throughout the Islamic world. In the initial Muslim conquests, the *jiziya* was imposed mainly on Christians and Jews, people of a religious faith based on some type of scripture.

In India, the *jiziya* was imposed on Hindus and in Iran on Zoroastrians. For the conquered, the *jiziya* represented a continuation of the taxes they had paid to their former rulers; for the Muslims, it represented an acknowledgment of the taxpayer’s subjugation to Islam. Although payment of the *jiziya* supposedly entitled non-Muslims to practice their faith, to some communal autonomy, to military protection, and to exemption from other taxes, these privileges
were also often ignored, and many people converted to Islam to escape payment of the jiziya.

In the Delhi sultanate, there was initially little distinction between the jiziya and the land tax imposed on non-Muslims known as the kharaj. Under Sultan Firuz Shah Tughluq (r. 1351–1388), an attempt was made to extend imposition of the jiziya to Brahmins and to urban Hindus, but resistance was great and the tax was apparently dropped.

Further Reading

John A. Wagner

Kafur Hazardinari, Malik (d. 1316)

As commander of the army of the Delhi sultanate under Sultan Allauddin Khilji (r. 1296–1316), Malik Kafur Hazardinari, an Indian slave and eunuch, launched various campaigns into South India that subjugated the Hindu states of the region to Delhi. In 1315 to 1316, during the sultan’s final illness, Malik Kafur also directed the central administration as viceroy, a position that allowed him to make an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to control the succession to the throne.

How Malik Kafur became a slave of the sultan is unclear. Some sources indicate that he was taken prisoner when Allauddin Khilji conquered the city of Kambhat in Gujarat. Finding himself physically attracted to the Indian eunuch, the sultan took him to court. Other sources say the sultan found Malik Kafur in Gujarat and bought him as a slave for 1,000 dinars, hence his later use of the name “Hazardinari.” After his conversion to Islam, Malik Kafur was appointed barbeg, or military chamberlain of the court. He commanded forces against the Mongols in 1306 and 1307 and in 1310 was given command of a campaign into South India. After successful sieges, he forced the Yadava king of Deogir and the Kakatiya king of Warangal to pay tribute to Delhi. In a second campaign in 1311, he pushed as far south as any Muslim army ever had, crossing the Krishna River and forcing the rulers of the Hoyasala and Pandya kingdoms to submit and pay tribute.

By 1315, Malik Kafur was viceroy and exercising a growing influence over the dying sultan. He obtained permission to imprison and blind Khizr Khan, Allauddin Khilji’s eldest son and heir apparent, and procured the execution of his chief rival for power, Alp Khan. Upon the Allauddin Khilji’s death in January 1316, Malik Kafur installed one of the late sultan’s infant sons on the throne, intending to rule the Delhi sultanate in the child’s name. The plan failed when Malik Kafur was assassinated by paiks, members of the sultan’s elite bodyguard of Hindu warriors.
Further Reading

John A. Wagner

Kalidasa (fl. fourth/fifth centuries C.E.)

The court of Chandra Gupta II provided a rich environment for cultural expressions, and most scholars place Kalidasa—the greatest Indian poet and dramatist—at his court. Although Kalidasa is recognized as the author of no more than three plays and four poems, he is regarded as the “Shakespeare of India.”

Little is known of Kalidasa’s life except hints within his works. He was identified in various stories as an orphan, idiot, laborer, and shepherd, yet his wide-ranging knowledge of Sanskrit, religion, and philosophy probably marks him as a Brahman and a follower of the cult of Siva. His name means “servant of Kali,” one of the consorts of Siva. His familiarity with geography suggests that he was a traveler who may have served as an ambassador of his king. Although all these biographical notes are speculative, his writings stand on their own merits.

His greatest poem is the *Cloud Messenger* (The *Meghaduta*). The first part of the poem describes India from the view of a cloud. The poem then describes an earth spirit who, exiled from his wife, sends her a love message via the cloud traveling to the Himalayas. The poem plays on the intensity of love, and the travels of the cloud over Ujjain lends credence to the idea of Kalidasa as a traveler and diplomat. The poem is original and establishes the creative skill of the poet. This poem was translated in the nineteenth century, and influenced the German romantic poet Goethe.

Indian drama evolved out of a combination of religious instruction and entertainment. It combined dialogue in prose and poetry with dance and was performed by men and women. The plots dealt with romantic love and drew heavily on themes from the epics. The plays were never tragedies and resorted to magic or miracles to produce happy endings.

The most famous of all Sanskrit dramas is Kalidasa’s masterpiece *Shakuntala*. This traces the fortunes of a woman deserted by her lover who has been robbed of his memory. The lover (who is a king) recognizes a ring recovered from the belly of fish as a token he had given to his beloved, and after a series of further misadventures the two are reunited to live happily ever after. Although the plot seems simple (and contrived), the play contrasts the demands of public life with the serenity of simple values to offer a complex portrait of courtly life. *Shakuntala* was translated into English in 1789, bringing this great dramatist to the attention of the West. Kalidasa was strikingly original in his own time, and his work has survived the test of time to bring the golden age of India into the modern world. See also Document 5.
Kanauj

Located in north central India, Kanauj was the sociopolitical center of North India for much of the pre-Muslim medieval period, from the height of the Gupta Empire in the fifth century to the Ghaurid invasion of the late twelfth century. The city was also an important religious center, being a noted site of Buddhist monasteries, especially during the Guptan and Harshan Periods, and a Hindu center of Brahmanical learning and influence in North India.

Kanauj was an important town, economically and religiously, under the Guptas. The town is frequently referred to in the epic Mahabharata. When the Chinese Buddhist monk Faxian visited the town in 405, it was not large and had only two Buddhist monasteries, but when Xuanzang, another Chinese pilgrim who visited India in the seventh century, came to the city in 636, he found a large and growing urban center with numerous Buddhist monasteries and shrines. Xuanzang chose to live in Kanauj for 7 years.

The city reached its height in the early seventh century, when it was the capital of the great North Indian empire ruled by Harsha (r. 606–647). Under Harsha, the city had a great population and was known for its grandeur and prosperity. The city was said to be strongly fortified and to have had many beautiful gardens and hundreds of Hindu and Buddhist temples and monasteries, which extended along the east bank of the Ganges River for almost 4 miles.

Harsha’s empire collapsed shortly after his death, and, by the eighth century, control of Kanauj was contested by three dynasties, the Rajput Pratiharas of the kingdom of Malwa to the west, the Rashtrakutas of the Deccan to the south, and the Palas of Bengal to the east. In the late eighth century, the Pala king Dharmapal seized Kanauj and installed a puppet ruler in the city. In the ninth century, the Pratihara king Nagabhata II conquered Kanauj, which then served as the Pratihara capital for nearly 200 years. During the Pratihara Period, the city became known as a center of poetry and literature. In 916, the Rashtrakuta king Indra III captured Kanauj from the waning Pratihara kingdom.

In 1019, the Muslim invader Mahmud of Ghazni sacked Kanauj, and the city thereafter fell under the control of the Rajput Chandela clan and then, in 1085, to the Sahadvala dynasty, which, under its greatest ruler Govindachandra (r. 1112–1155), again made Kanauj the center of a great state. In 1193, the Ghaurid conqueror Mu’izz al-din Muhammad Ghauri defeated and killed the last Sahadvala king and annexed Kanauj to the Ghaurid Empire. The city then became part of the Delhi sultanate when that kingdom was formed out of the Ghaurids’ Indian territories after 1206. Under the Delhi sultans, Kanauj was always a rich and important iqta, yielding significant revenues to its holder.

Further Reading

John A. Wagner
Khara

The kharaaj was the land tax collected in a Muslim state. In medieval India, it was introduced to the Delhi sultanate during the reign of Sultan Allauddin Khilji (1296–1316) and quickly became the most important source of state revenue.

The kharaaj developed in the seventh century following the first Muslim conquests, when it was a tax, usually in the form of a lump-sum duty, levied on all dhimmis, or non-Muslim subjects living in the conquered territories. The kharaaj was initially synonymous with the jiziya, which later developed into a poll tax imposed on dhimmis. Muslim landowners usually paid a ushr, a religious tithe, which was assessed at a much lower rate than the kharaaj. As many dhimmis converted to Islam, tax revenues fell, and attempts to impose taxes at the full kharaaj rate upon Muslims were fiercely resisted. Thus, in the eighth century, the Abbasid caliphs devised a compromise by forbidding the transfer of land subject to kharaaj to Muslims and by decreeing that any Muslim who leased such land must pay kharaaj. Over time, this compromise led to the imposition of kharaaj on most lands, regardless of the owner’s religion.

In fourteenth-century India, the kharaaj collected in territories under the control of the Delhi sultanate, consisted of half the total produce from a given piece of land paid in cash and kind. The Delhi sultans did not appear to distinguish the kharaaj land tax from the jiziya, which was elsewhere a poll tax on non-Muslims. Because Allauddin Khilji required large standing armies to resist the repeated incursions of the Mongols, the imposition of the kharaaj and other taxes on Hindu peasants lowered grain prices in the cities, thus minimizing unrest in the urban centers and providing the government with greater revenues for maintaining and enlarging the army. The kharaaj also significantly reduced the power of local Hindu magistrates by depriving them of control over any peasant surplus and it also helped to strengthen the central government in relation to provincial governors, who often took advantage of fiscal weakness in Delhi to increase their own authority in their territories. However, under Allauddin Khilji’s successors, these high tax rates led to great unrest among the rural peasantry, and, especially under Sultan Muhammad bin Tughluq (r. 1325–1351), to peasant uprisings. Nonetheless, this augmented land tax remained the major source of state revenue far beyond the medieval period.

Further Reading

Law

Hindu Legal Texts

The Hindu jurisprudence or Dhramasastra (instructions of sacred laws) is not one single text but a collection of jural prescriptions, the most important of which were written down roughly between the second and twelfth centuries C.E.
before the advent of Muslim rule. They were composed in verse form and were often thought of, especially by British colonial jurists, as legal texts, which they are not. They are corpuses of jurisprudence or discourses on proper conduct of self for living a full moral life as a Hindu Brahmin. In ancient and medieval India, most legal disputes were determined locally within a village by customary laws, and only the most difficult civil disputes were brought to the attention to the ruler, who was morally bound to settle them. This was also the pattern under Muslim rule. In disputes brought to the king’s court, each case was judged by its merits, and no reference was made to any legislative acts or recourse had to any binding legal procedures as is done in modern legal cases. Generally, the litigants were expected to plead their cases directly to the king; there were no professional lawyers in medieval India.

The Hindu legal system operated on broad principles sanctioned by the Dharamasastra texts, which offer prescriptive guidelines but no uniform binding set of rules. In the Middle Ages, the idea of litigation developed and the Dharamasastra texts began to give a number of procedural guidelines for the king and his legal officials to follow. Since the twelfth century, with the advent of Muslim rule in large parts of India, the development of Hindu jurisprudence seemed to stagnate, but the local customary law, by which cases were settled in villages and communities, continued to flourish.

There are a number of legal texts within the copus of Dharamasastra; the earliest, called Manua Dhrama Sastra, was written by Manu sometime during the second or third centuries C.E. Other important legal authors were Yājñvalkya, Nārada, and Vishnu. Manu was primarily concerned with human conduct while the writings of the later authorities look more like modern legal textbooks. Many medieval jurists also wrote long commentaries of Dhramasastras, most important being Vijnanesvara, who was a member of the court of the Chalukya ruler ruler Vikramaditya VI (1075–1127). Vijnanesvara’s work, Mitaksara, a commentary of the legal texts of Vajnavalkya, has influenced modern Hindu civil law. Hemadri (c. 1300) and Jimutavahana (twelfth century) wrote works on property inheritance that have also influenced the civil laws of modern India.

Crime in Hindu States

Crime was a serious problem in medieval India, but apparently not so in ancient India. Early Greek travelers such as Megasthenis (350–290 B.C.E.), who was the Mauryan ambassador to the court of Chandra Gupta Maurya, wrote that Indians of his era were remarkably law abiding and serious crimes was rare. A similar impression is left by the writings of the Chinese traveler Faxian, who visited India during the early Gupta Period (see Gupta Empire). But during the time of Harsha in the seventh century C.E., serious crimes had increased many fold. The Chinese traveler Xuanzang wrote of hereditary bandits much like the nineteenth-century thugs, who robbed their victims and murdered them as religious sacrifices. Merchant caravans were plundered by organized highway robbers. To check this rampant increase in criminal behavior, kings used local officials, garrison commanders, and village and city watchmen. They also created a medieval version of detectives called duhsadhu sadhanika, who had the role of tracking down and apprehending criminals.

Administration of Justice in Hindu States

According to ancient Hindu legal texts, the king was the sole source of justice. He had the role of chief judge and executioner and had the duty to strike
criminals with his mace. But in reality, the administration of justice over vast territories was overwhelming for any single person, and the task of maintaining law and order was delegated to a number of lesser officials and courts. The king’s court was reserved only for serious crimes, such as treason, and for appeals against the judgment of smaller courts or complaints about the actions of royal officials.

The composition of the court varied depending on the time and place, but evidence indicates that Indians seem to have preferred a group of three or five judges rather than a single judge. Literary evidence suggests a chief judge called *adhikaranika* presided over a case aided by two junior magistrates who were leading citizens of that community. The term *adhikara* means “government office,” which suggests that the judge was a magistrate and also an administrator, very much like the district collector during British rule. There were also courts of appeals in towns and at the capital in the king’s court.

Literary sources also tell of instances of judicial corruption, but the judges were expected to maintain high moral standards and character. To prevent bribery by the litigants, no private meetings were allowed between the judge and the litigants until the case was settled. The ancient text of statecraft *Arthasastra* prescribes that the honesty of the judge should be periodically tested by an ancient version of a sting operation. Certain of the *Dharmasastra* texts call for loss of property and banishment for a judge found guilty of either corruption or injustice, which are serious penalties for a member of the Brahmin caste. Many learned Brahmins could have used their legal knowledge from the *Dharmasastra* texts to achieve out-of-court settlements. There is also evidence in the late Middle Ages that some litigants employed learned Brahmin to support their case, and the Brahmin was rewarded by getting a share of the money awarded to the litigant as redress.

Giving false testimony was severely punished; the penalties were made all the more severe by religious sanctions providing for a number of miserable rebirths. In certain minor civil cases, only certain witnesses were admitted to give evidence in support of the litigants. Those who were rejected include learned Brahmins, women, government servants, debtors, people with criminal records, and people with physical defects—presumably people who could have prejudiced the outcome either by their personal status within the community, by self-interest, or by their general reputation or demeanor. Caste and status also influenced legal proceedings; the testimony of a low-caste or low-class person was not as valid as the testimony of higher caste members. In serious cases of litigation, evidence may be accepted from all sources. Several psychological tests were also given to ensure that the witness was mentally sound.

As for the use of judicial torture, Xuanzang flatly denied the use of corporal punishment to extract confessions even in serious criminal cases or those involving treason in the areas that he visited during the early seventh century. The guilty were simply given life sentences. But according to the Hindu legal text *Manua Dhrama Sastra*, the use of judicial torture to extract confessions was permitted (in the form of whipping) if there was overwhelming evidence that the accused was the culprit. Manu exempted from such judicial torture pregnant women, Brahmins, children, the sick, and lunatics. Xuanzang acknowledged common use of trial by ordeal for civil and criminal cases; he also stated that this procedure was used only when no other recourse was left to judge.
Trial by ordeal evolved only during the Middle Ages; ancient texts fail to mention it. Certain medieval legalists took a dim view of the entire notion of judicial torture and cautioned that the procedure should be employed only under the most exceptional circumstances. The logic behind trial by ordeal seemed straightforward to contemporaries. It called for supernatural interference in cases where there was no course left to find the guilty party. Divinity or the karmic law interceded to produce the unfavorable outcome and reveal the culprit. Xuanzang listed four kinds of trial by ordeal. In trial by water, the accused was placed into a burlap sack with weights attached and tossed into a deep pond; if they survived, they were deemed innocent. In trial by fire, the accused was asked to lift a scalding iron or to sit on a red hot plowshare; if there was no scarification or singed tongue, they were deemed innocent. In trial by weight, the accused was placed on a scale with a stone of equal weight; if the stone sank, it was judged as evidence of their guilt. In trial by poison, the thigh of a ram was slit open and the leftovers of the accused’s meal were mixed with poison and placed in the incision; if the ram survived; the accused was judged innocent. If a person was judged unfit or unwilling to undergo these ordeals, then the judgment of the court was decided by proxy. Flower buds were tossed near the flame and if the buds opened then the party was judged innocent, but if the flower was scorched by the flames then the accused was judged guilty.

**Nature of Punishments in Hindu States**

In the ancient period, many crimes were punished by death; the *Arthasastra* prescribes hanging for burglary and being buried alive for plotting against the ruler. Death was also prescribed for forced entry into the king’s harem; creating disaffection in the army; murder of one’s own parents, siblings, or children; arson; committing willful murder; and stealing cattle. A person who deliberately broke a dam would be publicly drowned in it; a women who killed her own children would be publicly torn apart by a team of oxen; and civilians stealing military supplies would be killed by arrows. Most legalists, however, were surprisingly lenient toward sexual crimes. The most common form of execution was impalement. Literary evidence also suggests that there were questions raised as to the merits of condemning the guilty to death and this is discussed in a passage from the epic *Mahabharata*. The argument against capital punishment and heavy penalties was based on humanitarian grounds—the possibility that the innocent would suffer with the guilty and the suffering of the families of the condemned, who had to bear a large part of the burden. This case is however rejected on the basis of the greater good for society. The spirit of the law behind capital punishment argued in the passage from the *Mahabharata* was meant to avoid social anarchy by keeping the guilty away from the rest of the society so that the rest could conduct their lives in peace.

The medieval Indian state saw itself as a moral order and, by this time, the humanitarian ideal of Buddhism had sufficiently seeped in the society so that capital punishment was abolished by most rulers. This was confirmed by the Chinese traveler Faxian concerning North India. He noted most kings imposed fines for most crimes only in cases of serious revolt against the ruler an arm in amputated. The Chinese scholar-monk Xuanzang who visited early medieval India some 200 years later informs that death penalty was replaced by life sentences for serious crimes. In the opinion of Xuanzang, the criminal
trial proceedings were conducted fairly as it gave the necessary consideration for the accused to defend themselves. And if the accused cooperated with the authorities then his punishments were also mitigated accordingly. He sees that the major factor that to prevent people from committing crimes was not so much the social sanctions or legal penalties but the far greater dread of violating the law of karma that would lead to unimaginable suffering in future lives. Ordinary people in India are easy going but are upright and honorable notes Xuanzang, and he has high regard as to the character of the average person who conducts himself with “much gentleness and sweetness.” In financial dealings Xuanzang also find the Indians straight forward and good at keeping their oaths and promises.

From Chola country in South India inscriptional evidence indicates that for a case of the murder of an army officer the guilty party had to pay a fine of twenty-six sheep and endow funds to maintain a perpetual lamp in a temple. In cases of blood feuds if the guilty could appease the family of the victim he is then let off lightly. Others record murders who were freed after paying fines. Killing for self-defense was considered as a justified homicide in medieval South India, and the accused faced no legal sanction; and the stealing small quantities of food in the case of famine or to avoid starvation was also considered as a justified theft. It seems overall that the judicial norms and the criminal penalties in medieval India were relatively mild in relation to any other states of this period. For minor crimes there is always a chance of arbitration to settle the dispute. The minor crimes were also judged by the village council, caste guilds whose validity as jural bodies is recognized by the legal literature. They could punish the offender by their own customs either by making him pay a fine or in case of serious crimes by banishment. These local bodies played an important part in adjudicating everyday disputes as the king’s court was for more serious crime. Xuanzang also mentions for serious civil cases mutilation was inflicted. In exceptionally serious domestic spousal abuse or the neglect of the elderly, if the deeds of the accused seemed particularly repugnant to the moral code of the entire community then the offender will lose his limbs, either ear, nose, hand, or feet by amputation or will be forced in to exile to desolate areas.

In later times, many animals were protected by law, especially the cow. Wanton killing of a cow was a serious offense, and heavy fines were imposed for the cattle killer. The Dhramasastras were class biased and tended to be lenient toward upper class/caste violators. A Brahmin slandering a Kshatriya had to pay a fine of fifty pana, but slandering a Sudra cost him only half as much. An accused belonging to the Sudra caste had to pay a great deal more for slandering a Brahmin. But guilty Brahmins were not always let off easily for certain crimes, such as theft. If the Sudra criminal was caught stealing he had to make redress by paying eight times the value of the stolen item. Whereas the Brahmin caught stealing had to pay sixty times the value of the stolen item. These differences indicate that the upper castes were expected to follow higher standards of morality, and therefore the levels of their fines were also high.

**Islamic Law**

Muslim law or *shari’a* made an impact in Indian legal practice after the Islamic invasions of the tenth century. Muslim personal law also became important as the Muslim population continued to grow. Serious criminal cases were
tried in the court of the sultan or by his appointed official at local and district level, and the sultans replaced the earlier Hindu criminal codes with Islamic criminal codes. Under Islamic rule, foreign-born Muslims who are well versed in shari’a, who were known a qadi (or magistrates), were offered attractive salaries to invite them to assume senior magistrate positions to settle legal cases involving Muslims. The most famous of these foreign magistrates was the Islamic scholar Ibn Battuta, who arrived in Delhi as a qadi in 1334. The qadi was expected to be guided as much by prevailing legal norms as by the legal injunctions prescribed by the Islamic shari’a code. As a result, pure shari’a injunctions were often modified and even superseded by local legal customs, especially those concerning inheritance, marriage, or adoption. The sultan’s court also functioned as the court of last appeal, but most litigants in civil cases would have found it either difficult to access or far too intimidating to settle their disputes.

Further Reading

Raman N. Seylon

**Mahabharata**

The early peoples of India produced stirring epic poetry commemorating their early history, portrayed as an heroic age of individual prowess. The long-est of the epic poems is the *Mahabharata*, and it had a long history before it appeared in its final form in the Middle Ages.

Beginning in the middle of the first millennium B.C.E., the *Mahabharata* consisted of popular stories of gods and kings. Like heroic tales from all over the world, these were told and retold. After about 350 C.E., the tales were written down into what became a unified, sacred text of one-hundred thousand stanzas written in Sanskrit. Shortly after 1000, it began to be translated into vernacular languages of India that increased its influence and popularity.

The epic is a complex tale of the rivalry between two branches of the royal family of northern India. It tells of two sets of paternal first cousins, the five sons of the deceased king Pandu and the one-hundred sons of the blind King Khritarashtra who fought for the possession of the ancestral kingdom on the Ganga River. The account of the struggle is filled with exciting episodes including a rare example of polyandry: a princess agrees to marry all four brothers. It includes accounts of gambling as the brothers wage the kingdom on a throw of the dice.

An actual battle that was fought near Delhi around 1400 B.C.E. provides the climax of the story. Allegedly kings from Greece and China as well as from all over India joined in the fight, which lasted 18 days and ended with practically all the participants slain. The five brothers survived and recovered their kingdom with the aid of the god Krishna.

Much of the action is accompanied by a discussion and debate about the ethics of the decisions. The most famous sermon “The Song of the Blessed One” delivered during Krishna’s revelation of his divinity just before the battle served as a powerful stimulus to the worship of Krishna and had a profound influence on the theology of Hinduism. Part of the power of the epic
was that the victory in war did not eng the concern about the ethics of the battle. According to the epic, in the years that followed the war the king and queen retreated to a forest to live a life of asceticism and died with yogic calm in a forest fire. The other participants also completed their journey to their final test before entering heaven.

The *Mahabharata* grew to resemble an encyclopedia of early Indian mythology and history. It was chanted by priests performing sacrificial rites for royal courts, and it took on religious significance. Eventually the epics replaced the Vedas (restricted to the Brahmans) as the bible for common people because anyone could listen to them. The final form of the epics was one of the most significant contributions of medieval India. See also Document 1.

**Further Reading**


*Joyce E. Salisbury*

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**Money and Exchange Systems**

**Pre-Islamic Currency**

The exchange and currency system of early medieval South India, under the Cholas, can serve as general example of similar systems across the India. Two main exchange units were paddy rice (unhusked rice) and gold, which were used to buy regular food items, such as ghee (clarified butter). Imported long-distance trade items, such as cardamom seeds, were assigned in cash value. Livestock such as female sheep (ewes) were also used as a unit of barter, for example, a cow might be bartered for two ewes and a water buffalo cow for six ewes.

In the Chola Period, a large piece of gold coin was called a *pon* or *kalanju*, with the latter term also referring to a unit of weight. Such coins were also referred to as *madhurantakan-madal* when not used as a medium of exchange but as gold endowments for temples. A smaller denomination, referred to as *kasu* (from which derives the modern term *cash*), was equal to one-half the weight of the *kalanju* and was issued for general circulation in the late tenth century. These issues of smaller denominations or gold *kasu* were possibly the direct result of expansion of maritime trade networks that stretched from the South India Sea to the Red Sea and were the standard gold currency used in trade. The ratio of *kasu* to *kalanju* fluctuated widely; one *kalanju* was equal to two *kasu* around 1050, but fetched one *kasu* and six *ma* (*mari*) in 1077.

By the twelfth century, minted coins of low exchange value appeared; these were composed of alloys of gold or silver mixed with copper. The term *fanam* was commonly used for the basic silver punch-marked coin that was present since antiquity. Great concentrations of low-value coins of alloy or copper
have been found in port cities where there was a greater need for a standard unit of exchange.

It has been argued that a scarcity of minted coins in early medieval North India led to an exchange system that generally resorted to barter. This argument is supported by the Chinese scholar Xuanzang who stated: “They always barter their commercial transactions for they have no gold or silver coins (mother of pearls) or little pearls” (Beal, 89–90). However, archaeological evidence tends to undermine such sweeping statements; silver coins weighing 0.6 to 0.9 grams and dated from the seventh to the twelfth centuries were circulated in western and northwestern India.

Furthermore, due to a shortage of locally available minted coins, a single region may have used a variety of different coinage systems deriving from different geographical areas within India and abroad. However, this situation did not handicap the flow of local commerce because a vigorous exchange rate was created by fixing the range of minimum purity and the value of its weight to create a common currency system out of many separate coinage systems. Most of the foreign gold coins were hoarded as cash reserves by individuals and the state. These reserves were tapped during dire financial emergencies; for the state, this meant the salary for its soldiers during war—an unpaid medieval army often refused to fight or openly mutinied.

In premodern times, the value of a coin was directly proportional to the value of its metal content. Thus, coins were not only a facilitator of exchange of various goods and services, but also a commodity that had an intrinsic value independent of its monetary function. An uncoined, unstamped copper bar of silver or gold dust could also be used as a medium of exchange. In eastern India, cowry shells were used as small denominational currency. In Bengal, land rent was paid in cowry shells as late as the eighteenth century.

**Islamic Currency**

During the early days of Islamic conquest, the sultans of the Gangatic Plains used earlier Indian coins with the Hindu goddess of fortune on one side and the name of the ruler on the other. This meant that the entire process of coinage production was in the hands of local Indian moneyers. Hindu goldsmiths and money changers, known as sarrafs, were members of the Hindu Sonar caste and controlled the entire monetary policy of the sultanate, as they had done previously for Hindu dynasties. An important source of information on medieval Islamic coinage is *Drarya-Pariksha (An Examination of the Coins)*, written in the fourteenth century by Thakkura Pheru, the son of the Hindu Master of Mint during the reign of Allauddin Khilji. The book deals with techniques for purifying gold and silver and making mixed metals and alloys and also discusses the weight and value of coins struck in different parts of India.

Gold was weighed by medieval jewellers and moneyers using the seeds of the *abrus precatorius* plant (or gunja seeds) as a standard in North India, and *molucca* beans (*caesalpinia crista*) as a standard in Tamil country in South India. The basic unit of gold by weight in Tamil country was called *kalanju*, which was equal to the weight of the *molucca* bean. The *kalanju* was divided into 20 *manjadi*, and each *manjadi* was further divided into two *kunari*. These weighing measures using either gunja seeds or *molucca* beans tended to fluctuate by area and over time.

Literary evidence is lacking for the early development of distinct Islamic gold and silver coinage that became the standard for much of India over the
next seven centuries. One of the earliest specially minted coins were the “victory coins,” which proclaimed the conquest of Hindu kingdoms by Moslem forces. The earliest of these coins, called a *tanka*, was specially minted for the Delhi sultanate; it had a galloping horseman with body armor holding a mace with his right hand. The coin’s Arabic inscription dates it to 1205, while its Nagari inscription states “at the victory of Bengal.” These early coins, minted only in smaller denominations for wide circulation, seem to have been issued for the sole purpose of making a political statement to the masses about the transfer of political power. As the standard coin of the sultanate, the *tanka*, either in gold or silver, came in various denominations. Over time, it was replaced by two separate coins, the *diner*, which was the standard gold coin, and the *rupee* or *rupia*, the standard silver coin, which had a wider circulation. The exchange rate between gold and silver during the Delhi sultanate period was firmly fixed at 1:10. Most of precious metals were supplied by the plunder of Hindu kingdoms further south and east and the plunder of religious centers, such as monasteries and temples. The fourteenth-century historian Ziauddin Barani noted that the expedition to Pandian country in the deep south yielded 241 metric tons of gold (possibly an exaggeration). Despite the scarcity of silver in India—it came from mines in Afghanistan, Burma, and southwestern China—the rate of exchange remained constant. The value of gold in relation to silver did not depreciate considerably; rather silver disappeared from circulation as a currency.

Fractional coins were minted in larger quantities in gold and copper and their value ranged from 1/2 to 1/16 of a *tanka*. These coins were found in wider circulation, reaching the rich and the average through economic transactions; they also travelled outside the frontiers of the state through trade and pilgrimage. The language used on the coinage issued by the sultanate generally was Arabic, mixed with Persian and occasional was made of Nagari script. Modern coinage systems are used primarily to facilitate economic transactions, but, in medieval times, coins served a variety of noneconomic functions, such as legitimacy, propaganda, thanksgiving, and royal appeal.

Further Reading

Raman N. Seylon

**Mongols**

The northwest edge of the Indian subcontinent (including modern Afghanistan) was always subject to invaders from Central Asia. In the thirteenth century,
this region was controlled by the **Delhi sultanate**, a Muslim dynasty that was established in 1206. These rulers, however, had to contend with incursions by the Mongols, a fierce people who conquered all of northern Asia into Europe.

The great grasslands of Central Asia produced many nomadic peoples who herded grazing animals and moved as their animals thinned the vegetation. The Mongols were one more group of these nomads. The nomadic peoples were strongly linked to kinship groups, which made it difficult for them to join together into larger social entities. However, during the thirteenth century, the Mongols united and formed the largest empire the world had ever seen.

In the same year that the Delhi sultanate was established, a Mongol leader named Temujin brought all the tribes into a single confederation, and an assembly of Mongol leaders proclaimed him “Chinggis (Genghis) Khan,” which means “universal ruler.” Chinggis was an extraordinary figure, who is remembered for his appalling cruelty as well as for his wisdom and talent as a leader, for after the violence of his initial conquest, Chinggis established a peaceful, tolerant rule. He implemented the first Mongol written language and promulgated the first law code for his nomadic people.

Once he had united the Mongols, Chinggis Khan turned his formidable army against the settled societies of Central Asia. He conquered Tibet, northern China, Persia, and the Central Asian steppes. By 1215, the Mongols had captured the capital of China near modern Beijing. By the time of his death in 1227, Chinggis Khan had established a mighty empire centered in China and extending west to Persia and into Europe. His grandson, Kublai Khan, established the Yuan dynasty in China, and Kublai’s brothers and cousins established Mongol kingdoms further west.

Kublai’s brother Hulegu conquered the ‘Abbasid empire in Persia and established the Mongol ilkhanate. In 1258, he captured the capital of Baghdad. It was this branch of the Mongol khans that swept into northwest India threatening the **sultanate of Delhi**. Even in areas where the ilkhanate of Persia was not able to exert direct control, the Mongol influence in India was felt. Groups of Mongols settled in northern India and adopted agricultural or industrial pursuits. So numerous were they in Delhi in the late thirteenth century that a section of the city was called “Mongol Town.” The sultan employed Mongol troops as mercenaries, but that relationship was always tenuous. The sultans were often suspicious of their loyalty, and in one incident tens of thousands of Mongols were massacred.

The Mongols in China tried to stay aloof from their Chinese subjects and maintain their own separate identity. In Persia, on the other hand, the Mongols were more willing to assimilate. In 1295, Ilkhan Ghazan converted to Islam, and most of the Mongols in Persia followed his example. This allowed the Mongols who settled in Muslim India to adapt more easily to the local culture. The Mongol presence in the north contributed to the rich cultural mix that marked medieval Southeast Asia.

The various Mongol kingdoms facilitated trade throughout Asia. The most famous example of a traveler who benefited from the relative peace imposed by the Mongols was Marco **Polo** and his family. He was but one example of the globalization that marked the medieval world that was fostered by the Mongols.
Muhammad bin Tughluq (d. 1351)

Muhammad bin Tughluq (known as Fakhr al-din Jauna prior to his accession) was the second sultan of Delhi from the Tughluq dynasty, ruling from 1325 to 1351. Although an intelligent and educated man, Muhammad bin Tughluq was also an unstable personality whose grand and visionary schemes often brought great physical suffering and economic hardship to his subjects.

In 1325, he succeeded his father Ghiyas al-Din Tughluq, whose death he was rumored to have arranged. The new sultan was a skilled writer and calligrapher and had an understanding of various branches of learning, including medicine, astronomy, logic, and philosophy. He was also a strict observer of Muslim religious rites and practices, abstaining from anything forbidden in the Qur’an, and attempting to enforce a similar discipline on his nobles.

In 1327, in an effort to improve administration in the southern provinces of the Delhi sultanate, the sultan ordered the removal of his capital from Delhi to Devagiri, which he renamed Daulatabad, a city lying 700 miles to the south in the Deccan. Not content with simply moving the royal administration to the new capital, he ordered the entire population of Delhi to be moved. Because of poor travel arrangements, many people died during the move, and because of an inadequate water supply at the new site, the capital had to be restored to Delhi in 1329, leading to further deaths during the return trip. When the traveler Ibn Battuta came to Delhi in the 1330s, he found the city was still a virtual ghost town.

Another of the sultan’s failed schemes involved the introduction of a token currency of brass and copper to be backed by gold and silver held in the state treasury. Based on a Chinese model, the new currency failed to gain the support of the people, who refused to exchange their gold and silver coins for the new issue, and the confusion threw local markets into disorder, damaging the economy. Counterfeiting also became a problem, because the new currency was much easier to duplicate than the old. Other rumors claimed that the sultan intended to invade Persia and China, though neither campaign materialized. Ibn Battuta, whom Muhammad bin Tughluq appointed to a judicial position, found the sultan’s behavior so erratic that he did not return to India after completing a diplomatic mission for him in China.

In the later years of the reign, Muhammad bin Tughluq’s harsh treatment of his nobility encouraged frequent rebellions, one of which led in 1347 to the formation of the independent Bahmani kingdom out of sultanate territories in the Deccan. Although a devout Muslim, the sultan was tolerant of Hindu practices, allowing them to worship as they chose, participating in Hindu festivals, and permitting the building of various Hindu temples. The one exception to this tolerance was his discouragement of the practice of sati, which could only be performed with the sultan’s permission. Muhammad bin Tughluq died in 1351 and was succeeded by his cousin Firuz Shah Tughluq (r. 1351–1388). See also Document 20.
Further Reading

John A. Wagner

**Muhammad Ghauri, Mu’izz al-Din. See Ghaurids**

**Nalanda**

The University of Nalanda was one of the most important centers of higher learning in medieval India. Although a monastic Buddhist institution, its rise to prominence was largely due to the patronage of the Gupta rulers, who were Orthodox Hindus. Although a major monastic university was founded on the site by Kumara Gupta (414–454 C.E.), with other smaller monasteries added by later Gupta rulers, Nalanda may have originally existed as a minor Buddhist center called Nala. The Gupta rulers endowed the monasteries they founded with the revenue of a hundred villages. According to Chinese sources, the endowments allowed for free boarding, lodging, meals, clothing, and medical care for thousands of student monks. By the time of Xuanzang’s visit, the physical appearance of Nalanda was imposing; it was said to have had a large central college and seven halls with high turrets. Other sources tell of the deep ponds of blue lotus that surrounded it, adding to the allure of the place and providing fresh flowers and water for the institution. Excavations have revealed a thousand-room residence quarters for the monks with some double occupancy spaces providing two stone cots and two niches—one for lamps and another for storing manuscripts. Residence rooms were supposedly assigned to monks on the basis of seniority and redistributed each year. Recent estimates have suggested that the number of students attending the monastic college was about five thousand, with most of them possibly day students. Large hearths (*chullas*) unearthed on the site indicate that eating arrangements were communal. Large sundials noted the time, and resident monks carried their own miniature sundials to maintain punctuality. The entire monastic center was encircled by a wall with the main door on its southern side. Free boarding was not generally offered to lay students unless they agreed to perform manual work (*karmadana*) in exchange for board. Chinese sources say that Nalanda had eight big halls and three-hundred small classrooms. Authorities arranged for one hundred lectures daily. Learned monks who could teach well and elaborate on the Buddhist sutras were held in high esteem and provided with sedan chairs.

As a center for Buddhist scholarship, Nalanda was the home for numerous eminent Buddhist scholars, who had authored several treatises. There were about a thousand competent teachers and, on average, each teacher was in charge of no more than ten students. Personal attention was possible, and the student–teacher ratio was high. Due to its fame throughout Buddhist Asia,
competition to secure a place in the monastic college was intense. Students from all parts of India and Southeast and East Asia competed through the demanding entry examination. The university also attracted such visiting Chinese scholars as Faxian (337–422), Xuanzang (602–664), and Yi Jing (635–713). Because the standard of admission was high, the majority of domestic and foreign applicants were rejected outright, and the ones selected had to have a good knowledge of old and modern Buddhist scholarship. Nalanda did not restrict itself to teaching Buddhist students but also students of other faiths. The courses taught included Hindu philosophy, the Vedas, literature, logic, Sanskrit grammar, law, medicine, and economics.

Nalanda was also known throughout Buddhist Asia for its excellent library facilities. It had three multistory library buildings called Ratna Sagara, Ratna Dadhi, and Ratna Ranjata, which were collectively known as Dhrama Ganja, or “mart of knowledge.” The valuable and extensive manuscript collections contained within this library were one of the reasons for the succession of Chinese and other East Asian scholars who made an arduous land or sea journey to reach this monastery. Yi Jing copied over four-hundred Sanskrit works with about five million verses. The monastic college also benefited from foreign sponsorship, such as the ninth-century Sailendra ruler of Java and Sumatra, named Balaputradeva, who built a monastery here to serve as the residence for visiting Javanese monks and asked his friend, the last great Pala dynasty king of Bengal, Devapala (810–850), to grant the revenues of five villages for its upkeep and for copying books for the university library.

From Nalanda, Buddhism spread to Tibet. From the eighth century onwards, scholars of Nalanda, led by the missionary monk Padmasambhava (also called Guru Rinpoche in Tibet), played an active role in spreading Buddhist teachings to Tibet. The Tibetan language was taught at Nalanda, and monks from Nalanda were instrumental in building the first monastery in Tibet. Translations of manuscripts into Tibetan allowed for the preservation of many Buddhist texts for future generations.

From 1193 to 1205, all the universities of Bengal and Bihar in eastern India were systematically raided and looted by Muhammad Bakhiyar Khiji, a Muslim Afghan adventurer from Ghur, Afghanistan. Buddhist monks were massacred or forced to flee, and their buildings were burned. The brick and mortar wall of Nalanda and its temples were not obliterated due to their immense size, but the contents of the renowned library buildings were burned. According to the Tibetan Historian, Jo-nan Taranatha, the majority of Buddhist refugees went to Southeast Asia through Burma. Others went to Tibet or South India. Lacking guidance from the monks of the great monastic institutions, the Buddhist laity in India began to merge with the popular Hindu traditions that surrounded them, and Indian Buddhism ceased to exist.

Further Reading
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Raman N. Seylon
Polo, Marco (1254–c. 1324), in India

In the early fourteenth century, the great Mongol empires that extended from the Middle East to China fostered trade across its vast lands. Churchmen looking for new converts and merchants seeking vast wealth braved the long journeys from Europe to the court of the Great Khan in China. The most famous of these travelers were the Polos, an enterprising merchant family from Venice, Italy. Niccolo Polo and his brother Maffeo traveled to China. Between 1260 and 1269 they traded throughout Mongol lands, and they met Khubilai Khan as he was consolidating his power in Beijing. They returned to Venice and prepared for a longer trading journey. This time they took Niccolo’s son, the 17-year-old Marco, with them.

The Great Khan, having recently established the Mongol Yuan dynasty, distrusted his Chinese subjects and relied heavily on foreigners to bring him information and conduct much of his business. Thus, he welcomed the Venetian merchants. He seems to have taken a special liking to young Marco, who had a talent for conversation and entertaining storytelling. The emperor sent him on numerous diplomatic missions during their stay. After 17 years in China, the Polos decided to return to Venice. They went back on the sea route by way of Sumatra, Sri Lanka, India, and Arabia, and arrived in Venice in 1295.

Their mission might have been forgotten, except that Marco had the bad luck to be captured and made a prisoner of war during a conflict between Venice and Genoa. While he was imprisoned, Marco told the tales of his travels to a fellow prisoner who recorded the adventures. This account circulated rapidly throughout Europe, and it served to stimulate interest in the lucrative trade networks. Hundreds of Italians traveled to China and India in the next century, and Christopher Columbus carried a well-marked copy of the book through his voyages. Although most of Marco’s accounts refer to China, he nevertheless included some highly informative (and entertaining) tales of India that he visited on his way home.

All of Marco’s observations were heavily influenced by his own interests. First and foremost, he was a merchant, so he noticed things to buy and sell and commented on the merchants who dealt in these items. In India, he was most impressed by the fabulous pearls that came from the surrounding seas. He described how divers harvested the oysters, and how carefully the king regulated the precious trade. He also commented on the rich diamonds from this land but strains credulity when he described how they were obtained: He claimed men took pieces of raw, bloody meat, tied them to ropes, and flung them down in the valley of diamonds. The gems would stick to the sticky flesh, which could then be pulled up. Sometimes eagles ate the flesh, so people had to gather diamonds from eagle droppings (Polo, 273). Marco probably gullibly listened to local accounts! His concern for commerce led him to talk about everything from pirates to pepper.

As a Christian, Marco was interested in religion, and he wrote of the great Christian shrine of St. Thomas the Apostle that still exists outside Chennai today. He also wrote of the beliefs and practices of Yogis, Hindus, and others. He loved superstitions and recounted how people could tell auspicious days by the behavior of tarantulas or shadows.

Finally as a youth, Marco was interested in women and sexuality. He described with fascination free expressions of sexuality and nudity, the many wives of
kings, and women’s clothing. His account of India offers the exciting narrative of an eyewitness, but it must be used with caution, for his reputation as a good storyteller led to much exaggeration. See also Documents 13, 14, and 15.

Further Reading

Joyce E. Salisbury

**Prithviraja III (d. 1192)**

A member of the **Rajput** Chahaman dynasty, Prithviraja III ruled, from his capitals at Ajmer and Delhi, a large Hindu kingdom in North India in the late twelfth century. His defeat at the Second Battle of Tarain in 1192 by the Muslim invader Mu’izz al-Din Muhammad Ghauri opened North India to Muslim domination and led eventually to the establishment of the **Delhi Sultanate**.

Although still quite young when he came to the Chahaman throne around 1180, Prithviraja quickly conquered several neighboring Rajput kingdoms, including Delhi, making the Chahaman kingdom the dominant Hindu state in North India. His kingdom eventually encompassed most of the present-day Indian states of Rajasthan and Haryana, as well as portions of Uttar Pradesh and Punjab. Thanks to the writings of his friend and court poet Chandbardai, Prithviraja became a popular and romantic figure in Indian literature, his elopement with Samyukta (Sanyogita), the daughter of Jai Chandra, the king of **Kanauj**, is a well-known subject of Chandbardai’s epic poem *Prithviraj Raso*.

When the Ghaurid commander Mu’izz al-Din Muhammad Ghauri, who had conquered the Punjab in 1186, attacked the Rajput kingdoms in 1191, Prithviraja led a Rajput coalition that defeated the invader at the First Battle of Tarain. However, in a second battle fought on the same field in 1192, the armies of Prithviraja were overwhelmed, and the king was taken prisoner and killed. Muhammad Ghauri occupied Ajmer and Delhi, forced Prithviraja’s son to swear loyalty to the **Ghaurid** state, and, by 1206, had overthrown most of the other Rajput kingdoms in North India, consolidating a block of territory that became the basis of the future Muslim sultanate centered on Delhi.

Further Reading

John A. Wagner

**Puranas**

Hinduism is an ancient set of beliefs that grew based upon sacred scriptures. Most were recorded long before the Middle Ages, but they had a continuing influence. The oldest were the Vedas, the ancient oral wisdom that was originally written in Sanskrit. There are four Vedic texts—Rig, Sama, Yajur, and Atharva. All were compiled between 1500 and 800 B.C.E., and they contain collections of hymns, spells, and cosmology. In the mid to late first millennium B.C.E., the *Upanishads* were added to sacred texts, and these revealed a trend toward inner contemplation rather than ritual activity as a path to salvation.
Two great epic poems joined the sacred Hindu texts probably during the early centuries C.E. These were the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. The first dealt with a massive war for the control of northern India between two groups of cousins. Although this may have begun as a historical account, priests credited the god Vishnu, the preserver of the world, with a prominent place in the resolution of the war.

The *Mahabharata* contains a short poetic work, the *Bhagavad Gita* ("song of the lord"), which is probably the most popular of the Hindu sacred texts. This work presents a dialogue between a warrior and his charioteer Krishna, who was a human incarnation of the god Vishnu. Through this dialogue, Krishna urges followers to fulfill their responsibilities as caste members.

The *Ramayana* was originally a love and adventure story about the legendary Prince Rama and his wife Sita, who experienced exciting adventures. Priests later made Rama an incarnation of Vishnu, once again using the romantic adventure as a vehicle for stimulating worship of the deity.

In the early Middle Ages at the same time that Buddhism spread, Vedic ritualism and Upanishadic contemplation there arose a spread of devotion (Bhakti) to individual deities. This trend was surely forwarded by local veneration to Buddha and the popularity of the epic literature that suggested that Vishnu and the other deities might actively participate in people's lives. This longing for a more personal relationship to deities was expressed in a new body of religious literature—the *Puranas*.

The *Puranas*—"stories of the ancient past"—are a vast body of complex narratives probably composed by 1000. These works contain genealogies of deities and kings (up to the Guptas), cosmologies, law codes, and descriptions of ritual and pilgrimages to holy places, but the central theme of all the puranas is the powers and works of the gods. Some of the *Puranas* exhibit devotion to Siva, and others to Vishnu. These two cults became predominant in temple worship in India.

There are eighteen major *Puranas* and eighteen related subordinate texts known as *Upapuranas*. There are various ways these texts are classified. For example, one method might classify on the basis of qualities: impurity or purity, ignorance or knowledge. Another method might organize around whether Vishnu or Siva appears as the Supreme Being. This diversity of classification merely serves to show the richness of the material included. All the *Puranas* traditionally cover five topics: (1) the creation or manifestation of the universe; (2) the destruction and recreation of the universe; (3) the genealogies of gods and sages; (4) the reigns of the fourteen progenitors of humanity; and (5) history of the dynasties of kings.

The *Puranas* were highly instrumental in transforming the orthodox Brahminism of the Vedas into a Hinduism that was more receptive to popular forms of devotion and worship. Through the *Puranas*,
medieval Hinduism was marked by devotional cults to Vishnu and Siva that promised salvation for followers.

Further Reading

Joyce E. Salisbury

Rajputs

The Rajputs are medieval *Kshatriya* (warrior) clans originating in a region of northwestern India known as Rajputana and ruling over various Hindu kingdoms between the tenth and sixteenth centuries. Among the fiercest opponents of Muslim invasion and expansion in medieval times, the Rajputs have long had, and still have, a reputation as strong and skilled warriors.

Originally believed to be the descendents of migrants from Central Asia who were given *Kshatriya* status by Hindu priests, the Rajputs are now thought to have originated among those groups of people displaced from Rajputana by the *Hun* invasions of the sixth century. The term *Rajputra*, or “son of a king,” first came into use during the reign of Harsha in the seventh century. *Rajput* is thought to be derived from “Rajputra” and may indicate the origins of the first clans among the younger sons and brothers of Indian rulers, who, despite being of royal blood, took up the profession of a warrior, because the Indian practice of primogeniture allowed only the eldest son of a king to succeed to the throne. Because, after the collapse of *Harsha*’s empire in the midseventh century, India was divided into many small kingdoms, such younger sons and brothers were plentiful.

As Rajput warriors began to establish themselves on various thrones, the ruling dynasties they founded began to be recognized in Brahmanical literature as belonging to the *kshatriya* class. Rajputs are mentioned in the *Puranas, Ramayana, Mahabharata*, and other Hindu writings. Although the Rajputs came to be divided into many clans, the most significant medieval groups were the four *agnikula* or “Fire Family” clans, which are so named because they believe themselves descended from a mythical figure who arose out a great sacrificial fire pit near Mount Abu in ancient Rajputana. These clans are the Pratiharas, who ruled the kingdom of Malwa in the ninth and ten centuries; the Chahamans, who ruled a large kingdom based on Ajmer in the eleventh and twelfth centuries; the Chalukyas, who ruled parts of Gujarat and the *Deccan* from the eighth to eleventh centuries; and the Paramaras, who ruled in Rajputana from the tenth to twelfth centuries.

Further Reading
Hindu culture and religion were dominated by two popular and significant epic poems: the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The *Ramayana* is the older and shorter of the two. Its origins in an oral tradition probably extend back to 1000 B.C.E., but it was probably written in Sanskrit in about the fourth century B.C.E. The core of the work is traditionally attributed to a single author named Valmiki, and some materials were added later by anonymous poets.

The story surrounds the adventures of Prince Rama, the eldest son of King Dasaratha and heir to the throne. However, a second queen contrives to have the prince sent into exile so her own son, Bharatha may become king. Prince Rama and his beautiful wife Sita go into exile and live in a forest where they have numerous adventures.

In the forest, Sita is abducted by Ravana, a demon-king of Sri Lanka. Rama searches for her aided by Hanuman, a monkey god, who in Indian lore exemplifies a loyal servant. The two rescue Sita, destroying Ravana and his entire force, and Rama returns in triumph, where he is restored to the throne.

Sita is accused of having lost her purity while in captivity but is vindicated when Rama subjects her to a public test where she is to enter a fire. She is vindicated when the fire god refuses to harm her. In a supplement to the original text, Sita is sent to end her life at a hermitage. There she gives birth to twins and eventually pleads with the earth, from which she is descended to bear witness to her virtue. The earth swallows her up.

The Sanskrit contains nearly fifty-thousand lines of verse and is traditionally broken up into seven books:

1. Bala-kanda: the boyhood of Rama
2. Ayodhya-kanda: the court of Dasaratha and the exile of Rama
3. Aranya-kanda: forest life to the abduction of Sita
4. Kishkindhya-kanda: Rama’s quest for Sita
5. Sundara-kanda: Rama and his allies arrive in Sri Lanka
6. Yuddha-kanda: the book of war revealing the defeat of Ravana and the rescue of Sita
7. Uttara-kanda: Rama’s life in Ayodhya, Sita’s death, and Rama’s ascent into heaven.

The *Ramayana* came to be regarded as an exemplar of the ideal man and woman. Rama is an incarnation (avatar) of the god Vishnu, and the purpose of the incarnation was to demonstrate the righteous path (*dharma*) for all living creatures. These theological principles combined with the exciting narrative combine to make this an influential and much-loved work. See also Document 2.
Raziya Sultan (d. 1240)

The daughter of Sultan Shams al-Din Iltutmish (r. 1211–1236), and chosen by him to succeed to the throne, Raziya was sultan of Delhi from 1236 to 1240. She was one of the few female rulers of medieval India.

Upon the death of Iltutmish, the Muslim nobility, being unwilling to be ruled by a woman, placed Rukn al-Din, one of the late sultan’s sons, upon the throne. Dominated by his mother, and little interested in governing, Rukn al-Din proved thoroughly incompetent; and he and his mother were assassinated after only a few months in power. The nobility then reluctantly accepted Raziya as sultan, although they continued to oppose many of her proposals, including a plan to reduce or abolish some taxes on non-Muslims. Clever and popular, the sultan (she reportedly would not answer to the female title “sultana”) was adept at playing off noble factions against each other and so was able to quickly secure her hold on the throne. However, the favor she showed to her Abyssinian master of horse, Malik Jalal al-din Yaqat, who was rumored to be her lover, offended the nobility and aroused great opposition within the court.

In 1239, the governor of Lahore rose in rebellion, which was suppressed, but not before a new revolt erupted under the leadership of Malik Altunia, governor of Sirhind. Betrayed by her Turkish guards, Raziya Sultan was handed over to the rebels, who killed Yaqat. While in the custody of Altunia, the sultan either agreed to marry her captor or persuaded him to accept a marriage alliance with her. With her new husband, Raziya then marched on Delhi, where the rebel nobility had placed her brother, Bahram, on the throne. Defeated in two battles near Kaithal, Raziya and Altunia fled but were captured and killed in October 1240 by local chiefs allied with her opponents. See also Document 12.

Further Reading

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Sati

Known in the West as “suttee,” sati is a traditional Hindu funeral rite involving the voluntary self-immolation of a widow upon her husband’s funeral pyre. Derived from Sati, the virtuous consort of the god Siva, who, in Hindu mythology, protested her father’s disrespectful treatment of her husband by burning herself, the term sati refers also to any woman who distinguishes herself through her righteous and exemplary devotion to her spouse,
especially by willingly following him into death.

Although the practice of sati is praised in the Vedic texts and may have been practiced as early as the fourth century B.C.E. among some warrior groups of North India, the first recorded instance dates to around 510 C.E., with the practice for long thereafter being a voluntary act confined largely to the wives of the kshatriya (warrior) caste. Although the exact origins of the rite of sati are unclear, the concept of eternal wifely devotion may be ancient. A series of double graves containing male and female skeletons and dating from before 1500 B.C.E. may indicate the existence at that time of a belief that wives should accompany their husbands from life into death.

Over time, sati came to be viewed as the greatest act of selfless love, and the act and those who undertook it became highly romanticized in Indian society. In 1303, Padmini, a princess of the Rajputs, led other Rajput wives in a jauhur, a mass sati, rather than submit to the invading armies of Alauddin Khilji (r. 1296–1316), sultan of Delhi. In the Delhi sultanate, sati was accepted as a Hindu cultural tradition that could be freely practiced as long as there was no coercion of the woman and the Muslim authorities were informed of its performance in advance.

The only evidence indicating an attempt to discourage the practice comes from the reign of Muhammad bin Tughluq (1325–1351), who declared that it could not be performed without his permission. However, the noted Muslim poet, Amir Khusrau (1254–1325), who was sympathetic to Hindu culture, declared sati a clear proof of the fidelity of Indian women to their men. In the Hindu empire of Vijayanagar, the practice of sati was common, although voluntary, and practiced mostly among the upper classes. Sati continued to be practiced into modern times, although it was strongly discouraged during the period of British rule and was outlawed by the Indian Republic in the twentieth century.

Further Reading

John A. Wagner
Tamil Country

In medieval Indian history, the term Tamil country refers to a region of extreme South India that includes the modern-day states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala, and portions of the neighboring states of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, as well as the island of Sri Lanka. The region was defined by the use there of the Tamil language, which is the earliest Dravidic language of South India. Dravidian is a term used to describe the peoples, cultures, and languages that existed in South India prior to the coming of the Aryans to India between about 1700 and 1300 B.C.E.

The Tamil language was first committed to writing in about the third century B.C.E., and the earliest period of Tamil literature encompassed the writing of the Sangam literature, the production of which extended well into the medieval period to about the tenth century C.E. Enriched by infusions from Sanskrit and by its employment in the literature of Hindu devotional cults between about 500 and 900, the Tamil language became fully developed during the rule of the Tamil Chola dynasty, which controlled portions of southern and eastern India from about 900 to 1300. The dynasty reached its peak during the reigns of Rajaraja Chola I (985–1014) and his son Rajendra Chola I (1014–1044), whose authority extended into Sri Lanka, the islands of Sumatra and Java, the Malay Peninsula, and portions of Southeast Asia. The Cholas’ patronage resulted in the production of some of the greatest works of Tamil literature and some of the greatest achievements of Hindu religious architecture.

Two other important Tamil dynasties in the region were the Pandyas, who are mentioned in the Sangam literature and in Greek and Roman sources from the second and third centuries C.E. and who ruled until the sixteenth century, and the Chera, who ruled in extreme southwestern India until about the eighth century. In the fourteenth century, during the reigns of Allauddin Khilji (1296–1316) and Muhammad bin Tughluq (1325–1351), much of the Tamil region fell briefly under the domination of the Muslim Delhi sultanate.

Further Reading

Temple, Buddhist: Stupas

Stupas are religious buildings that were associated with Buddhism. Siddhartha Gautama (c. 563–c. 483 B.C.E.) was a prince who studied, meditated, and became known as “the enlightened one”—or “Buddha.” Buddha had become enlightened while meditating under a large bodhi tree, which became associated with the temples that would be built in his honor. The religion he founded in India has been profoundly influential all over the world.
At his death, his disciples wanted to be sure he would be remembered, so they established shrines to him. They divided his cremated remains and placed them in ten locations associated with his life and teachings. These early shrines were made up of a simple mound of rubble and earth, and these were known as *stupas*. These mounds served as the inspiration for later Buddhist architecture. In time, Buddhist monks settled around the *stupas*, which added to the temple design.

The Mauryan ruler Ashoka (268–232 B.C.E.) converted to Buddhism and added to the architectural design of the *stupa*. Ashoka was influenced by the Hellenistic and Persian cultures, and he brought builders proficient in stone construction to India. Under his patronage, the original simple *stupas* were enlarged, and many new shrines were created.

Under Ashoka, all *stupas* were built in hemispherical form covered by a dome. The dome represented the world mountain and the dome of the heavens. To indicate their sacred character, they were protected by a fence that marked the path for the faithful to walk around in ritual, meditative fashion. To be sure the temples would be permanent, the mounds were paved over with brick or stone. To remember Buddha, the temples were topped by a square railing (called *harmika*) and a three-tiered umbrella form (called *Chatra*) that represented the famous bodhi tree. The triple parasol represented royalty, and its supporting pole symbolized the axis of the world passing through the exact center of the hemispherical form of the *stupa*.

The *Great Stupa*, that was built between 250 B.C.E. and 250 C.E. at Sanchi, contained all these defining elements. It also has four gates opening to the four cardinal directions, and stairs at the south lead to the top. The shrine at Sanchi includes many buildings that were built over time, including three *stupas* along with monasteries for the monks, and other temples.

As Buddhism spread and came in contact with Hellenistic traditions, followers of Buddha began to revere their founder as a savior and included images of Buddha in their shrines. In the seventh century C.E., two colossal statues of Buddha were carved into the mountains of Bamiyan, Afghanistan, and these figures were replicated as far away as China. Sadly, these statues were destroyed by the Taliban in 2001.

Indian influence spread to Southeast Asia through merchants, and the *stupa* form of temple became even more elaborate. For example, the *stupa* shrine of Borobudur, on the island of Java, was built c. 800–850. It was built on a plain surrounded by mountains. A huge artificial hill covered in stone supports a *stupa* shrine that symbolizes the center of the universe. Visitors walk around the rising terraces in a pilgrimage that represents everyone’s path to enlightenment. Along the way, they pass miniature *stupa* shrines holding images of the Buddha and of other *bodhisattvas* (individuals who achieved enlightenment but chose to remain in the world as a help to others). Over three miles of friezes along the path of the rising terraces portray events from the life of the Buddha.
The three-tiered parasol on top of the stupas had a far-reaching influence on Buddhist shrines outside of India. In China, images of the Buddha were placed inside “pagodas,” multistoried buildings with layered roofs. The word pagoda is derived from the Sanskrit word for stupa, “dagoba.” Many of these structures were built throughout medieval China. The oldest surviving brick structure in the country is the 130-foot-tall Saongyue Pagoda at Dengfeng, built in 523. At Yingxian, the Fogong Temple, built in 1056, includes the oldest surviving pagoda constructed entirely of wood. These are but a few examples of the highly influential stupa form of religious building that shows the spread of Buddhism throughout the Middle Ages.

Further Reading

Joyce E. Salisbury

Temples, Hindu

In medieval India, Hinduism replaced Buddhism as the dominant religion, and Hindu temple building blossomed. The Hindu temple creates a link between humans and gods and served as a sacred space, just as the Buddhist stupas did. However, there were some striking differences.

Unlike Buddhism, which focuses on the life and teachings of one man, Hindus venerate many deities, and the temples reveal this multiplicity in complex, stunning architecture. The temples themselves serve many purposes. They are the dwelling of the gods, where worshipers may confront images of the deities’ avatars (incarnated forms). These images are served by priests offering prayers, incense, and other offerings to the gods.

The buildings themselves, covered with sacred carvings, are objects of worship. Aspects of the universe are incorporated into the temple by the use of sculpture, sacred geometry, and axial alignments. Hindu religion recognizes several forms as sacred: a holy mountain, a sacred cave, and the cosmic axis, so temple architecture expresses these forms. Most have a womb-chamber (called a garbhagriha) at their center that radiates energy to the roof and the cardinal directions. A sacred mountain towers over the garbhagriha, and a passage for walking clockwise about the center is built to invite worshipers to contemplate the holy structure. Temple complexes are usually aligned on the cardinal points, representing the four corners of the earth, with the major entrances facing east to confront the sun’s rise.

In the garbhagriha rests a sacred image or element as the symbol of the god’s presence. If proper rituals are not performed, people believe that the god may choose to live somewhere else, so the job of the priests is to make the deity welcome and honored so he or she will continue to reside in and bless the temple. Rituals for the deity include ceremonies that honor the deity with
South Asia

music, food, dancing, the recital of religious texts, and the singing of hymns. Visitors count on the presence of the deity to bring them blessings as they visit the temple.

Priests perform sacred rites at regular times for the benefit of the entire community, but there is no congregational worship, so there is no need for a large enclosed gathering place. Instead, people come to offer private devotions at any time, taking their shoes off before they enter the sacred space of the temple complex. Western visitors are often bewildered by the various activities within the temple complex: people sell trinkets and flowers; others walk around admiring the carvings (many of which show explicit sexual activities) and talking; still others tend cattle, which are sacred and thus welcome in the temples. All these activities are manifestations of community veneration as much as the activities of those who silently meditate on the statues of the deities.

Throughout the Middle Ages there was a great deal of temple building, and many of the structures survive today. Some of the earliest surviving Hindu shrines are near Sanchi, the Buddhist shrine, and show clear influence from the Buddhist work. Temple 17 at Sanchi dates from the early fifth century. Hindu architects grew more skilled at working with stone and brick, and the towering mountain forms rose ever higher.

In northern India, the support of the rulers of the Gupta dynasty stimulated the building of temples, and this building expansion continued even with the political turmoil that marked northern India through the Middle Ages. For example, at Khajuraho there were at least twenty-five temples constructed over a 200-year period. The best preserved is the Lakshmana temple, built about 950, which has three huge halls each topped by a mountainous roof.

South India developed a distinctive style of temple that was as impressive as those built in the north. Under the patronage of the Chola then the Vijayanagar rulers, temples began to dot the skylines and become centers for communities. One of the oldest surviving temples in the south is the stunning complex at Mahabalipuram, south of Chennai. This seaside temple was carved out of solid rock in the eighth century and still draws many awed tourists today. In the eleventh century, builders at Brihadesvara Temple at Tanjore built a 200-foot tower that was twice as high as anything else that had been built.

In southern India particularly, temples took on many public functions beyond religious celebrations. They served as economic and social centers as well. For example, priests coordinated work on irrigation systems and organized food supplies in times of famine. They also conducted schools for boys in the communities. Temple authorities served as bankers, made loans, and invested in business ventures. In these ways, temples remained crucial centers contributing to the economic health of southern India.

When Hinduism spread to other regions in Southeast Asia through the activities of Hindu merchants, temples architecture too moved out of the subcontinent. Unquestionably, the most famous temple outside of India is Angor Wat, which was begun c. 1120 in modern Cambodia. This magnificent temple complex represents a fusion of Hinduism with native Khmer tradition. The scale of the complex makes it one of the largest religious structures ever built, with a rectangular perimeter wall measuring 4,275 by 4,920 feet. If visitors were to follow the circumambulation of the temple in accordance with Hindu tradition, they would have to walk about 13 miles.
Angor Wat was begun in about 1120 as a shrine to the Hindu god Vishnu, then became the royal shrine of the Khmer dynasty. The Khmers abandoned Angkor in 1431 after the Thai people invaded. Once the complex was rediscovered by Westerners in the nineteenth century, it draws visitors from all over the world and remains a silent witness to the strength of medieval Hinduism and the temples it spawned.

Further Reading

Joyce E. Salisbury

Timur/Tamerlane (1336–1405)

Throughout the Middle Ages, nomadic tribes originating in central Asia made an impact all over the Eurasian land mass. Whether Huns or Mongols, these warriors sent terror spreading before them whether they moved east or west. Another such group, the Turks began to take a prominent role in the eighth century with their conversion to Islam. Their embrace of Islam provided a unifying force for the Turks and brought them into closer association with the civilizations of Persia, Iraq, and drew them into the Muslim lands of India.

In the fourteenth century, the great empires of the Mongols that had spanned Asia into Europe declined. As Mongol strength waned, Turkish peoples resumed their expansion that had been held at bay by the Mongols. During the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, the Turkish conqueror Timur built an empire that rivaled that of Chinggis (Genghis) Khan.

Timur was born about 1336 near Samarkand and grew up influenced by the story of Chinggis Khan, who had also risen from a family of the minor nobility. Timur had sustained an injury to his right leg and walked with a limp. Therefore his contemporaries called him Timur Lang, or “Timur the Lame.” This appellation made its way into English as Tamerlane, by which he is known in most textbooks.

His limp did not keep Timur from becoming a brilliant horseman and warrior with a good deal of charisma. He attracted a loyal band of followers and by the 1360s had eliminated any rivals and was acknowledged leader of his tribe. By 1370 he had extended his authority throughout the old

Timur or Tamerlaine enthroned from Timur Nama by Hatifi, Persian, 1563–1565. Elliott 403 folio 120v. The Art Archive/Bodleian Library Oxford.
Khanate of Chaghatai in central Asia and built a magnificent capital in Samar-kand. For the rest of his life, Timur led his armies to conquer an ever-greater empire, which extended from the Byzantine Empire in the west up to the Hindu Kush and the Indus River in the east.

Timur was a merciless follower of Islam, and he demonstrated this zeal when he drove into India. There, his troops slaughtered Hindus by the thousands and subjected Delhi to a ferocious sack. Contemporary chroniclers reported that for 2 months after the attack not even birds visited the devastated city. Later, Timur campaigned along the Ganga, although he never attempted to incorporate India into his empire.

Timur was a warrior more than an administrator. He ruled through tribal leaders, and even when he appointed overlords in the conquered territories, they relied on existing bureaucratic structures. This organization allowed continuity in local governments once the conqueror sped on to his next conquest.

In 1404, Timur began preparations for an invasion of China to complete his re-creation of the Mongol accomplishment. He was ill at that time, but that did not deter him from leading his armies. He was carried on a litter during his final campaign but died from his illness in 1405.

Timur’s political accomplishments barely outlasted him. His sons and grandsons engaged in a long series of bitter conflicts that resulted in the contraction of his empire and its division into four main regions. For a century after his death, however, they maintained control over the region from Persia to Afghanistan.

Perhaps surprising for a warrior king, Timur’s most longstanding accomplishments lay in the realm of culture. The conqueror served as patron for scholars and artists, and his capital at Samarkand was established as a cultural center for centuries. Great architectural monuments of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries still show his influence. He contracted great mosques in his birthplace, Kesh, and another, dedicated to his favorite wife, Bibi Khanum, in Samarkand. In literature, he fostered the use of the Turkic literary language called Chaghatay, which supplanted Persian. It survived as the primary language of the literary arts in Central Asia into the twentieth century. See also Document 21.

Further Reading

Joyce E. Salisbury

Vijayanagar Empire

The Vijayanagar Empire was a Hindu state of South India centered on the city of Vijayanagar on the Tungbhadra River; it controlled most of South India between the 1330s and 1560s. The empire was founded by the brothers Hari-hara I (r. 1336–1356) and Bukka Raya I (r. 1356–1377), who sought to create a Hindu state capable of warding off further Muslim invasions of South India from the Delhi sultanate and other Islamic kingdoms.
The origins of the founding brothers are uncertain. They claimed to be descendents of the Yadava kings of Deogir and were for a time in military service to Rudradeva, the Kakatiya ruler of Warangal, with whom they were carried to Delhi as prisoners in 1324 after the armies of the Delhi sultanate overran the Kakatiya kingdom. Upon their release, they returned to South India, where, by the mid-1330s, the repeated Islamic invasions of the region under the Sultans Allauddin Khilji (r. 1296–1316), and Mohammad bin Tughluq (r. 1325–1351) left the weakened Hoyasala kingdom as the only remaining independent Hindu state. Inspired to fight the Muslims by Vidyaranya, a Hindu holy man at the monastery of Sringeri, the brothers established a new state at the new city of Vijayanagar in about 1336. Upon the death in battle of King Veera Ballala III in 1343, the Hoyasala kingdom merged with the rapidly expanding Vijayanagar state, which over the next decades extended its control across South India.

Harihara I conquered most of the territory south of the Tungbhadra River, while Bukka Raya I absorbed most of the small states, Hindu and Muslim, of the central Deccan. Harihara II (1377–1404) pushed his authority well north of the Krishna River, bringing the whole of South India under his rule. For much of its existence, Vijayanagar was at war with the Bahmani kingdom, its Islamic neighbor to the north. Although religious differences embittered this ongoing conflict, Islamic influence increased in Vijayanagar, where the ruler called himself “Sultan among Hindu Kings” and employed significant numbers of Muslim cavalrymen. Beyond that the empire encouraged a flowering in the region of Hindu literature and arts, particularly in architecture.

The empire reached its height under Krisha Deva Raya (r. 1509–1529), who conquered territories in the northern Deccan formerly held by the Muslim Deccan sultanates, the successor states to the Bahmani kingdom, which broke up around 1518. In 1565, an alliance of Deccan sultanates killed King Aliya Rama Raya and crushed his army at the Battle of Talicota. This defeat began a period of decline that culminated with the breakup of the empire in the seventeenth century, with much of the north falling to the sultanates of Bijapur and Golkonda and much of the south being divided among various Hindu successor states.

Further Reading

John A. Wagner

Warfare

On medieval methods of military recruitment the Chinese monk Xuanzang noted that elite body soldiers were recruited from the bravest people, soldiering continued to be a hereditary profession, and the sons of soldiers learned
the profession through a form of military apprenticeship. During peacetime, elite military forces were garrisoned around the royal palace; during war, they manned the front ranks in battle. The bulk of Hindu armies was infantry comprising members of the hereditary warrior caste, who were chosen for their reputation and loyalty. The Hindu infantryman was armed with a large pike and shield and sometimes a sword, the standard Indian infantry weaponry until the late eighteenth century. Other weapons included iron maces, iron battle axes, slings, long lances, javelins, and composite or bamboo bows; nearly all these weapons were said to be razor sharp and pointed. Hindu armies did not possess the necessary technology to make the advanced siege engines or flaming naphtha fire balls that were being used in the Mediterranean basin or in Europe during medieval times. This may well be due to the fact that although Indian rulers built large stone forts, most battles occurred in open plains with large standing armies. However, Indians were familiar with underground tunneling, something borrowed from the Greco-Bactrian kings (250–125 B.C.E.) who ruled Northwest India and Afghanistan.

Early medieval Hindu armies were also composed of units of cavalry, elephant corps, and war chariots, which, with infantry, made up the standard four-fold division of an army of the period. Commanders rode chariots that had two drivers or attendants and were pulled by a team of four horses. The commander’s chariot was closely followed by a file of solders that stood near the wheels of the chariot. Cavalry was used in the front lines to harass the enemy and in case of retreat to send messages. Although the role of war chariots was largely replaced by cavalry and elephants by the fourth century B.C.E., chariots still served as command vehicles for officers and played a major role in Hindu royal and religious rituals.

Elephants and cavalry units began to come to service as the major offensive body of Indian army just as war chariots began to lose their prominence. As fast-moving attack vehicles, chariots were unsuited to jungle-covered uneven terrains or to the soft soils of the central Gangoetic Plain. Elephants proved to be better suited as mobile platforms for carrying a body of soldiers. Elephants also terrified the untrained and unfamiliar horses of the enemy cavalry and were effective in breaking up enemy infantry formations. Also, most of India was unsuitable for breeding superior quality military horses; good cavalry mounds had to be imported from Arabia or Persia and were therefore expensive whereas elephants were plentiful in the jungles of eastern India. For this reason, Indian rulers, since antiquity, had maintained a large core of battle elephants. As a result of their strength and demeanor, elephants came to be associated with the pomp and pageantry of royalty and thus also became an integral part of royal ceremonial. War elephants acted like modern tanks, smashing fortress gates, palisades, and other wooden defenses; a line of elephants might act as a living bridge for crossing swollen rivers. Battle elephants were protected by leather armor and their tusks were tipped with metal spikes; the Chinese traveler Sung Yun (520–521 C.E.) reported seeing battle elephants with sharp swords fastened to their trunks. Elephants were guided by trained mahouts; carried soldiers armed with bows, long spears, and javelins; and were often accompanied by a small detachment of infantry. In the long run, however, heavy reliance on battle elephants proved to be a tactical error for Indian princes, for by the medieval period invading armies from Central Asia were well prepared to counter Indian battle elephants. Even the best trained
elephants could be incapacitated or confused and panicked by battle wounds, sheer fatigue, or fire, and would inflict great damage as they fled the battlefield overthrowing riders and trampling its own support troops.

Thus, by the eleventh century large formations of battle elephants had become not only useless but also a serious liability against a well-disciplined cavalry. As early as the eighth century, the invading Umayyad Arab armies had used arrows and naphtha fireballs to cripple and immobilize the elephant corps. By the eleventh century, the Muslim Turks did much the same thing against battle elephants and the huge formations of infantry that accompanied them.

After the demise of the Gupta Empire, the warrior castes dominated Northwest India, the most prominent among them being the Rajputs. The ancestors of the Rajputs are believed to have migrated to India as part of early Central Asian invasions, such as those of the Huns in the sixth century. They then settled in India with the collapse of Gupta rule. The Rajputs considered them to be members of the ancient Kshatriya varna (see Caste System) and were known for their fanatical attempts to assert their Kshatriya status. This assertion distinguished the Rajputs from other similar castes who migrated from outside India. They were also known to be haughty and aristocratic and soon gained a reputation for suicidal bravery and chivalry, although their battle tactics eventually came to be old fashioned and cumbersome. Babur, the sixteenth-century founder of the Mughal Empire, reportedly declared that the Rajputs knew “how to die but did not know how to fight” (Lannoy, 69).

The brunt of the medieval Muslim Turkish invasions was borne by the Rajputs, but they wasted their energies in internecine quarrels instead of forming a joint confederacy to meet the common adversary. The Muslim invasions of the Middle Ages made cavalry warfare supreme. Rajput cavalry techniques were by then antiquated and clumsy, and they were outmaneuvered by the superior cavalry techniques of the Muslims. The Rajputs were also hampered by their notions of warfare, which were based on individual valor, and thus unsuited to the effective coordination of effort needed to counter the strategy and tactics of Muslim Turkish horsemen. The Rajput cavalry also consisted of freemen, who were poor in obeying orders, whereas the Muslim Turkish cavalry was composed of specially trained slaves who obeyed all orders without question. The Turks also practically grew up on horseback and went through constant battle drills to sharpen their cavalry skills. Among the superior cavalry techniques employed by the Muslim Turks was the seemingly suicidal charge, which was halted at the last minute so the horses could be turned to allow their riders to launch a deadly volley of arrows at the onrushing enemy at virtually point-blank range. Used repeatedly, his tactic confused and demoralized the Rajput cavalry, which suffered heavy casualties while inflicting few losses on the Muslim horsemen.

The Indians were also unfamiliar with the kind of religious-based zealotry and religiously motivated warfare with which the Muslims confronted them. War among the Rajputs was only a royal pastime, more like a ritual, and the men recruited for it were either kinsmen or mercenaries whose primary aim was to loot. This traditional mode of warfare led to frequent defeats at the hands of the dangerous Muslim Turks, who were better led and had superior battle tactics. The Turks were also fired up by religious zeal to fight the infidels, while the Indians lacked similar religious and ideological motivations.
Caste divisions amongst the Indians also separated Hindu rulers from the ruled and discouraged the communal solidarity needed to put up an effective resistance or defense against such a formidable adversary. Muslim society was egalitarian, and anyone who wanted to join the army could; a talented soldier could quickly rise up the ranks. In the rigid caste-based Hindu society, the rank of an officer did not necessarily correspond to their military competence. A form of “military Darwinian,” or survival of the fittest, existed among the Muslim Turkish military class. Even a sultan may be replaced by a slave turned general if the former could not maintain his position.

The Battle of Peshawar, fought on November 28, 1001, was the first major encounter between the army of Muhmud of Ghori and the local Indian Raja Jaipal. The Muslim chronicles report that an Indian army of 12,000 cavalry, 30,000 infantry, and 300 battle elephants was defeated by a smaller army of irregular infantry and 15,000 select cavalry. But the Rajputs, by their sheer obstinacy and valor, proved to be a formidable enemy in resisting the Muslim invaders. However, the superior cavalry techniques of the Turks even allowed them to thwart Mongol incursions into India by the armies of Genghis Khan and his successors.

In 1526, Babur, the young ruler of Kabul in Afghanistan, brought with him field artillery pieces and muskets to defeat the one-hundred-thousand-man cavalry formation of the last ruler of Delhi sultanate, Ibrahim Lodhi. Curiously, the Muslim Turkish rulers of the Delhi sultanate, who had earlier defeated Hindu Rajput armies equipped with battle elephants, themselves succumbed to the lore of the elephant and saw it as having military potential. Ibrahim Lodhi had a corps of one thousand battle elephants in his fateful encounter with Babur. Babur’s field artillery put an end to the use of battle elephants in Indian warfare.

Further Reading

Women. See “Society” section

Xuanzang (602–664)

Since the fall of the Gupta Empire in northern India in 550, there had been decentralization and petty warfare. In 606, however, a brilliant 16-year-old king, Harsha, was able to reunite much of northern India. Harsha’s ruled his kingdom until 648, establishing a reign that fostered scholarship, Buddhism, and piety. His kingdom served as a welcoming place for Xuanzang, a Chinese pilgrim who came to study Buddhism in India.
Xuanzang was the youngest of four children who amazed his father with his early grasp on Confucian rituals. After his father died in 611, his older brother, Changjie, who was a Buddhist monk came to be his greatest influence. Xuanzang visited his brother, studied the texts, and became a zealous new convert. He took his vows as a monk at the age of 13. In 618, China was engaged in violent civil wars, and the brothers sought refuge in the mountains of Sichuan to pursue their studies. Young Xuanzang was bothered by seeming contradictions in the texts, so he decided to go to India to study in the birthplace of Buddhism. The Emperor Taizong forbade travel outside China to preserve national security, but the young monk defied the decree. In 629, he secretly set out on his journey.

His journeys were arduous. His guide abandoned him in the Gobi Desert, where he lost his water bag and almost succumbed to the heat before he luckily made his way to the oasis town of Turpan on the Silk Road. The Buddhist ruler of Turpan gave him supplies, gifts, and twenty-four letters of introduction to rulers of lands along the way. Thus supplied, the monk continued on his way, crossing three of the world’s highest mountain ranges: the Tian Shan, Hindu Kush, and Pamir ranges. He lost one-third of his party to cold and starvation and faced numerous attacks from bandits.

He finally arrived in India in 630 where he lived for more than 12 years, visiting the holy sites of Buddhism and studying languages and Buddhist texts. He spent most of his time at Nalanda, the famous monastery, where he became the special student of the abbot Silabhadra. His intellectual skills soon brought him to the attention of King Harsha, who called a conference in 643 on religion and philosophy. Purportedly, Xuanzang defeated five hundred Brahmins, Jains, and Buddhist in a spirited debate.

Finally the monk was ready to return to China. He brought a huge collection of relics and images, as well as 657 books, which he packed into 527 crates. He was fortunate that by the time of his return in 645, China had come under the rule of the Tang dynasty, which fostered trade and presided over an era of peace and economic prosperity. In spite of having violated the travel ban, Xuanzang was received as a hero by the Emperor Taizong.

Xuanzang declined an offer of an official position with the emperor and entered the Temple of Great Happiness. There, assisted by a staff of more than twenty translators, he translated the texts he had brought from India. He was engaged in this task until his death in 664. His efforts helped popularize Buddhism, reconciling it with Confucianism, and bringing about the almost universal acceptance of Buddhism in China. See also Document 9.

Further Reading

Joyce E. Salisbury

Yoga

The goal of Hindus is to achieve salvation through detachment from the body and its concerns in this world, and a desire to join with the divine, or
universal spirit. The path to salvation is generally called yoga, which in Sanskrit means “yoke,” or joining oneself to the divine. Medieval travelers from the West and from Muslim lands wrote of their encounters with holy people, “yogis” who could do remarkable feats of physical activity and endure physical deprivation. These travelers joined the Hindus who recognized these people as particularly holy. The practice of yoga in India is very old and was well established by the Middle Ages. Although the goal of yoga is to connect with divinity, there are various kinds of yoga, each emphasizing different paths to God.

In the modern United States, we are most familiar with “hatha yoga.” In this form of yoga, a practitioner believes that the path to God is through the body itself, so he or she practices various postures (called “asanas”) of increasing difficulty. While performing these asanas, the yogi focuses on breathing deeply and consciously, joining mind, body, and breath into a harmonious whole. Hatha yoga practitioners use this focused integration to bring their whole body into meditation, which represents the distancing from the concerns of this world and focus on the divinity. Medieval travelers commented with wonder at the physical prowess of the practitioners of hatha yoga as they were able to place their bodies into challenging poses.

*Karma yoga* means the “Way of Works” and was praised by the god Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita*. This form of practice requires one to perform the proper rituals every day and at turning points in life. This is not the highest road to salvation (i.e., not as difficult as other forms, nor as certain), but nevertheless it can lead to salvation, or release from the cycle of rebirth. In Karmic yoga, men and women had distinctive ritual duties. Men were primarily responsible for offerings for their ancestors to try to keep them from the wheel of rebirth. Women earned release through service in the home and preparing foods in ritual ways. As Hindus practice karma yoga, their daily lives become an attempt to connect to the divine.

*Jnana yoga* is the “Way of Knowledge.” In this practice, believers see ignorance as the main reason for the alienation of the human from God. The ignorant do not know that the human soul is ultimately of the same essence as the ultimate reality (Brahma) but instead thinks it is identified with the world. It is this misconception that draws the soul into a series of rebirths. Through study and training the mind, individuals can learn their true identity and earn the release from rebirth.

*Bhakti yoga* is the “Way of Devotion.” Like the Karma yoga, this path was also emphasized in the *Bhagavad Gita*. In this path, practitioners embrace God through passionate love. Bhakti was widespread among Hindus during the reign of the Gupta emperors, and this practice was written down in many devotional works like the Puranas. Those who want to commit to the Way of Devotion focus their devotion on one of the major deities. Brahma is the creator. His responsibilities are shared with Vishnu, the preserver, and Siva, the destroyer. Vishnu is worshiped in his incarnation as Krishna, as the personification of divine love. In popular Hinduism, most people usually choose to serve Siva or Vishnu, and the temples are filled with devotees bringing offerings of love as they follow the Way of Devotion.

*Raja yoga*, the “Way of Physical Discipline,” is often identified with the Yoga Sutra, attributed to Patanjali in about the second century C.E. The goal of raja yoga is training the physical body with a special emphasis on meditation. It is this emphasis that separates raja yoga from hatha yoga. Raja yoga requires such
long meditation that its practice is usually restricted to monks. The practitioner tries to focus so intently on one object that it fills his or her whole mind. In the next step, they withdraw the object until the person is no longer conscious of it. The final step extinguishes all consciousness of the world, which prepares the adept to escape the cycle of rebirth.

Tantric yoga explores the idea of release through embracing the body in a ritual way. Practitioners—often worshippers of Siva—embrace sexual intercourse as a ritual to generate the power of the spirit. The embrace of sexuality has led many in the West to explore this form of yoga, however, in its Hindu context it remains one more path to escaping the attachments of this world.

All these pathways recognize the diversity of Hinduism. Through all of them, however, the goal remains to escape the cycle of rebirth and to escape this world into union with the divine principle. See also Document 15.

**Further Reading**


*Joyce E. Salisbury*
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Chapter VIII
Arjuna asked:

1. What is Brahman?, what is Atman, and what is karma?, Oh Best of Men. What is your material nature, and what is your divine nature?
2. What is your sacrificial nature in this body, and how does it operate, Oh Madhusudana? How again, are you to be known at the time of death by those with their minds in yoga?

The Blessed Lord answered:

3. Brahman is the indestructible, the supreme, whose essential nature is called Atman. Karma is the name for the creative power which causes the births of beings.
4. The foundation of all existence is My material nature, the basis of all Spirit is My divine nature. The basis of all sacrifices is My sacrificial nature; I am here, in the body, Oh Greatest of Embodied Ones.
5. And that one who at the hour of his death, thinking on Me alone as he casts off his body, he enters into My nature. Of this there is no doubt.

6. On whatever state of being a man thinks when at the end he gives up his body, to that state of being he goes, Oh Son of Kunti, having been totally absorbed in the thoughts of that state.

7. Therefore think upon Me at all times and fight. When your mind and reason are fixed on Me, then, without doubt, you shall come to Me.

8. With the Mind not wandering after anything else, with the mind yoked by yoga and practice, meditating on the highest divine Spirit, to that Spirit you will go.

9. He who meditates on the ancient Seer, the World Controller, Who is smaller than the smallest, the Establisher of all, of form unfathomable, sun-colored, beyond the darkness;

10. He who does this, at the time of his death, by an unswerving mind fixed in devotion, and by the power of yoga drawing the life breath to the center of the eyebrows, he goes to this Spirit, supreme and divine.

11. Now I will tell you about That state which the knowers of the Veda call Indestructible; That which those who are controlled and free from passion enter, and That desiring which they lead a life of bramacarya.

12. With all the gates of the body closed, confining the mind within the heart and his own breath in his head, using the concentration of yoga;

13. Then he who recited the singly syllable Aum!, which is Brahman, and meditating on Me as he dies, giving up his body, he goes to the highest goal.

14. That man who constantly meditates on Me, thinking of no other, who is a yogi truly disciplined, by him I am easily obtained.


2. The Ramayana: The Story of Ahalya and the God Indra

One of the most important literary works of ancient India, the Ramayana is a Sanskrit epic comprising some twenty-four-thousand verses divided into seven books and telling the story of Rama, a Hindu prince who is an incarnation of the god Vishnu. Authorship of the work is traditionally attributed to Valmiki, who is revered as the first poet in Hinduism. Although most scholars accept that the original kernel of the Ramayana may have been written by one person between about 750 and 500 B.C.E., making it somewhat older than the Mahabharata (see Document 1), the epic as it exists today is the result of centuries of revisions and interpolations by others and may not have reached its final form until India’s medieval period. The oldest existing manuscript dates from the eleventh century C.E. The following prose excerpt, which tells the story of the beautiful woman Ahalya, is drawn from a version of the Ramayana crafted by the Tamil poet Kamban in the thirteenth century.

Brahma once created, out of the ingredients of absolute beauty, a woman, and she was called Ahalya. . . . God Indra, being the highest god among the gods, was attracted by her beauty and was convinced that he alone was worthy of claiming her hand. Brahma, noticing the conceit and presumptuousness of
Indra, ignored him, sought out Sage Gautama and left him in charge of the girl. She grew up in his custody, and when the time came the sage took her back to Brahma and handed her over to him.

Brahma appreciated Gautama’s purity of mind and heart (never once had any carnal thought crossed his mind), and said, “Marry her, she is fit to be your wife, or rather you alone deserve to be her husband.” Accordingly, she was married, blessed by Brahma and other gods. . . .

Indra, however, never got over his infatuation for Ahalya, and often came in different guises near to Gautama’s ashram, waiting for every chance to gaze and feast on ahalya’s form and figure . . . One day . . . Indra assumed the voice of a rooster, and woke up the sage, who, thinking the morning had come, left for the river. Now Indra assumed the sage’s form, entered the hut, and made love to Ahalya. She surrendered herself, but at some stage realized that the man enjoying her was an imposter; but she could do nothing about it. Gautama came back at this moment, and surprised the couple in bed. Ahalya stood aside filled with shame and remorse; Indra assumed the form of a cat (the most facile form for sneaking in or out) and tried to slip away. The sage . . . was not to be deceived. He arrested the cat where he was with these words:

“Cat, I know you; your obsession with the female is your undoing. May your body be covered with a thousand female marks, so that in all the worlds, people may understand what reales on in your mind all the time.” Hardly had these words left his lips when every inch of Indra’s body displayed the female organ. There could be no greater shame for the proud and self-preening Indra.

After Indra slunk away, back to his world, Gautama looked at his wife and said, “You have sinned with your body. May that body Harden into a shapeless piece of granite . . .

Indra’s predicament became a joke in all the worlds. . . . He stayed in darkness and seclusion and could never appear before men or women. This caused much concern to all the gods, as his multifarious duties in various worlds remained suspended, and they . . . requested [Brahma] to intercede with Gautama. By this time, the sage’s resentment had vanished. And he said in response to Brahma’s appeal, “May the thousand additions to Indra’s features become eyes.” Indra thereafter came to be known as the “thousand-eyed god.”


3. Excerpt from the Travel Account of Faxian: A Cremation in Ceylon, c. 400

Faxian (c. 337–c. 422) was a Chinese Buddhist monk who traveled through India between about 399 and 412, during the reign of Chandra Gupta II. Faxian’s mission was to find and acquire works of Buddhist literature and to bring them to China for translation. While in India, Faxian visited many Buddhist sites, including the birthplace of Lord Buddha at Lumbini. Faxian’s account of his travels Record of the Buddhistic Kingdoms is one of the world’s great travel books and a valuable source of information on Gupta India and on early Buddhism. In the following excerpt, Faxian describes a cremation he witnessed in Ceylon. See also Document 4, for another except from the writings of Faxian.
Seven li to the south of the city there is a shrine called the Great Shrine, with three thousand resident priests. Among them was one reverend Shaman, so pure in his conduct as regards the Disciples that all suspected him of being a Lo-han [i.e., one who has followed the eight-fold path and has achieved deliverance from earthly existence]. When he was at the point of death, the king came to look into the matter; and when, in accordance with the rules of the Faith, he had assembled the priests, he asked, “Has this religious mendicant become a Lo-han?” The priests at once told the truth and replied, “He is a Lo-han.” When he was dead the king accordingly buried him with the ceremonial due to a Lo-han, as laid down in the Canons.

Four or five li to the east of the shrine a great pile of wood was collected, over thirty feet square and of about the same height. Sandalwood, garoo wood (lign-aloes), and all kinds of scented woods were laced on the top, and at the four sides steps were made. Over it was spread clean white cashmere which surrounded and quite covered the pyre; and again on the top of this was placed a car, in form like the hearses of China, but without the dragon. At the time of the cremation the king and his subjects collected together from all quarters, and with offerings of flowers and incense followed the car to the burial-ground, the king himself making personal offerings of flowers and incense. When these ceremonies were finished, the car was placed on the top of the pyre, oil of sweet basil was poured all over it, and a light was applied. While the fire was blazing, every one was moved with a feeling of reverence, and each took off his upper garment, and together with feather-fan and umbrella, threw it from a distance into the midst of the flames, so as to help on the cremation. When it was all over, the bones were collected and a pagoda raised over them. Fa-hsien did not arrive while the deceased was yet alive, but only in time to see his funeral.


4. Excerpt from the Travel Account of Faxian: The Chandalas, c. 400

In this excerpt from Faxian’s Record of the Buddhistic Kingdoms, the Chinese scholar-monk makes reference to the Chandalas, members of the lowest Hindu caste, who must separate themselves from the rest of Gupta society. Faxian also describes the esteem with which Indian rulers regard Buddhist holy men and the rewards such men receive for their pure way of life. See also Document 3, for another excerpt from the writings of Faxian.

All south from this is named the Middle Kingdom [central India, the northern Deccan]. In it the cold and heat are finely tempered, and there is neither hoarfrost nor snow. The people are numerous and happy; they have not to register their households, or attend to any magistrates and their rules; only those who cultivate the royal land have to pay (a portion of) the gain from it. If they want to go, they go; if they want to stay on, they stay. The king governs without decapitation or (other) corporal punishments. Criminals are simply fined, lightly or heavily, according to the circumstances (of each case). Even in
cases of repeated attempts at wicked rebellion, they only have their right hands cut off. The king’s body-guards and attendants all have salaries. Throughout the whole country the people do not kill any living creature, nor drink intoxicating liquor, nor eat onions or garlic. The only exception is that of the Chandalas [Untouchables]. That is the name for those who are (held to be) wicked men, and live apart from others. When they enter the gate of a city or a market-place, they strike a piece of wood to make themselves known, so that men know and avoid them, and do not come into contact with them. In that country they do not keep pigs or fowls, and do not sell live cattle; in the markets there are no butchers’ shops and no dealers in intoxicating drink. In buying and selling commodities they use cowries. Only the Chandalas are fishermen and hunters, and sell flesh meat.

After Buddha attained to pari-nirvâna [i.e., when Buddha died] the kings of the various countries and the heads of the Vaisyas built vihâras for the priests, and endowed them with fields, houses, gardens, and orchards, along with the resident populations and their cattle, the grants being engraved on plates of metal, so that afterwards they were handed down from king to king, without any one daring to annul them, and they remain even to the present time.


5. Excerpt from the Poem “The Birth of the War-God” by Kalidasa, c. Fourth/Fifth Century C.E.

Kalidasa is the most renowned Sanskrit poet and playwright of medieval India. Although little is known about his life, the fame of his plays and poems, which are based mainly on Hindu mythology and philosophy, have earned him a place in Indian literature that is akin to that of William Shakespeare in English literature. Of his three known plays, the most acclaimed is Abhijnanashakuntala, which tells the story of the mishaps that befall King Dushyanta and his wife Shakuntala. Also attributed to him are two epic poems and several long lyric poems. Scholars are uncertain as to just when Kalidasa lived and wrote, though most place his life between 300 and 470 C.E., with many narrowing it to sometime during the reign of Chandra Gupta II in the early fifth century. The following excerpt is taken from Kalidasa’a poem, “The Birth of the War-God.”

Canto Second

The Address to Brahma
While impious Tarak in resistless might
Was troubling heaven and earth with wild affright,
To Brahma’s high abode, by Indra led,
The mournful deities for refuge fled.
As when the Day-God’s loving beams awake
The lotus slumbering on the silver lake,
So Brahma deigned his glorious face to show,
And poured sweet comfort on their looks of woe.
Then nearer came the suppliant Gods to pay
Honour to him whose face turns every way.
They bowed them low before the Lord of Speech,
And sought with truthful words his heart to reach:
“Glory to Thee! before the world was made,
One single form thy Majesty displayed.
Next Thou, to body forth the mystic Three,
Didst fill three Persons: Glory, Lord, to Thee!
Unborn and unbegotten! from thy hand
The fruitful seed rained down; at thy command
From that small germ o’er quickening waters thrown
All things that move not, all that move have grown.
Before thy triple form in awe they bow:
Maker, preserver, and destroyer, Thou!
Thou, when a longing urged thee to create,
Thy single form in twain didst separate.
The Sire, the Mother that made all things be
By their first union were but parts of Thee.
From them the life that fills this earthly frame,
And fruitful Nature, self-renewing, came.
Thous countest not thy time by mortals’ light;
With thee there is but one vast day and night.
When Brahma slumbers fainting Nature dies,
When Brahma wakens all again arise.
Creator of the world, and uncreate!
Endless! all things from Thee their end await.
Before the world wast Thou! each Lord shall fall
Before Thee, mightiest, highest, Lord of all.
The self-taught soul thine own deep spirit knows;
Made by thyself they mighty form arose;
Into the same, when all things have their end,
Shall thy great self, absorbed in Thee, descend.
Lord, who may hope thy essence to declare?
Firm, yet subtle as the yielding air:
Fixt, all-pervading; ponderous, yet light,
Patent to all, yet hidden from the sight.
Thine are the sacred hymns which mortals raise,
Commencing ever with the word of praise,
With three-toned chant the sacrifice to grace,
And win at last in heaven a blissful place.
They hail Thee Nature labouring to free
The Immortal Soul from low humanity;
Hail Thee the stranger Spirit, unimpressed,
Gazing on Nature from thy lofty rest.
Father of fathers, God of gods art thou,
Creator, highest, hearer of the vow!
Thou art the sacrifice, and Thou the priest,
Thou, he that eateth; Thou the holy feast.
Thou art the knowledge which by thee is taught,
The mighty thinker, and the highest thought!”
6. Inscriptions of the Gupta Kings, Fourth and Fifth Centuries C.E.

Reproduced below are three inscriptions from the Gupta Period in which the Gupta monarchs and other rulers celebrate their achievements and lineage. The first refers, probably posthumously, to Samudra Gupta, who reigned from about 335 to 375; it was carved on a stone pillar near what is today the North Indian city of Allahabad. The second inscription is from the reign of Chandra Gupta II (c. 375–415) and mentions the asvamedha or horse sacrifice, a ritual that gave great power and prestige to whomever carried it out. As it is here, this ritual, which did not always include the actual immolation of a horse, is always associated with Samudra Gupta, who is said to have “displayed prowess by a horse-sacrifice.” The third inscription refers to Yasodharman, a sixth-century king of Malwi, a Hindu kingdom of central India.

Inscription of Samudra Gupta
This lofty column [is] as it were an arm of the earth, proclaiming the fame,—which, having pervaded the entire surface of the earth with [its] development that was caused by [his] conquest of the whole world, [has departed] hence [and now] experiences the sweet happiness attained by [his] having gone to the abode of [Indra] the lord of the gods,—of the Maharajadhiraja, the glorious Samudragupta, ... Whose happy mind was accustomed to associate with learned people; —who was the supporter of the real truth of scriptures ... who, having overwhelmed, with the [fore of the] commands of the collective merits of [his] learned men, those things which obstruct the beauty of excellent poetry, [still] enjoys, in the world of the wise, the sovereignty of the fame [produced] by much poetry. . . .

Inscription of Chandra Gupta II
By him who is the son,—accepted by him, [and] begotten on the Mahadevi Dattadevi,—of the Maharajadhiraja, [the glorious] Samudragupta,—[Who was the exterminator of all kings; who had no antagonist [of equal power] in the word; [whose fame was] tasted ]by the waters of the four oceans]; who was equal to [the gods]; who was [the very axe] of [the god] Kritanta; who was the giver of [many] millions of ]lawfully acquired cows] and gold; [who was the re- storer of the asvamedha-sacrifice, that had been long in abeyance,—Who was the son of the son’s son of the Maharaja, the illustrious Gupta; the son’s son of [the Maharaja, the illustrious] Ghatotkacha; [and] the son of the Maharajadhiraja [the glorious Chandragupta I], [and] the daughter’s son of Lichchhavi, begotten on the Mahadevi Kumaradevi;—By him, the most devout worshipper of the Divine One, the Maharajadhiraja, the glorious Chandragupta [II]. . . .

Inscription of Yasodharman
Perfection has been attained! Victorious is he, [the god] Pinakin, the lord of [all] worlds,—in whose songs, hummed with smiles, the splendour of [his] teeth, like the luster of lightning sparkling in the night, envelops and brings into full view all this universe! . . . Now, victorious is that tribal ruler, having
the name of the glorious Yasodharman, who, having plunged into the army of [his enemies, as if into a grove of thornapple-trees, [and] having bent down the reputations of heroes like the tender creepers of trees, effects the adornment of [his] body with the fragments of young sprouts which are the wounds [inflicted on him].


7. Except from The Minister’s Seal, a Work by the Gupta Playwright Visakhadatta, Early Fifth Century C.E.

Little is known about Visakhadatta beyond what the playwright says of himself in the following excerpt from the prologue to his play, The Minister’s Seal. Given that his grandfather was a governor and that he is sometimes referred to as Visakhadeva—deva being a royal appellation—it seems likely that he was a member of the Gupta nobility. His life dates are uncertain, but, because the final benediction of the play mentions King Chandra Gupta, it is likely that he lived during the Reign of Chandra Gupta II (c. 375–415). The Minister’s Seal is semihistorical in that the king whose throne is in jeopardy in the play is an historical figure, known from Greek sources for having defeated Alexander the Great’s commander Seleucus Nicator in 305 B.C.E. The circumstances of the play, however, appear to be entirely fictional. The excerpt below is from the prologue, wherein the director sets the stage for the coming performance.

After the blessing has been said, enter the Director.

Director: This will do. I have been instructed by the audience to stage a new play today, a play by the poet Visakhadatta, the son of Maharaja Bhaskara and the grandson of governor Vatesvaradatta. The play is a heroic drama, entitled The Minister’s Seal. In fact, I am extremely happy to stage a play for an audience like this that is so appreciative of good literature. For even a fool can reap a rich harvest, if his seed falls on good soil; the abundance of his crop does not depend on the sower’s skill. So I had better get home and call my wife, so that we can begin the performance with our troupe. . . . Here we are. Well, well, what is going on here? It looks as if we are having a celebration. All the servants are unusually busy at their jobs. One is carrying buckets full of water, another is mixing incense, a third is fashioning garlands of all kinds of flowers, and still another is humming while she pounds with her pestle. All right, then, I’ll call my wife and ask what is happening. [He looks toward the backstage.]

Enter an Actress

Actress: Here I am, my Lord. Be good enough to grace me with your orders.

Director: My orders can wait. Tell me, have you invited these reverend Brahmins to grace our house, or have they come by themselves as welcome guests, since there is such a variety of dishes being prepared?

Actress: No, I invited the reverend Brahmins myself.

Director: Why?

Actress: We must worship the moon today. There is an eclipse.
Director: Whoever told you that?
Actress: someone from the City.
Director: Madam, I have made an elaborate study of all sixty-four chapters of astrology. By all means, carry on your cooking for the Brahmins, but we are not going to have an eclipse today. Somebody has played a trick on you! Look, . . . a Cruel Grasper wants to violate the Moon’s Immaculate Realm . . .
Voice Offstage: Who dares, while I am here!
Director: . . . but the Conjunction of Mercury will save the day!
Actress: Who was that man who, safely on earth, wants to save the moon and stave off its attackers?
Director: I could not quite catch it myself. Let me try again [repeats the phrase: “A Cruel Grasper . . . ”]
Voice Offstage: Who dares violate my Lord the Moon while I am here? Speak up!
Director [listening]: Ah, I have got it! Kautilya! [Actress shrinks with fear.] Yes, Kautilya of the crooked mind, who burnt the house of the Nandas in the fire of his fury. He heard that someone tried to grasp the Moon and thought that his lord Chandragupta was threatened. Let us get away from here! [Exeunt.]


8. Banabhatta’s Account of How the Newly Crowned Harsha Turned a Bad Omen to His Advantage, c. 606

Banabhatta (known as Bana) was court poet to the seventh-century North Indian ruler Harsha, whose life and deeds were recorded by Bana in his Sanskrit biography of the king, the Harshacharita. Although written in florid and poetic prose, the Harshacharita is the first historical biography in Sanskrit and appears to be based on accurate and detailed observation of the people and events it depicts. It also has an element of autobiography, telling us something about the thought and personality of Bana himself. The following excerpt describes an incident that occurred when Harsha first came to the throne in difficult circumstances following the murder of his older brother. See also Document 9, for another description of the start of Harsha’s reign.

On the outskirts of the city of Sthanesvara, the local notary came “with his whole retinue of clerks” to pay homage to the newly crowned an consecrated Harsha, saying “ ‘Let his majesty, whose edicts are never void, even now bestow upon us his commands for the day,’ so [he] presented a newly made golden seal with a bull for its emblem. The king took it. As soon, however, as a ball of earth was produced, the seal slipped from the king’s hand and fell face downwards upon the ground, and the lines of the letters were distinctly marked upon the nearly dry mud and soft earth of Saravati’s bank. Apprehensive of an evil omen, the courtiers were depressed, but the king thought in his heart: ‘The minds of the dull are indeed blind to reality. The omen signifies that the earth shall be stamped with the single seal of my sole command: but the rustics interpret otherwise.’ Having thus mentally welcomed the omen, he bestowed upon the Brahmanas a hundred villages delimited by a thousand
ploughs. That day he spent in the same place, and when night arrived, complimented all the kings and retired to rest.”


9. Xuanzang’s Account of Harsha’s Accession to the Throne, c. 606

Xuanzang (c. 602–654), like that earlier Chinese visitor to India, Faxian (see Documents 3 and 4), was a Buddhist monk. Xuanzang traveled through India in the early seventh century visiting Buddhist sites and studying with Buddhist scholars. He spent several years studying Sanskrit, logic, and grammar at Nalanda, the great Buddhist center of learning in early medieval India. When he returned to China in the 640s, he brought back many Buddhist texts, for which he established a translation bureau with the permission of the Chinese emperor. Also at the emperor’s request, he wrote an autobiography, which includes detailed descriptions of his experiences in India during the reign of Harsha. The following excerpt describes the circumstances surrounding Harsha’s accession to the throne. See also Document 8, for another account of the start of Harsha’s reign.

The great minister Po-ni whose office/wisdom, and reputation were high and of much weight, addressing the assembled ministers and officials said, “The destiny of the nation is to be fixed today. The old king’s son [Rajyavardhana] is dead; the brother of the prince [Harsha-vardhana], however, is humane and affectionate, and his disposition, heaven conferred, is filial and respectful. Because he is strongly attached to his family, the people will trust in him. I propose that he assume royal authority. Let each one give his opinion on this matter, whatever he thinks.” There was no dissention and they all admired his virtue.

On this the ministers and officials all exhorted him to take authority saying: “Let the royal prince attend! The accumulated merit and the conspicuous virtue of the former king were so illustrious as to cause this kingdom to be most happily governed. When he was followed by Rajya-vardhana we thought he would end his years [as king]; but, owing to the badness of his ministers, he was led to subject his person to the hand of the enemy, and the kingdom has suffered great affliction; but it is because he lacked good ministers. The opinion of the people, as shown in their songs, proves their real submission to your eminent qualities. Reign, then, with glory over the land; conquer the enemies of your family; wash out the insult laid on your kingdom and glorify the deeds of your illustrious father. Great will your merit be in such a case. We pray you reject not our prayer.”

The prince replied: “. . . Setting up a ruler on the throne—this should be done with great circumspection. I am indeed of little virtue and my father and brother have orphaned me. . . . Although public opinion thinks me fit for the throne, how dare I forget my insufficiency. Now, on the banks of the Ganga there is a statue of the Avalokitesvara Bodhi-sattva which has witnessed many spiritual wonders. I will go and request a response.”
Forthwith coming to the spot where the figure of the Bodhi-sattva was, he remained before it fasting and praying. The Boshi-sattva was moved by his sincerity and appeared in bodily form and enquired, "What do you seek that you are so earnest in your supplications?" the prince answered, "I have suffered under a load of affliction. My kindly father indeed is dead and to add to this cruel punishment my good brother has been murdered. I am aware that I am lacking in virtue, nevertheless the people would exalt me to royal dignity, to glorify my illustrious father. Yet, I am indeed but ignorant and foolish. In my trouble I ask for holy direction."

The Bodhi-sattva replied, . . . The Law of Buddha having been destroyed by the king of Kanrna-suvarna, you, when you become king, should revive it. If you be compassionate to the distressed and cherish them, then before long you shall rule over the five Indias."


10. A Muslim Account of Hindu Devotions, 1041

Muhammad Kasim Firishta (c. 1560–c. 1620) was an Indian Muslim historian, who, under the patronage of the shah of Bijapur, wrote a history of the Muslims in India since the tenth century. His work, which was translated in 1829, is a landmark in Indian historiography because it provides detailed information on the history of medieval India. The following excerpt is a less-than-flattering account of Hinduism and its followers in eleventh-century India.

In the year 435 [1041 C.E.], the prince of Delhi in alliance with others, raising an army, took Hassi, Tannasar, and their dependencies, from the governors to whom Modood [Sultan Manmood] had entrusted them. The Hindoos from thence marched towards the fort of Nagracut, which they besieged for four months, and the garrison being distressed for provisions, and no succours coming from Lahore, were under the necessity of capitulating. The Hindoos, according to the ancient form, erected new idols, and recommenced the rites of idolatry. We are told that the prince of Delhi, observing a weakness in the empire of Ghizni, pretended to have seen a vision, in which the great idol of Nagracut told him, that having now revenged himself upon the Ghizni, he would meet him at Nagracut in his former temple. This story being propagated by the Brahmins, who probably were in the secret, it gained faith among the superstitious, by which means the Raja was joined by zealots from all parts, and soon saw himself at the head of a very numerous army. With this army as we have already mentioned, he besieged Nargacut, and when the place surrendered, he took care to have an idol, of the same shape and size with the former, which he had caused to be made at Delhi, introduced, in the night, into a garden in the center of the place. This image being discovered in the morning, there was a prodigious rejoicing among his deluded votaries, who exclaimed, that their God was returned from Ghizni. The Raja, and the Brahmins, taking the advantage of the credulity of the populace, with great pomp and festivity, carried him into the temple, where he received the worship and congratulations of his people. This story raised so much the fame of the idol,
that thousands came daily to worship from all parts of Hindostan, as also to consult him as an oracle, upon all important occasions. The manner of consultation was this: The person who came to inquire into futurity, slept on the floor of the temple before him, after drinking a dose of something which the Brahmins prescribed to create dreams, from which they predicted their fortune, in the morning, according to their own fancy.


11. A Description of the City of Delhi at the End of the Reign of Sultan Shams al-Din Iltutmish, 1236

The following excerpt from the writings of the thirteenth-century Indian historian Al Minhaj Bin Siraj (see also Document 12) is a laudatory description of the power and prestige of the city of Delhi at the end of the reign of Sultan Shams al-Din Iltutmish (d. 1236). Although born into a noble Central Asian family, Iltutmish was a former slave who was proclaimed sultan of Delhi in 1210 in succession to his former master, Sultan Qutb al-Din Aibek.

The capital city of Delhi . . . is the seat of the government of Hindustan, and the Centre of the circle of Islam, the sanctuary of the mandates and inhibitions of the law, the kernel of the Muhammadi religion, the marrow of the Ahmadi belief, and the tabernacle of the eastern parts of the universe—Guard it, O God, from calamities, and molestation! This city, through the number of the grants, and unbounded munificence of that pious monarch [Sultan Shams al-Din Iltutmish], became the retreat and resting-place for the learned, the virtuous, and the excellent of the various parts of the world; and those who, by the mercy of God, the most High, escaped from the toils of the calamities sustained by the provinces and cities of Ajam, and the misfortunes caused by the (irruption of the) infidel Mughals, made the capital—the asylum of the universe—of that sovereign their asylum, refuge, resting-place, and point of safety; and, up to the present day, those same rules are observed and remain unchanged, and such may they ever continue!


12. Sultana Raziya and Nasiriah College, c. 1240

In this excerpt, the thirteenth-century historian Al Minhaj Bin Siraj (see also Document 11), describes how he was placed in charge of Nasiriah College. The appointment appears to have been made initially by Sultana Raziya, the daughter and successor of Sultan Shams al-Din Iltutmish and one of the few female rulers of medieval India. However, confirmation of the appointment seems to have been made some years later after Sultana Raziya had been overthrown and killed and the throne had come to Nasir al-Din Mahmud Shah.
[Sultana Raziya] issued commands for her troops to proceed to Gwaliyur, and bestowed rich and valuable presents. As disobedience was out of the questions, this servant of the victorious kingdom, Minhaj-i-Suraj, in conjunction with the Malik-ul Umra (the chief of the Amirs) Ziya-ud-Din, Junaidi, who was the Amir-I-Dad (chief magistrate) of Gwaliyur, and with other persons of note, came out of the preserved fortress of Gwaliyur on the 1st of the month of Sha’ban, 635 [1240] . . . and returned to Delhi, the capital; and, in this same month, Sultan Raziyyat committed to the charge of this servant . . . the Nasi- riah College at the capital to which was added the Kazi-ship of Gwaliyur . . .

The writer of this book . . . reached the capital on Monday, the 14th of the month of Safar, 643 [1248] . . . and permission to pay homage at the sublime Court was obtained. On Thursday, the 17th of the month of Safar . . . the Nasiriah College, together with the superintendence of its endowments, the Kazi-ship of Gwaliyur, and the lecture-ship of Jami Masjid, all these, were confirmed to the author, according to the former grant, and that Malik (Ulugh Khan-i-Mu’azzam) conferred on the author a special honorary robe, and a caparisoned horse such as no other among his brethren of the same profession had ever obtained. God reward him for it!


13. Excerpt from the Account of Marco Polo: The Customs of Maabar, c. 1291

Marco Polo (1254–c. 1324) was a Venetian merchant and explorer who, with his father and uncle, traveled to Mongol China in the late thirteenth century. Polo’s account of his travels, mainly in China, also through India and Southeast Asia, offers a European perspective of the peoples and places of East Asia. The following excerpt lists various customs of the people of Maabar, which appears to be the Coromandel Coast of southeastern coast of India. See also Document 14, for another selection from the writings of Marco Polo.

Another custom is this. when a man is dead and his body is being cremated, his wife flings herself into the same fire and lets herself be burnt with her husband. The ladies who do this are highly praised by all. And I assure you that there are many who do as I have told you . . .

Here is yet another of their customs. The king and his barons and everyone else all sit on the earth. If you ask them why they do not seat themselves more honourably, they reply that to sit on the earth is honourable enough, because we were made from the earth and to the earth we must return, so that no one could honour the earth too highly and no one should slight it . . .

This kingdom produces no grain excepting only rice. And here is a greater matter, well worth recounting: in this country if a stallion of noble breed covers a mare of the like mettle the offspring is a stunted colt with its feet awry. Horses so bed are worthless and cannot be ridden.

The people here go into battle with lance and shield and they go stark naked. They are not men of any valour or spirit, but paltry creatures and mean-spirited.
They kill no beasts or any living thing. When they have a mind to eat the flesh of a sheep or of any beast or bird, they employ a Saracen or some other who is not of their religion or rule to kill it for them. Another of their customs is that all of them, male or female, wash their whole body in cold water twice a day—that is, morning and evening. One who did not wash twice a day would be thought an ascetic. . . .

And you must know that in eating they use only the right hand; they would never touch food with their left. Whatever is clean and fair they do and touch with the right hand, believing that the function of the left hand is confined to such needful tasks as are unclean and foul, such as wiping the nose or the breach and suchlike. Likewise they drink only out of flasks, each one from his own; for no one would drink out of another’s flask. When they are drinking, they do not set the flask to their lips, but hold it above and pour the fluid into their mouth. They would not on any account touch the flask with their lips nor pass it to a stranger to drink out of. If a stranger wants to drink and has not got his own flask with him, they will pour the wine or other fluid into his hands and he will drink out of them, so that his own hands will serve him for a cup.


14. Excerpt from the Account of Marco Polo: The Brahmins of Lar, c. 1291

Like Document 13, above, the following is a selection from the travel account of Venetian trader Marco Polo, who journeyed to China and other parts of East Asia in the late thirteenth century. This excerpt describes the merchants of the Indian province of Lar, which appears to be a district of southwestern India.

Leaving the place where rests the body of the glorious apostle Saint Thomas, and proceeding westward, you enter the province of Lar [probably the region around modern-day Mysore in southwestern India], from whence the Brahmins, who are spread over India, derive their origin. These are the best and most honorable merchants that can be found. No consideration whatever can induce them to speak an untruth, even though their lives should depend upon it. They have also an abhorrence of robbery or of purloining the goods of other persons. They are likewise remarkable for the virtue of continence, being satisfied with the possession of one wife. When any foreign merchant, unacquainted with the usages of the country, introduces himself to one of these, and commits to his hands the care of his adventure, this Brahmin undertakes the management of it, disposes of the goods, and renders a faithful account of the proceeds, attending scrupulously to the interests of the stranger, and not demanding any recompense for his trouble, should the owner uncourteously omit to make him the gratuitous offer. They eat meat, and drink the wine of the country. They do not, however, kill any animal themselves, but get it done by the Mahometans. The Brahmins are distinguished by a certain badge, consisting of a thick cotton thread, which passes over the shoulder and is tied under the arm, in such a manner that the thread appears upon the breast and behind the back.
The king is extremely rich and powerful, and has much delight in the possession of pearls and valuable stones. When the traders from Maabar [along the southeastern coast of India] present to him such as are of superior beauty, he trusts to their word with respect to the estimation of their value, and gives them double the sum that each is declared to have cost them. Under these circumstances, he has the offer of many fine jewels.

The people are gross idolaters, and much addicted to sorcery and divination. When they are about to make a purchase of goods, they immediately observe the shadow cast by their own bodies in the sunshine; and if the shadow be as large as it should be, they make the purchase that day. Moreover, when they are in any shop for the purpose of buying anything, if they see a tarantula, of which there are many there, they take notice from which side it comes, and regulate their business accordingly. Again, when they are going out of their houses, if they hear anyone sneeze, they return into the house, and stay at home. They are very abstemious in regard to eating, and live to any advanced age. Their teeth are preserved sound by the use of a certain vegetable which they are in the habit of masticating. It also promotes digestion, and conduces generally to the health of the body.


15. Marco Polo Describes Yogis He Encounters in India, c. 1291

In this excerpt from the writings of the European traveler Marco Polo (see Documents 13 and 14), he describes Indian Yogis, with whom he is clearly fascinated.

Among them [Brahmans] are certain living under a rule who are called Yogis. They live even longer than the others, as much as 150 or 200 years. And their bodies remain so active that they can still come and go as they will and perform all the services required by their monastery and their idols and serve them just as well as if they were younger. This comes of their great abstinence and of eating very little food and only what is wholesome. For it is their practice to eat chiefly rice and milk. . . .

There is a regular religious order in this kingdom of Maabar, of those who are called by this name of Yogi, who carry abstinence to the extremes of which I will tell you and lead a harsh and austere life. You may take it for a fact that they go start naked, wearing not a stitch of clothing nor even covering their private parts or any bodily member. They worship the ox, and most of them carry a little ox made of gilt copper or bronze in the middle of the forehead. You must understand that they wear it tied on. Le me tell you further that they burn cow-dung and make a powder of it. With this they anoint various parts of their body with great reverence, no less than Christians display in the use of holy water. If anyone does reverence to them while they are passing in the street, they anoint him with this powder on the forehead in token of blessing. They do not eat out of platters or on trenchers; but they take their food on the leaves of apples of paradise or other big leaves—not green leaves, but dried ones; for they say that the green leaves have souls so that this would be a sin. For in their dealings with all living creatures they are at pains to do
nothing that they believe to be a sin. Indeed they would sooner die than do anything that they deemed to be sinful. When other men ask them why they go naked and are not ashamed to show their sexual member, they say: "We go naked because we want nothing of this world. For we came into the world naked and unclothed. The reason why we are not ashamed to show our member is that we commit no sin with it, so we are not more ashamed to show it than you are when you show your hand or face or any other member which you do not employ in sinful lechery. It is because you employ this member in sin and lechery that you cover it and are ashamed of it.


16. A Story of Pre-Muslim Delhi: Justice for a Crow, c. 1320

Amir Khusrau (1253–1325) was a Turkish soldier who gained a high reputation as a scholar and poet. Able to read Sanskrit, he also wrote in two languages, Persian and Hindi. The following selection from his writings tells a mythical tale of an eighth-century Hindu ruler of Delhi.

I have heard a story that, in Delhi, about five or six hundred years ago, there was a great rai, called Anangpal. At the entrance of his palace he had placed two lions, sculptured in stone. He fixed a bell by the side of the two lions, that those who sought justice might strike it, upon which the rai would order them to be summoned, would listen to their complaints, and render justice. One day, a crow came and sat on the bell and struck it, when the rai asked who the complainant was. It is a fact, not unknown, that bold crows will pick meat from between the teeth of lions. As stone lions cannot hunt for prey, where could the crow obtain it usual sustenance? As the rai was satisfied that the crow justly complained of hunger, having come to sit by his tone lions, he gave orders that some goats and sheep be killed, on which the crow might feed himself for some days.


17. Ibn Battuta: The Pepper Tree of South India, c. 1325

Ibn Battuta (1304–c. 1368/1377) was a fourteenth-century Moroccan Berber scholar and jurist who is best known as a traveler and explorer. Ibn Battuta’s travels covered more than 30 years and over 70,000 miles, extending across the entire Islamic world, from North and West Africa to southern Europe, the Middle East, Central Asia, China, Southeast Asia, and India. At the direction of the sultan of Morocco, Ibn Battuta dictated a detailed account of his travels, which, for sheer distance traveled, far outstripped those of his near contemporary, Marco Polo (see Documents 13, 14, and 15). The following except is a description of pepper trees in South India. For another selection from the writings of Ibn Battuta, see Document 18.
The pepper trees resemble grapevines; they are planted alongside coco-palms and climb up them in the same way that vines climb, except that they have no shoots, that is to say tendrils, like those of vines. The leaves of the tree resemble those of stocks, and some of them resemble the leaves of briar. It produces its fruit in small clusters. In the autumn they gather the grains and spread them on mats in the sun, just as is done with grapes to obtain raisins; they keep on turning them until they are thoroughly dried and become black, and then sell them to the merchants. Most people in our country suppose that they roast them with fire and that it is because of that they become crinkled, but it is not so since this results only from the action of the sun upon them. I have seen pepper grains in the city of Qaliqut being poured out for measuring by the bushel, like millet in our country.

The First town in the land of Mulaibar that we entered was the town of Abu Sarur [Barcelore], a small place on a large inlet and abounding in coco-palms. Two days’ journey from there brought us to Fakanur [Bacanor], a large town on an inlet; here there is a large quantity of fine-flavoured sugarcanes, which are unexcelled in the rest of the country. Three days after leaving Fakanur we reached Manjarur [Mangalore], a large town on the largest inlet in the land of Mulaibar. This is the town at which most of the merchants from Fars and al-Yaman disembark, and pepper and ginger are exceedingly abundant there. The sultan of Manjarus is one of the principal rulers in that land, and his name is Rama Daw. There is a colony of about four thousand Muslims there, living in a suburb alongside the town. Warfare frequently breaks out between them and the townspeople, but the sultan makes peace between them on account of his need of the merchants.

After staying with them for three days, we set sail for the town of Hili, which we reached two days later. It is large and well built, situated on a big bay which is navigable for large vessels. This is the farthest town reached by the ships from China; they enter only this port, the port of Kawlam, and Qaliqut. The town of Hili is venerated both by Muslims and infidels on account of its cathedral mosque, for it is of great blessedness, and resplendent with radiant light. Seafarers make many votive offerings to it, and it has a rich treasury. I met in this mosque a pious jurist . . . called Sa’id, of fine figure and character. He used to fast continually, and I was told that he had studied at Mecca for fourteen years and for the same length of time at al-Madinah, and that he traveled in India and China.


18. Ibn Battuta: A Pious Holy Man of Delhi, c. 1325

The selection from the writings of the fourteenth-century Muslim scholar and traveler Ibn Battuta (1304–c. 1368/1377) describes a Muslim holy man that the writer met in Delhi in about 1325. For another excerpt from the writings of Ibn Battuta, see Document 17.

Another of the pious men of Delhi is the learned and saintly Shaikh Sadr al-Din Kuhrani. He used to fast continually and stand all nights (in prayer). He renounced the world entirely and rejected all its goods, and wore nothing but a
wollen cloak. The Sultan [Muhammad Adil Shah] and the officers of state used to visit him but he often refused to see them, and when the Sultan asked permission to give him a grant of some villages with the revenues of which he could supply food to poor brethren and visitors, he would have nothing to do with it. . . . It was said that he broke his fast only after three nights and that when someone remonstrated with him about this he replied: “I do not break fast until I am under such compulsion that carrion becomes lawful to me. . . .”

I had a slave boy who ran away from me, and who I found in the possession of a certain Turk. I had in mind to reclaim the slave from him, but the sheikh said to me “This boy is no good to you. don’t take him.” The Turk wished to come to an arrangement, so I settled with him that he paid me a hundred dinars and I left him the boy. Six months later the boy killed his master and was taken before the Sultan, who ordered him to be handed over to his master’s sons, and they put him to death. When I experienced this miracle on the part of the sheikh I attached myself entirely to him, withdrawing from the world and giving all that I possessed to the poor and needy. I stayed with him for some time, and I used to see him fast for ten and twenty days on end and remain standing (in prayer) most of the night. I continued with him until the Sultan sent for me and I became entangled in the world once again—may God give me a good ending!


19. The Values of Concubines and Slave Girls in Delhi, c. 1348

This excerpt from the writings of the fourteenth-century Syrian geographer Shihab al-Din Al-Umari (d. 1349), describes the value of a good concubine in Delhi. That value increases dramatically if the slave can read, write, play games such as chess, and recite by heart verses of the Qur’an.

All of my informers related that the price of a slave girl for service in Delhi does not exceed eight tankas. The slave girls who are fit for both service and cohabitation cost fifteen tankas. But in other cities . . . they are still cheaper. Abul Safa Umar al-Shibli told me: I purchased a competent slave of adolescent age for four dirhams. One can guess the cheapness of slaves on account of this. . . . Al-Shibli states: Inspite of this cheapness of the slaves, there are in India such concubines also who coast twenty thousand tankas or even more. Ibn-Ul-Taj also testified to this fact. I enquired how a slave girl could cost so much inspite of so much cheapness? All the informers told me without any contradiction that the reason was the grace of her deportment and the refinement of her manners. Many of the slave girls of this type know the Quran by heart, can write, recite verses, relate stories and play on the sitar. They also make display of their ability in the games of Chaussar and Chess. They take pride in these things. One of them says: “I shall capture the heart of my master within three days”; another says: “I shall be the queen of his heart within a day.” The third says: “I shall captivate his heart in an hour”; while the fourth says: “What is to say about day and hour, I shall capture him in the twinkling of an eye.”
20. An Uprising in Delhi during the Reign of Sultan Muhammad bin Tugluq, c. 1350

The following excerpt from the writings of the fourteenth-century Muslim historian Ziau-d Din Barni describes a serious rebellion that erupted in Delhi during the last years of the reign of Sultan Muhammad bin Tugluq (1325–1351).

While the Sultan was prosecuting the siege of Rantambhor, a revolt of some importance broke out in Delhi. . . . Haji, a maulaa or slave of the late Kotwal, Amiru-l umara Fakhru-d din . . . was a man of violent, fearless, and malignant character and he was charged with the guard of the exchequer. A man called Turmuzi was kotwal of the city and greatly oppressed the people. . . . Haji Maula, seeing the city empty, and the inhabitants distressed by the violence and tyranny of Turmuzi . . . knowing also that not a man could be spared from the army . . . thought the people would support him. He secured the support of the old kotwali officers, and excited a somewhat formidable revolt. It was the month of Ramazan, and the sun was in Gemini. The weather was very hot, and at midday people kept indoors taking their siesta, so there were few in the streets. At this time Haji Maula, with several armed followers, went to the house of kotwal, carrying with them as a blind a letter which he pretended to have received from the Sultan. The kotwal was taking his nap, and had none of his men with him. When he was called he roused himself, put on his slippers, and came to the door. Haji Maula instantly gave the signal, and his followers cut off the unsuspecting victim’s head. He then brought out the pretended royal farman, and showing it to the crowd, he said that he had killed the kotwal in obedience to orders received from the Sultan. The kotwal was taking his nap, and had none of his men with him. When he was called he roused himself, put on his slippers, and came to the door. Haji Maula instantly gave the signal, and his followers cut off the unsuspecting victim’s head. He then brought out the pretended royal farman, and showing it to the crowd, he said that he had killed the kotwal in obedience to orders received from the Sultan. The people were silent. The keepers of the gates were creatures of Haji Maula, so they closed them. . . . Haji Maula then proceeded with the riotous followers to the Red Palace, seated himself upon a balcony, and set free all the prisoners, some of whom joined his followers. Bags of gold tankas were brought out of the treasury and scattered among the people. Arms were brought from the armoury, and horses from the royal stables, and distributed among the rioters. Everyone that joined them had gold tankas thrown into his lap. There was an Alawi (descendent of Ali) in Delhi who was called the grandson of Shah Najaf, who, by his mother’s side, was grandson of Sultan Shamsu-d din. The Maula set off from the Red Palace with a party of horse, and went to the house of the poor Alawi. They carried him off by force and seated him on the throne in the Red Palace. The principal men of the city were brought by force and made to kiss his hand. . . . These riotous proceedings were on for seven or eight days, and intelligence was several times conveyed to the Sultan, but he kept it secret, and it did not become known to the army.

On the third or fourth day of the riot, Malik Hamidu-d din, Amir of Koh, with his sons and relations, all valiant men, opened the Ghazni gate and went into the city. They proceeded towards the gate of Bhandar-kal, and arrows began
to fly between them and the rioters, who became desperate and obtained gold from Haji Maula. After Hamidu-d din, the Amir of Koh, had been in the city two days, he and his loyal followers prevailed over the rebels. . . . He then entered the gate of Bhandar-kal, and a struggle ensued between him and the shoemakers, and between him and Haji Maula. The Amir of Koh alighted from his horse, dashed Haji Maula to the ground, and sat upon his breast. Swords and clubs were aimed at him all round and he was wounded, but he never quitted his fallen foe till he had dispatched him. After this the victors proceeded to the Red Palace. They decapitated the miserable Alawi and carried his head about the city on a spear.


21. The Plunder of Delhi by Timur’s Army, 1398

In 1398, the city of Delhi was sacked by the armies of the Turco-Mongol invader Timur (1336–1405), who is often known as Timur the Lame or Tamerlane. Timur eventually ruled much of Central Asia, and his descendants, the Mughals, ruled much of India from Delhi from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. In this excerpt from his memoirs, Timur vividly describes why and how his soldiers slaughtered the Hindu inhabitants of Delhi, whose frenzied resistance is explained by the fact that prior to the capture of the city Timur executed thousands of Indian captives, mostly Hindus.

On the 16th of the month [December 1398] some incidents occurred which led to the sack of the city of Delhi, and to the slaughter of many of the infidel inhabitants. One was this. A party of fierce Turk soldiers had assembled at one of the gates of the city to look about them and enjoy themselves, and some of them laid violent hands upon the goods of the inhabitants. When I heard of this violence, I sent some amirs, who were present in the city, to restrain the Turks. A part of soldiers accompanied these amirs into the city. Another reason was that some of the ladies of my harem expressed a wish to go into the city and see the palace of Hazar-sutun (thousand columns). . . . I granted this request, and I sent a party of soldiers to escort the litters of the ladies. Another reason was that Jalal Islam and other diwans had gone into the city with a party of soldiers to collect the contribution laid upon the city. Another reason was that some thousand troopers with orders for grain, oil, sugar, and flour, had gone into the city to collect these supplies. Another reason was that it had come to my knowledge that great numbers of Hindus and gabrs, with their wives and children, and goods, and valuable, had come into the city from all the country round, and consequently I had sent some amirs with their regiments . . . into the city and directed them to pay no attention to the remonstrances of the inhabitants, but to seize and bring out these fugitives. For these several reasons a great number of fierce Turki soldiers were in the city. When the soldiers proceed to apprehend the Hindus and gabrs who had fled to the city, many of them drew their swords and offered resistance. The flames of strife were thus lighted and spread through the whole city . . . burning up all it
reached. The savage Turks fell to killing and plundering. The Hindus set fire to their houses with their own hands, burned their wives and children in them, and rushed into the fight and were killed. The Hindus and gabrs of the city showed much alacrity and boldness in fighting. The amirs who were in charge of the gates prevented any more soldiers from going into the place, but the flames of war had risen too high for this precaution to be of any avail in extinguishing them. On that day, Thursday, and all the night of Friday, nearly 15,000 Turks were engaged in slaying, plundering, and destroying. When morning broke on the Friday, all my army, no longer under control, went off to the city and thought of nothing but killing, plundering, and making prisoners. All that day the sack was general. The following day, Saturday, the 17th, all passed in the same way, and the spoil was so great that each man secured from fifty to a hundred prisoners, men, women, and children. There was no man who took less than twenty. The other booty was immense in rubies, diamonds, garnets, pearls, and other gems; jewels of gold and silver; . . . vessels of gold and silver; and brocades and silks of great value. Gold and silver ornaments of Hindu women were obtained in such quantities as to exceed all account. Excepting the quarter of the saiyids, the ulama, and the other Musulmans, the whole city was sacked. The pen of fate had written down this destiny for the people of this city. Although I was desirous of sparing them I could not succeed, for it was the will of God that this calamity should fall upon the city.

On the following day, Sunday, it was brought to my knowledge that a great number of infidel Hindus had assembled in the Masjid-i-jami of Old Delhi, carrying with them arms and provisions, and were preparing to defend themselves. Some of my people who had gone that way on business were wounded by them. I immediately ordered Amir Shah Malik and Ali Sultan Tawachi to take a party of men and proceed to clear the house of God from infidels and idolaters. They accordingly attacked these infidels and put them to death. Old Delhi then was plundered.


22. The Mughal Conqueror Babur Describes India, c. 1526

In the excerpt from his memoirs, the Babur-nama, Babur, the founder of the Mughal dynasty in India, describes India and the Hindu Indians as he perceives them. To get an idea of the conqueror’s mindset, note carefully what he thinks are the “charms” of India and what he thinks are not.

Most of the inhabitants of India are infidels, called Hindus, believing mainly in the transmigration of souls; all artisans, wage-earners and officials are Hindus. . . . Every artisan follows the trade handed down to him from his forefathers.

India is a country of few charms. The people lack good looks and good manners. They have no social life or exchange of visits. They have no genius or intelligence, no polite learning, no generosity of magnanimity, no harmony or proportion in their arts and crafts, no lead-wire or carpenter’s square. They lack good horses and good dogs; grapes, melons, and any good fruit; ice and
cold water; good food or good bread in the markets. They have no baths and no advanced educational institutions. . . . There are no running streams in their gardens or residences, no waters at all except the large rivers and the swamps in the ravines and hollows. Their residences have no pleasant and salubrious breezes, and in their construction no form of symmetry. . . .

Among the charms that India does possess is that it is a large country, with large quantities of gold and silver. Its air in the rainy season is very fine. Sometimes it rains ten or fifteen or even twenty times a day, and in such torrents that rivers flow where no water was previously. While it rains, and throughout the rainy season, the air is remarkably fine, not to be surpassed for mildness and pleasantness. Its only fault is its great humidity, which spoils bows. . . .

For all these reasons, most of the best warriors were unwilling to stay in India; in fact, they determined to leave. . . .

When I discovered this unsteadiness among my people, I summoned all the leaders and took counsel. I said, “Without means and resources there is no empire and conquest, and without lands and followers there is no sovereignty and rule. By the effort of long years, through much tribulation and the crossing of distant lands, by flinging ourselves into battle and danger, we have through God’s favor overcome so many enemies and conquered such vast lands. And now, what force compels us, what necessity has arisen, that we should without cause, abandon a country taken at such risk of life? And if we returned to Kabul, we would again be left in poverty and weakness. Henceforth, let no well-wisher of mine speak of such things! But let not those turn back from going who cannot bear the hardship and have determined to leave.” With such words I reasoned with them and made them, willy-nilly, quit their fears.

Appendix: Dynasties of Medieval India

**Gupta Dynasty**
- Chandra Gupta I (c. 320–c. 335)
- Samudra Gupta (c. 335–c. 375)
- Rama Gupta (c. 375?)
- Chandra Gupta II Vikramaditya (c. 375–c. 415)
- Kumara Gupta (c. 415–455)
- Skanda Gupta (c. 455–467)
- Narasimha Gupta (467–477)
- Buddha Gupta (477–c. 495)
- Vishnu Gupta (c. 540–c. 550)

*The line of Gupta rulers is uncertain after about 495, when the Hun invasions overwhelmed the Gupta Empire and North India eventually splintered into various states and kingdoms. Vishnu Gupta, who reign ended about 550, is believed to be the last ruler of the Gupta line.*

**Sultans of Delhi**

*Mamluk Dynasty*
- Qutb al-din Aybak (1206–1210)
- Aram Shah (1210–1211)
- Shams al-Din Iltutmish (1211–1236)
- Rukn al-din Firuz (1236)
- Raziya Sultan (1236–1240)
- Muiz al-din Bahram (1240–1242)
- Ala al-din Masud (1242–1246)
- Nasir al-din Mahmud (1246–1266)
- Ghiyas al-din Balban (1266–1286)
- Muiz al-din Qaiqabad (1286–1290)
- Kayumars (1290)

*Khilji Dynasty*
- Jalal al-din Firuz Khilji (1290–1294)
- Allauddin Khilji (1294–1316)
- Qutb al-din Mubarak Shah Khilji (1316–1320)

*Tughluq Dynasty*
- Ghiyas al-din Tughluq Shah I (1320–1325)
- Muhammad Shah II (1325–1351)
- Mahmud Ibn Muhammed (1351)
- Firuz Shah Tughluq (1351–1388)
- Ghiyas al-din Tughluq II (1388–1389)
- Abu Bakr Shah (1389–1390)
- Nasir al-din Muhammad Shah III (1390–1393)
- Sikander Shah I (1393)
- Mahmud Nasir al-din (Sultan Mahmud II) at Delhi (1393–1394)
- Nusrat Shah at Firuzabad (1394–1398)

*Timur sacks Delhi in 1398, leading to a period of political turmoil.*

*Sayyid Dynasty*
- Khidr Khan (1414–1421)
- Mubarrak Shah II (1421–1435)
- Muhammad Shah IV (1435–1445)
- Aladdin Alam Shah (1445–1451)

*Lodhi Dynasty*
- Bahlul Khan Lodi (1451–1489)
- Sikandar Lodi (1489–1517)
- Ibrahim II (1517–1526)

*Babur, the first Mughal ruler, conquers Delhi in 1526.*

**Vijayanagar Empire**

*Sangama Dynasty*
- Harihara Raya I (1336–1356)
- Bukka Raya I (1356–1377)
- Harihara Raya II (1377–1404)
- Virupaksha Raya (1404–1405)
- Bukka Raya II (1405–1406)
- Deva Raya I (1406–1422)
- Ramachandra Raya (1422)
- Vira Vijaya Bukka Raya (1422–1424)
- Deva Raya II (1424–1446)
- Mallikarjuna Raya (1446–1465)
- Virupaksha Raya II (1465–1485)
- Praudha Raya (1485)
Saluva Dynasty
- Saluva Narasimha Deva Raya (1485–1491)
- Thimma Bhupala (1491)
- Narasimha Raya II (1491–1505)

Tuluva Dynasty
- Tuluva Narasa Nayaka (1491–1503)
- Viranarasimha Raya (1503–1509)
- Krishna Deva Raya (1509–1529)
- Achyuta Deva Raya (1529–1542)
- Sadashiva Raya (1542–1570)

Aravidu Dynasty
- Aliya Rama Raya (1542–1565)**
- Tirumala Deva Raya (1565–1572)***

Sriranga I (1572–1586)
- Venkata I (1586–1614)
- Sriranga II (1614–1617)
- Ramadeva (1617–1632)
- Venkata II (1632–1642)
- Sriranga III (1642–1646)
- Venkata III (1646–1652)

**Aliya Rama Raya, who was slain at the Battle of Talicota, was regent for the last Tuluva ruler.
***Tirumala Deva Raya, who succeeded his brother as regent, took the throne in 1570.
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206 B.C.E–220 C.E. Han dynasty rules China

c. 200 C.E. Porcelain developed in China

c. 200–300 Creation of the Yamato state in Japan

c. 220–589 Buddhism reaches China and begins to spread

221–280 Three Kingdoms Era in China

c. 300–500 China suffers a series of barbarian invasions

c. 405 Adoption of Chinese writing in Japan

c. 500 Magnetic compass and manufacture of glass developed in China

c. 550 Buddhism begins to spread in Japan

581–618 Sui dynasty unifies China after nearly four centuries of political division

618–907 Tang dynasty rules China

645 Emperor of Japan promulgates Taika reforms to promote centralization and enhance the power of the imperial court

710 City of Nara established as capital of Japan

712–755 Reign of Emperor Illustrious August (Xuanzong) marks the golden age of China’s Tang dynasty

751 Battle of Talas River between Chinese and Muslim forces halts the Chinese advance to the west and the Muslim advance into Central Asia

794–1185 Heian Period in Japanese history sees Confucianism and other Chinese influences at their height; the period is also considered the peak of the Japanese imperial court and is noted for a flowering of art, especially poetry and literature

c. 900 Woodblock printing of books develops in China, Japan, and Korea

907–960 Fall of China’s Tang dynasty initiates the Era of the Five Dynasties, a period of decentralization with warlords dominating various regions of China

938 Vietnamese repel the Chinese at the Battle of Bach Dang

960–1279 Song dynasty rules in China

c. 1000–1200 Development of Neo-Confucianism in China

1021–1086 Life of Wang An-shih, Chinese writer and political reformer

1024 First paper money is introduced into China
1141–1279  Height of landscape painting in China
1150     Explosive powder begins to be used in weapons in China
1192     Establishment of shogunate in Japan
1200     Zen Buddhism reaches Japan; inoculation for smallpox is undertaken in China
1206–1227 Reign of Chinggis (Genghis) Khan, who unites nomadic Asiatic tribes and establishes the vast Mongol Empire
1219–1221 Mongols conquer Persia
1235     Development of Chinese drama
1237–1241 Mongols conquer Russia
1254–1324 Venetian traders Marco Polo and his family visit the Mongol court in China to trade
1258     Mongols sack Baghdad
1264–1294 Reign of Kublai (Khubilai) Khan, grandson of Chinggis Khan, who centers Mongol rule in China
1274     Mongols launch an unsuccessful invasion of Japan
1279     Mongol conquest of Song dynasty of China
1279–1368 Yuan (Mongol) dynasty rules in China
1281     Mongols launch a second unsuccessful invasion of Japan
1300–1550 Rise of the daimyo, the powerful feudal lords of Japan
1330s     Plague erupts in China and begins to spread westward
1368     Rebel Chinese forces capture Yuan capital of Khanbaliq; remaining Mongol forces retreat to the central Asian steppes, ending the Mongol dynasty in China
1368–1644 Ming dynasty rules China
1405     Zheng He/Cheng Ho (a former Muslim slave) sails west with a fleet of three-hundred ships, invading Sumatra and Ceylon and eventually reaching the coast of Africa
1421     Construction of the Forbidden City begins in Beijing
T’ang Empire, c. 645–700
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1. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

China

To paraphrase Mark Twain, history does not repeat itself, but it sure rhymes a lot. Such is the case with Chinese history and the almost cyclical nature of the rise and fall of dynasties. First, a new dynasty rose up on the ashes of the old. Peasant life improved, with lower taxes and a much higher percentage of land ownership by the common people. As the years progressed, large landholders began to reemerge (or expanded their dominating hold over more lands, depending on the dynasty in question). These gentry raised the rents on their lands and demanded more and more taxes from the fewer and fewer peasant freeholders—all due to the fact that the gentry served as the tax officials, police, and judges at their local level and were thus immune to taxation. One popular ploy used by local gentry was to offer to buy land and rent it back to the same peasant family at a lower sum than that previously collected in taxes. Another was simply to steal a part of the tax receipts, as the bottom of the civil service was often chosen solely by status and not by passing various levels of the examination system. Within 100 years of the dynasty’s founding, these ploys, coupled with many peasant families’ inability to afford the higher tax rates, periodic crop failures, and general overpopulation, all led to the creation of a powerful landlord class controlling huge swaths of land. Under them struggled the millions of now-landless peasants, forced to become either lowly tenant farmers working hard to survive oppressive rents and usurious loans, or part of the unemployed masses with only begging or petty banditry left as options to feed themselves. Soon thereafter angry peasant rebellions began, often led by Daoist or Buddhist secret societies, aiming at the now-disreputable dynasty, rich landlords, or both. Many times nomadic forces would take advantage of the strife or outright civil war within China to take lands on the perimeter of the dynasty, and sometimes much more. At this point the government, lacking skilled leaders, often began begging for help from the landlords. These obvious weaknesses show a clear loss of the mandate of heaven and result in one of the following: conquest of half or more of China by outside nomads; a rich landlord crowning himself emperor of a new dynasty after leading a powerful army that defeated the peasant armies and the imperial forces; or, in the rarest outcome, a peasant leader starting a new dynasty after victories against nomads, rich landlords, the state, or all three.
These dynastic patterns help us to make sense of otherwise complicated events. But to understand Chinese history from 400 to 1400, much more detail is necessary. China in 400 was a divided country since the fall of the Han dynasty in 220; this era is often called the Period of Disunity (220–589). Geographically, China was isolated by jungle in the south, ocean in the west, and mountains in the east; it was the north where China traditionally interacted with nomadic or seminomadic groups. In the case of the Period of Disunity, a series of pastoral nomadic groups conquered north China for differing periods of time, causing many Chinese to flee southward. In the south strong landlords led many short-lived so-called dynasties, as battles for control led to constant change in the rulership of the south. The south’s population explosion led to some conflict: rich landlords fleeing from the north demanded a share of governance and poor peasants competed with newcomers and the rich for ever-dwindling southern lands. These internal problems kept the more populous south from mounting successful wars to retake the north.

The history of the northern half of China during these times was no less chaotic. The region had seen a series of nomadic conquests, with each different nomadic group borrowing Chinese culture to rule and collect agricultural taxes, something quite unknown to these hunter/herding cultures prior to their successful conquest. The year 400 found the Tuoba nomads winning control northern China after military victories over the previous herding culture, the Tibetans. The victorious Tuoba proclaimed their lands and dynasty the Northern Wei (386–534), deciding to use leading Chinese landowning families to help administer laws and collect the taxes they hoped would make them rich.

The system agreed upon by the Confucian-educated gentry of north China and their Tuoba overseers was “land equalization,” also known as the equal field system. The idea behind this system was to maximize the number of landholding peasant families to create an enduring tax base by adding or subtracting land from a peasant family based on its size. The system worked remarkably well in China for 300 years, guaranteeing the state stable taxation. Yet in addition to predictable taxes, the state also added to the corvee (unpaid labor—usually irrigation or flood-control projects) of the peasants the new task of forming a militia to serve as infantry along side the Tuoba cavalry in battles with their neighbors.

As the Tuoba ruled, they borrowed more ways to govern and more customs from their Chinese advisors and neighbors. Soon the Tuoba required the use of Chinese language as the official language, Chinese family surnames for Tuoba aristocrats, and Chinese social customs at the elite level. They at first encouraged and then supposedly demanded marriage between their leaders and Chinese gentry-class women! The Tuoba moved too far from their military exploits toward civilization, and the Northern Wei was swept away by new nomads; northern China was divided into two new states.

At first, Religious Daoism played the role of most popular religion in north and south China, due to its reputed healing and life-extending properties. The Period of Disunity also saw the introduction and adoption of Buddhism, which began slowly to erode Daoist appeal in both sections of China. Just as Confucianism and Daoism had become important philosophies/religions during the Warring States Period (480–221 B.C.E.), so did many Chinese accept Buddhism in the divided, disordered country. Yet Buddhism early on faced
some opposition among more traditional followers of Confucianism and Daoism, as it demanded of its ardent followers actions considered “un-Chinese,” including shaving one’s head and practicing celibacy. Twice purges in the north halted the growth of Buddhism, yet only temporarily. None of these religions demanded the exclusive nature of Western religions, allowing a Chinese the ability to follow one, two, or all three teachings—Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism—simultaneously or at different phases of one’s life. But the uncertain, confused times in the south and north, and the coming of a newer, more simple sect called Pure Land Buddhism—which appealed to commoners as well as monks and nuns—allowed Buddhism to spread across China. The Period of Disunity saw Buddhism become China’s third great religious/philosophical tradition.

In 581, a prominent general of mixed Chinese-nomadic origin overthrew the king of the Northern Wei’s successor state, killed the royal family, and assumed the throne. He declared himself the first emperor of the Sui dynasty, Emperor Wen. Quickly he conquered the rest of north China, then headed south across the Yangzi River to unify all of China under his control, an effort accomplished easily by 589.

Wen (ruled all China as emperor 589–604) first sought to create a strong central government. He reorganized the administration and bureaucracy, at first placing mixed Chinese-nomad families from the north in key positions. Quickly southern families married into the newcomer families from the north. The emperor established a limited examination system and a series of rules to prevent corruption by officials: local officials could not appoint subordinates; officials could not serve in their native place; and officials could spend no more than one tour of duty in the same location.

Wen secondly worked to restore the economy by instituting the successful equal field system throughout China. By creating new peasant landowners, he built up the tax base as had been done in the Northern Wei. Wen used corvee labor to build granaries around the capital of Changan, located along a major tributary of the Yellow River. Peasant labor also started a Grand Canal to link the Yangzi and Yellow rivers so grain and taxes could flow to the capital easily for more than half the year. The reforms strengthened the economy for a time. Then Emperor Wen of the Sui dynasty set out on some further wars of conquest. He fought wars to protect and then extend the empire west, north, south, and east. Wen was then murdered, likely by his son, who took the throne in 604 and ended up exceeding the megalomania of his father.

Emperor Yang (r. 604–617) decided to spend his time and China’s money first on elaborate building projects. He decided to build a new capital, Loyang, around 200 miles down the Yellow River from Changan. He employed two million peasants on the project, and thousands died hauling rare timber to the treeless plain. He needed 1.2 million peasants starting in 607 to work on the Great Wall, where at least half perished. And supposedly five and one-half million peasants worked on the various canal projects; most important was finishing and extending the Grand Canal north and south. These forced laborers faced death if they fled and the whip if they worked too slowly. Once the Grand Canal reached the capital, Emperor Yang took his four-story, 270-foot long dragon boat south to the Yangzi River, towed by peasant power. His entourage reached eighty-thousand men and stretched out as many as 60 miles. He had forty palaces built so he could avoid sleeping on the barge.
Emperor Yang coupled his mistreatment of the peasantry and waste of taxes with renewed wars of conquest that turned out to be failures in Korea, even with perhaps the largest army in world history before the twentieth century. China faced bankruptcy and two large peasant rebel armies when Turkish nomads captured Yang and held him for ransom in 615. In the end, the emperor’s own entourage assassinated Yang in 617, and chaos in China deepened. Key Sui dynasty officials joined the scramble for power. The winner was a Chinese-nomad military governor of the north. He claimed power in 618 and spent the better part of 8 years consolidating his hold on China using the same Turks as mercenaries. Thus began the short reign of Tang Gaozu, the first emperor of the Tang dynasty (see Early Tang Dynasty; Late Tang Dynasty). After his second son killed his other sons, Gaozu abdicated in 626 to Emperor Taizong.

The Tang dynasty made China the largest, richest, most powerful, and most civilized country in the world. Chinese historians consider Taizong one of the greatest of all emperors. He helped create for China a governing, bureaucratic system utilized from this period forward to the twentieth century (see Tang Governance) by Chinese emperors to control their vast empires, including a system of laws and divisions of the state down to the county level. Besides these reforming efforts, Taizong also got to the root of government problems: peasant distress. He began the equal field system anew, this time on a larger scale than ever before. In addition, the tax system allowed flexibility. If people wanted to avoid spending time doing corvee, they would simply pay extra taxes. If others wanted to avoid taxes, they could spend more time with corvee. And corvee included militia duty, which guaranteed a large army cheaper than mercenaries.

Agricultural production grew rapidly in the first century of the Tang, and government revenues increased with only moderate tax rates. Large landlords when the equal field system was implemented and Buddhist holdings were hardly affected by the changes. In fact, both were exempt from taxation. Large landholders (usually officials at the district level or local level—below the county level) and government officials in charge at the circuit level (like modern provinces), prefectural level, and county level practiced a lavish lifestyle that soon promoted the growth of the economy, including the import trade: Chinese silk for foreign luxuries.

China’s capital reverted to Changan, along a Yellow River tributary. It was a planned city—the largest planned city built to that point and perhaps the largest ever. It stretched over 30 square miles, not including the extensive palace grounds, which, like the city itself, faced south. One million people lived within city walls, while perhaps another million lived just outside the perimeter. The city became the most prosperous, civilized, and cosmopolitan city in the world for its time. Many foreigners, especially Arab traders, arrived through the impressive 500-foot city gate to conduct business, and were afforded religious toleration during their stay as a result.

Although the Tang emperors created stability within China’s borders as long as the census and redistribution of land under the equal field system continued, wars with their neighbors began quickly. Although some of the Turk allies who made Gaozu and Taizong emperors remained loyal, other groups attacked their erstwhile ally, invading from the north all the way to the capital across the great north China plain. A successful counterattack, coupled
with disorder among their enemies’ leaders, allowed China to recapture the Silk Road—lost during the Han dynasty—and the oases the caravans depended on, by 648. The subject peoples conquered in the far west, although officially part of the Tang Empire, had relative autonomy on local matters and would shake off Chinese rule when the Tang dynasty grew weak.

The Tang dynasty also fought with its eastern neighbors, the three kingdoms of Korea. The war proved difficult at first. But once the Chinese went back to their classic ploy—use barbarians against barbarians—the Tang, with an alliance with one Korean state, Silla, defeated the rest. The result was a unified Korean state with local autonomy, but a tributary state of China nonetheless.

Then an abnormality occurred in Chinese history. The concubine of a just-deceased emperor started running China from behind the scenes in starting in 660, before she dropped the facade in 690 and proclaiming herself Empress Wu. She ruled as China’s only female emperor until forced out in a coup in 705 when she was 82 years old after years of her killing potential rivals in the imperial clan. She did do some good in her years in control of the Tang dynasty, from expanding the examination system, to pushing China’s borders to their furthest extent in all directions. She also encouraged the worship of all three of China’s great traditions as equals. In fact, Buddhism reached its highest point of political and economic power during her years in charge—in this case Pure Land Buddhism.

Chinese historians consider the early years of the 700s as the high point of the Tang dynasty and China in general, politically, economically, and culturally. New Emperor Xuanzong had reformed the coinage, repaired and extended the Grand Canal, and briefly renewed land registration for the equal field system. Yet soon he would withdraw from politics and let his chief minister rule as a virtual dictator. First came the abandonment of a militia army for an expensive, paid mercenary force. Frontier generals led nomadic troops in great numbers to protect China’s new gains, sometimes with little thought of loyalty. Couple that with a defeat with Arab forces in 751 and a deepening social crisis as fewer peasants paid increasing taxes—all due to Buddhism taking away land from the tax rolls and putting aside yet again the equal field system, this time forever.

The biggest damage to the dynasty started in 755 with the illiterate slave of nomad origin An Lushan. Grotesquely obese yet charismatic and cunning, he had gotten into the confidences of Emperor Xuanzong’s favorite consort and thus the emperor by playing the buffoon. He used this trust to send one hundred fifty thousand troops from north China to Loyang without meeting resistance. He then closed the short gap and attacked the capital Changan, proclaiming himself the new emperor. The real emperor fled south in remorse; his escorts forced him to kill his betrayed consort. Then Xuanzong’s heir apparent fought An’s forces until victory in 763.

The victory proved hollow, as loss of the capital showed the dynasty’s weakness. Quickly between 25 percent and 30 percent of China fell into the hands of the autonomous military governors, and parts of the empire to the far west obtained their independence. Throughout the final half of the dynasty, emperors periodically had to fight these generals to keep from independence. In addition, eunuchs rose up at the end of the eighth century. Although originally hired to protect the emperor’s wives, consorts, and concubines, by this late date they took charge of the secret police and became virtual masters of the
country. Eunuchs chose eight out of the nine emperors to mount the throne after 800. Only conflict between eunuch factions held them back from total control.

Hoping to stop the dynasty’s decline and to increase tax receipts otherwise stolen along their way to the capital by the empire’s own collectors, the Emperor Wuzong—a fervent Daoist—persecuted Buddhists to bring their lands back onto the tax rolls. From 841 to 846, the new emperor through edict destroyed 4,600 temples and monasteries, 40,000 smaller shrines, and secularized 260,000 monks and nuns. Pure Land Buddhism in China would never recover, nor would Buddhism ever again have as much influence, even as successor emperors repealed Wuzong’s efforts. Instead, Chan Buddhism (Zen Buddhism in Japan) would become the most popular form, even taking over some of the church-like behaviors of the Pure Land sect. Besides, the monetary windfall expected from the elimination of Buddhism turned out to be too little to help save the dynasty. Discontent among the peasantry, coupled with famine in parts of the country and enormous floods along the path of the Grand Canal, led to rebellions. The largest of these became one of the largest in Chinese history—the Huang Chao Rebellion—and its merchant-family leader even declared himself emperor over part of China for 2 years, until the few surviving members of the Tang dynasty, allied with Turkish fighters, defeated him. But at what cost? The Tang dynasty disintegrated in 907 into another disunited period, this time only 53 years in duration.

In 960, General Zhao Kuangyin became Emperor Taizu and worked hard to limit the power of other generals, founding the Song dynasty (normally called the Northern Song dynasty). His mercenary force, subject to periodic rotation of its commanders, would remain loyal to the emperor and prove valuable in the reconquest of China. Like unifiers before him, Taizu applied moderate force to those opposing him and welcomed those to join him when defeated. He and his successor brother fought to the north and used the Great Wall as the dividing line between China and a seminomadic conqueror, the Liao, for three generations.

The wars that ended the Tang and the period after its fall with little government control left a strange situation among the rich and poor, educated and uneducated, as the Song dynasty began. Some long-time gentry families had lost everything, and new families had become wealthy. The Song dynasty instituted an examination system used up until the twentieth century (with the exception of most of the Yuan dynasty) that ended hereditary officials (save the emperor). The central government chose its officials based on Confucian exams, with three levels to pass. At the start, over one hundred thousand scholars competed for five hundred government positions. The printing press in full use made Confucian books for study widely available. Of course the usual degree-earner came from a wealthy, educated family; it took time to learn classical written Chinese, let alone understand the Confucian canon. But once in a while, a smart village boy received backing from a village to allow him to study, take the exams, and make the village famous.

Throughout the Song dynasty, Confucianism became the most important of the three teachings, but it had evolved over time into Neo-Confucianism. Borrowing ideas from Chan Buddhism and Daoism, Neo-Confucianism, starting slowly in the ninth century, made Confucian ideas more meaningful in the starkly different world of the Late Tang and Song dynasties. This form of
Confucianism tried to answer certain Buddhist questions about heaven and hell, the nature of humans, and other fundamental matters. Some scholars then used their interpretations of Neo-Confucianism to try and remake the Northern Song dynasty, like the unsuccessful modernizer Wang Anshi. More important for the long term were the interpretations of Southern Song thinker Zhu Xi (1130–1200), whose ideas in two generations would be the respected interpretation of Confucianism. He sought to show that people were inherently good, but needed training and self-cultivation through meditation to show this goodness to the world. The downside to choosing one interpretation in the examination system is that it led to stagnation among China’s intellectuals, who needed to memorize the style and even substance of this one particular version of Neo-Confucianism rather than rely on their own interpretations. Along with the memorization, Neo-Confucianism brought new restrictions on elite women to seclude themselves and practice the painful art of footbinding.

The Northern Song dynasty ended up making a terrible mistake based on the traditional Chinese custom of playing barbarian against barbarian. The nomadic Jurchen had recently thrown off the yoke of the Khitans, also called the Liao, so the Chinese decided to ally with the Jurchen against the Khitans and gain lands to the north of the Great Wall. But where the Jurchen succeeded, the Song failed in fighting the Khitans, and so the Jurchen decided after their victory to attack China itself. Like other nomadic invasions to this point, the Jurchen conquered just northern China after a 14-year war, with the Huai River (halfway between the Yellow River and the Yangzi River) serving as the dividing line between the Jurchen state and the Southern Song dynasty, established in 1127.

Although the Song dynasty had suffered a major blow, the loss of the north had the strange effect of improving China’s economy. For one, more and more peasants fled Jurchen rule to join up with the Southern Song. These newcomers worked and lived on the new strains of rice (taken from southern Vietnam) that allowed for two crops of rice a year from the Yangzi River southward. Tea growing also expanded, as did cotton growing. And with these excess commodities, foreign and regional trade expanded so much that there was not enough copper currency to conduct business. China first used weighed amounts of gold and silver before turning to paper money, yet the government’s urge to print paper money led to damaging inflation (see Money/Coinage).

The Song then made another costly error, again playing barbarian against barbarian. The Chinese stupidly allied with the Mongols against the Jurchen, hoping to get back north China in the process. The Mongols, disparate tribes living a nomadic existence in the plains that bear their name, became a unified and highly successful fighting force under Genghis Khan (one of many transcriptions of his name) starting in 1206. He died in 1227, after many victories in Central Asia and into Russia, having only just begun to attack northern China. The alliance between his heir, Ogodei, and China resulted in the loss in 7 years of the Jurchen buffer state. The Mongols then slowly conquered the Southern Song dynasty over the next 45 years, as most Chinese landlords decided to ally with the Mongols in return for leaving their property intact.

Khubilai Khan (r. 1260–1294), the grandson of Genghis, moved the Mongol capital to Beijing and became the first ruler of the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368). Soon China became a realm within an empire, as China was easily the wealthiest possession of the Mongols. Khubilai had the population of China divided
into four groups to help him rule: Mongols at the top of the bureaucracy, Central Asian peoples in less important bureaucratic positions, recent north China defeated-peoples in the least important positions, and southern Chinese completely out of government. The Chinese were also not allowed arms and forbidden from meetings. This would be the first time in history that Chinese landlords felt deprived of their official positions. The one benefit they received was to keep their estates intact.

Mongol control over Central Asia stimulated trade between China, the rest of the empire, and Europe, but the profits to this trade left Chinese hands. These losses increased rapidly due to a mistaken printing of too much paper currency; Mongol corruption and unsuccessful invasions of Southeast Asia and Japan (both twice), crippling China’s economy in the long run. In addition, Mongols confiscated land in north China for pasturing horses, Mongol aristocrats, and Buddhist temples. As this land left tax rolls, peasants made up the difference. Taxes increased rapidly due to these economic problems, and because the Mongols built and extended the Grand Canal to move receipts and grain to this new capital. Although the Mongols expanded the Grand Canal, they did nothing about shoring up the Yellow River dykes or irrigation systems, which failed, leading to massive famine in some parts of China. In addition, peasants faced one hundred percent interest on loans as landlords attempted to recoup the funds they used to take from the government as local or regional bureaucrats.

Peasant unrest led to rebellion against the foreign Mongols. It started under the leadership of a leader claiming Song heritage, a Buddhist secret society called the White Lotus, and their Red Turban soldiers. Recruiting in the north was easy for this group, especially as one hundred fifty thousand peasant conscripts were working on repairing the Yellow River there in the 1340s. Open rebellion broke out in 1352, and for 3 years major parts of south and central China were lost to the Mongols and the Chinese landlords. The Mongols finally ended this rebellion by using Chinese troops led by the gentry against the peasant rebellion.

This victory for the Mongols and their allies would be short lived. Peasants continued to fight against the dynasty. A former peasant and one-time Buddhist monk rose in rank to become the leader of the southern Red Turban armies. Zhu revised the plan of attack, deciding to ally with Chinese landlords to attack the Mongols, rather than having both as enemies. Even though not all Chinese gentry broke from the Mongols, enough did to allow Zhu to push the nomads out of China in 1368 and form a new dynasty with its capital on the Yangzi at Nanjing: the Ming dynasty (1368–1644).

Zhu changed his reign name to Hongwu but is better known to history as his posthumous title Taizu, founder of the Ming or Brilliant dynasty. As a former peasant who led a peasant uprising, he understood the importance of agriculture and keeping the peasants complacent. He worked to promote agriculture by giving title to abandoned land cultivated by peasants, even exempting them from 3 years’ taxation and corvee. Taizu also fixed the irrigation systems and tried to settle garrison troops on reclaimed land for the military to farm their own grain. Even artisans were better off under the Ming, as they could buy their way out of the corvee by paying higher taxes.

Although shrewd in managing peasants, Taizu was a harsh and autocratic ruler, executing those who spoke out or even made a pun on his name or
position. He forced his advisers and ministers to kneel in front of him rather than the previous Chinese practice of standing at attention or even sitting. He restored the imperial university and examination system in 1382, but he only trusted his own family members and gave out huge land grants to his many sons and grandsons. He also divided the Ming empire into fifteen provinces, all corresponding with minor differences to present-day ones. Although he restored China to **Tang governance** with the six ministries, he controlled important parts of the government himself rather than having help by high Confucian bureaucrats in the secretariat or chancellor’s office. These decisions would prove a mistake in the long run, as emperors and imperial family members later in the Ming dynasty would rely on the help of **eunuchs** for running the government and maneuvering for succession, disregarding Taizu’s warnings on the matter—eunuchs became more and more powerful and helped cause the dynasty to weaken and fall in the seventeenth century.

Taizu also went to war with the Mongols, first capturing Beijing before pushing them back over the Great Wall in 1382. He followed up these successes with difficult and expensive expeditions into Mongolia to keep the pressure on the Mongols. In the midst of these inconclusive battles, Japanese pirates began to prey on Ming shipping, a problem not solved in two centuries. But these negatives did not outweigh Taizu’s agricultural growth, especially when taking into account the renewed spread of south Vietnamese strains of rice that allowed three crops a year in the south and two crops a year in the Yangzi delta. China’s population rebounded to 110 million.

Taizu chose his grandson, known later as Huizong (r. 1399–1402), to succeed him, but a civil war broke out over his choice. The winner was Yongle, Taizu’s son, known to later historians as Chengzu (r. 1403–1425). It was he who rebuilt Beijing as the capital of the Ming and continued work on the Great Wall—to keep the Mongols at bay, as well as sending out a huge trading fleet seven times. All these actions are beyond the scope of this encyclopedia. However, it was after his reign that Confucian leaders began a crackdown on the merchant class, destroying the plans to build ships over 400 feet in length as well as many of the merchant maps of the Southeast Asian and Indian Ocean trading regions. Mongol rule had led to renewed distrust of merchants and foreigner and made most Confucianists believe—perhaps rightly—that Chinese civilization was the greatest in the world and did not need foreign influence. These factors are important to explain why Europe “discovered” the world instead of China.

**Korea**

Head east from Manchuria and cross the Yalu River one then enters the Korean peninsula. It is approximately the size of Britain or Minnesota, roughly 600 miles long by 135 miles wide. Korea’s mountainous terrain only allows 20 percent of the land to be farmed. Yet those valleys early became large-yield rice-growing regions with organized irrigation systems, as Korea benefitted moisture wise from its position between the Yellow Sea and Sea of Japan. Although the Koreans, like the Japanese, borrowed important parts of China’s culture, it is a mistake to assume Korea became a “little China” from 400 to 1400. This is true even considering that the peninsula served as a metaphoric
bridge for Chinese ideas and Buddhism to cross first from the Shandong peninsula, across the Yellow Sea to southern Korea, and then move from there across the Tsushima Straights to Kyushu, Japan. Even with the borrowing of Confucianism and Buddhism, Koreans kept the shamanistic aspects of their folk religion and never in these years gave up their aristocratic, hereditary governing system unlike China did in the Song dynasty, using the more egalitarian-in-theory examination system to populate Chinese government posts.

Korea in 400 was divided into kingdoms of Koguryo in the north, Silla in the middle and south, and Paekche to the southwest. Koguryo especially copied the Chinese model of the defunct Han dynasty, using a Chinese-style bureaucracy paid for out of Chinese-style agricultural taxes and the corvee. It sought to increase its population and thus power by conquests of its Korean neighbors. Wealth gained by taxes or victories, however, trickled up only, allowing for enormous tombs for kings and nobles.

Koguryo’s neighbors worked together, but the pinprick attacks from Silla and Paekche were not enough to hurt militarized Koguryo. Its forces pushed back the military might of China’s Sui dynasty in 598, 612, and 614, helping to fell the brief dynasty. The Tang dynasty exacted revenge with the famous Chinese tactic of “barbarian against barbarian,” uniting by sea with Silla in 660 to attack and defeat Paekche before turning successfully on Koguryo. Tang leadership thought with this last victorious battle China would rule Korea. Silla had other ideas. War returned, and, with the addition of indigenous uprisings, by 676 the Chinese had to retreat from the peninsula.

Silla Korea served as a little Tang. The country borrowed the Confucian structure of the government, including the bureaucracy and regional divisions of Tang China. Government posts, however, remained in the hands of the hereditary aristocrats in their hierarchical “bone ranks” instead of opening to anyone capable of passing the Confucian examination system. Yet Buddhism had more direct effect on Silla Korea. As the state religion, the government sponsored an elite corps of aristocratic youths called “flower squires,” who attended an exclusive military academy devoted to protect Buddhism and the nation. It also promised more to the individual than the Korean folk traditions. But just like Japan, Korea adopted Buddhism without rejecting its previous shamanistic faith. Buddhist art and architecture spread throughout Korea, paid for by the taxes collected by the state and by the rich. The government also controlled the Buddhist orders and temples. It used art, dance, music, and literature to try to bring Pure Land Buddhism to the masses.

Religion did not fell Silla Korea, however. Instead, internal squabbling over royal succession after the king was assassinated in 780 became a common occurrence, as did regionalism and even a rebellion by an obscure group calling themselves the Red Trousers. Korea fell apart and back into three kingdoms toward the end of the ninth century.

It took a former merchant, Wang Kon, to reunify in 935 Koryo, from which we get Korea. Because so many of the aristocrats had died in the wars for control of Korea, Wang and his successors were able to create a government much closer to the Chinese model, including a civil service examination system in place after 958 based on Confucian ethics and Chinese history. Government schools soon taught these subjects, allowing some of society’s lower-ranking members into important positions, if they could learn to read Chinese!

Koryo’s civilian government was overthrown in 1170 by the military. A century of military rule followed, but not peacefully. Military men fought each
other for control, and widespread social turbulence—peasant and slave rebellions. Only one military strongman was able to bring a semblance of order to Korea: General Choe Chung-hon. He eliminated rivals and put down rebellions, and he and his descendants kept the Mongols out of Korea until he was assassinated. Only then did Koryo stop fighting the Mongols to become their tributary state in the 1250s. For the next one hundred years or so, Korean kings were forced to marry Mongolian princesses; self-rule ended.

Mongolian control over Korea mostly meant catastrophe for the common people, starting with two-hundred thousand sent into slavery in 1254. Later came the destruction of Korean forests and more forced labor of Korean workers to build and man the ships needed to invade Japan, first in 1274 and then 1281. These failed invasions meant Japan would be unconquered, but Korea felt Mongol control until the 1340s. What was left of the Korean government proved confused when the Mongols were pushed out of China by the new Ming dynasty. General Yi Song-gye was sent to attack Ming forces in northwestern Korea in 1388. Seeing Ming strength firsthand, he marched his troops back and conquered the rest of Korea for himself with his capital at Seoul. Yi became a tributary state under the Ming and pushed Neo-Confucianism on Koreans, common and elite. Although Buddhism and Korea’s old folk traditions would remain, especially among the illiterate majority, Korea became more Confucian than China! Confucian education spread wildly. The matrilineal power of women was pushed aside in favor of filial piety to fathers, seclusion of women, and a ban on widow remarriage. This idealized Neo-Confucian state, called the Yi dynasty or Chosen Period, would last in Korea until the Japanese takeover in 1910.

Japan

The people known today as Japanese were not the original inhabitants of the islands of Japan. The Japanese came over in different waves from Korea, starting first around 300 B.C.E. in southern Kyushu. Slowly these newcomers displaced the aboriginal inhabitants north and eastward, the Ainu (today these proto-Caucasian Ainu inhabit mostly Hokkaido, the northern of Japan’s four main islands, and make up around 2 percent of Japan’s total population). Around 250 C.E., another burst of people came over from Korea, this time on horseback in military clans and likely subjugating the earlier group and building enormous grave sites for their leaders—hence Japan’s Tomb Period (ca. 250–ca. 400). These clans, called uji in Japanese, admired Japan for its beauty as well as for its mild climate; hence the Japanese Shinto religion’s nature focus. The clans took different kami, or gods, as their different ancestors. But because of these mountains, volcanoes, and rugged forested hillsides, Japan’s three southern islands only have approximately 10 percent arable land. As the clans’ population grew, so did the need to expand. By around 400, these military clans had settled Kyushu and Shikoku and had pushed as far as the Yamato Plain in southern/western Honshu, driving the Ainu before them. Historians date the beginning of this Yamato Period differently, but it makes sense to start it when the uji arrived on Honshu. The clans who chose the sun goddess to worship as ancestor used the fact that the sun is so important and gives light to all Japan to convince the other clans to follow its leadership. This is how the imperial family took the steps toward leadership in Japan. Even today there are those that claim that the imperial line flows unblemished from this early emperor.
By the sixth century, ideas from China via Korea streamed into Japan, and the battle for control of the imperial family became a fierce contest between three clans, with Soga—chief sponsor of Buddhism and by affiliation things Chinese—the temporary victor. The emperor, under Soga leadership, was to sponsor the adoption of Chinese ideas and influence in the law, arts, religion, society, and eventually even the idea of a capital city. Leaders of Soga decided to intermarry with the imperial line and have a regent control the niece of the family, Empress Suiko (r. 592–628). This regent was Prince Shotoku.

Prince Shotoku became famous for sponsoring Buddhism and Buddhist temples, as well as creating the Seventeen Point Constitution in 604. This constitution was more of a list of advice for rulers and the ruled and was written in Chinese, the only written language for the Japanese for centuries. Its articles heavily advocated Confucianism and Buddhism, with a sprinkling of Daoism and Shinto’s consensus building thrown in for good measure. But the constitution was really a way to show forcefully that the emperor or regent for the emperor would serve as a powerful central government, including collecting taxes. Prince Shotoku also opened up relations with China and sent four missions to the short-lived Sui dynasty.

After the death of Prince Shotuku in 622, a new round of fighting for control of the empire broke out. The winner, the renamed Fujiwara family, would control or influence the empire for centuries to come. This leading Shinto family decided to keep Buddhism and the centralizing of the state. It even copied the Chinese equal field system and taxation policies of the Tang dynasty. And with the building of a permanent capital, the Yamato Period ended, and the short Nara Period began in 710.

Heijo, known today as Nara, was laid out as a miniature Changan, China’s Tang dynasty capital. The main differences between the capitals was Japan built mostly with wood due to its availability and fear of earthquakes (while using wood increases fear of fire), and the city lacked a protective wall as Japan did not fear invasion. Even though Japan continued to borrow Chinese ideas, there were some differences. For example, emperors ruled not with the mandate of heaven but because they were related to heaven. This meant anyone trying to take control of the government would rule through the emperor, keeping his lineage intact. In addition, the equal field system was weakened from its creation by aristocrats keeping control of their land. The final blows to the system were the periodic smallpox epidemics that led the government in 743 to allow any new rice fields created to be owned forever.

The Nara Period saw six missions sent to Tang China, each of up to six hundred men. Japanese learned architecture from their Chinese hosts. In fact, the Buddhist temples in Heijo and later Heian (Kyoto) are the best examples of Tang dynasty buildings left in the world.

Buddhism grew very quickly during the Nara Period. The emperor’s 741 edict required a Buddhist temple and pagoda to be built in every province. The emperor also worked to link Shinto gods to the Buddhist canon to keep both coexisting in peace and helping to spread to the common people. In 752 the huge Todaiji temple in Nara was finished, including the 50-foot great Buddha made out of a million pounds of metal. Emperor Kammu, either as part of the rivalry between families over control of the emperor or due to fears that Buddhist priests had become too powerful, decided to move the capital, successfully achieved in 794 with the move to today’s Kyoto with the start of the Heian Period (794–1185).
As the Tang dynasty grew weak, Japan created more and more of its own high culture. Using literary sources, historians have a good idea how the aristocrats in the capital—again made out of wood—lived. The most important work is *Tale of Genji*, not only the world’s first novel, but the first surviving work in Japanese and a work written by a woman, Lady Murasaki, probably from 1008 to 1021. The story takes place over 75 years, following three generations of the imperial family and five hundred characters in fifty-four chapters originally written in haphazard order most likely to amuse ladies of the court and not for publication. The story became famous first because the beautiful poetry—for a long time considered the only important Japanese language literature—written within the sprawling tale.

In brief, *Tale of Genji* is a story about looking for love where it is forbidden or unlikely to be found. The protagonist’s popularity among Japanese then (and now) lies in his capacity to be deeply moved and emotional through poetry, painting, music, and affairs of the heart. Most important, the novel helps to explain the aesthetics of Heian Japan, at least for the 5 percent of Japanese living in the capital. But what the Heian Period aristocrats considered beautiful was not necessarily the obvious. Instead of the tune, the smell, or the sight, Heian Japanese elites, in contrast to Chinese, admired the transient nature of life heard in the last few notes of a song fading away, fragrance wafting on the breeze, or shadows present at dusk or dawn.

After centuries controlling the imperial family, the Fujiwara needed to keep the size of the imperial family—its relatives—limited in size. To do so it cut off branch families after a certain number of imperial generations. The collateral families had new names and wealth from provincial posts, but many elites would rather live in Heian with its many urban delights made famous by Lady Murasaki and so appointed others to do their jobs and run their estates. Other branch families, most famously Taira and Minamoto, became great warrior families with money for horses and expensive weapons and armor. Fighting soon broke out in the provinces between different groups in the eleventh century. This showed the weakness of the Heian system and lack of centralized military forces. Even rule by the emperors changed. Retired or “cloistered emperors” ran the government while the emperor just reigned and performed the Shinto rites. The system finally broke down when in 1156 military force from the provinces was used to control the government starting a cycle of violence across Japan. The eventual victors were the Minamoto family in 1185. Again, the emperor kept his position, as the victorious family forced the emperor to establish in 1192 a new position for control of the secular (and military) government, the shogun—barbarian quelling generalissimo.

This new era, the Kamakura Period began with the shogun controlling Japan from the Kanto Plain, near where Tokyo is today. The emperor granted the shogun the secular power needed to appoint bureaucrats to staff provincial posts. This made it easier to rule the country. Unfortunately for the Minamoto family, the shogun Minamoto Yoritomo distrusted his own family and had many members killed. Upon his death his widow and her father started to control from behind the scenes. Instead of taking the shogunate directly, these Hojo family members decided to rule through the shogun as regents. Within three generations the shogun was from the Fujiwara family, with the Hojo family actually running the country through its role as regent.
The late Heian Period and Kamakura Period saw the rise of the military class, the bushi or warrior. Not quite the samurai of film and comic book fame, the bushi owned lands like a European knight that enabled him to be able to own the horse, armor, and sword needed for combat. These warriors were rewarded for their victories in the long wars that ended the Heian Period. Warriors began to work on an informal code, although not quite the samurai bushido code of the seventeenth century. Kill or be killed was part of the code. Seppuku (ritual disembowelment often called “harakiri”) was for those dishonored on the battlefield. In 1274 war was renewed, this time when Khubilai Khan sent an invasion fleet made up of Korean ships, Korean warriors, and Mongol horsemen—a total of thirty-thousand men—to invade Kyushu. Fierce fighting broke out, but an unexpected storm destroyed much of the fleet and led the invading force to retreat. In 1281, Khubilai Khan sent envoys to urge Japan to surrender. Instead, the Japanese executed the envoys. Luckily for Japan, when the Mongols invaded they again chose Kyushu; this time the Japanese had built a wall to make breaching defenses more difficult, even in the face of one-hundred forty thousand enemies. Again a typhoon halted the attack, and the Mongols again retreated, this time for good.

Although a military victory, no additional lands or wealth were won in the struggle and divided up among the warriors. As a result, the bushi became less enamored of their leaders. So when Emperor Go-Daigo launched his Kemmu Restoration in 1333, seeking to return the power to rule to the emperor, many disgruntled bushi joined his cause, so ending the Kamakura Period.

The Kemmu Restoration only briefly put the emperor back into power. His foe, then ally, then foe again—Ashikaga Takauji—pushed the emperor south and out of power. He then founded the Ashikaga shogunate in 1336, using Kyoto as his capital.

Although Takauji was a fighter, Yoshimitsu, the third shogun, was mainly interested in cultural pursuits. These were made easier with the choice to keep the capital in Kyoto near the emperor. With the rise of the Ming dynasty, trade between China and Japan reopened. Japan traded its famed samurai swords, illustrated folding fans, and painted silk screens—all Japanese inventions—for porcelain, great paintings, and sculptures of the Ming. The influx of art and ideas from China, combined with the huge following of Zen Buddhism, all had a huge impact on religion, aesthetics, and culture in the Ashikaga shogunate. Zen’s inward-looking nature, Japanese ideals of beauty, and Ming Chinese sensibilities all worked together to create iconic Japanese arts: noh theater, the rock garden, flower arranging, and the tea ceremony.

The Ashikaga shogunate was far weaker than the Hojo regency. It tried to control the countryside through regional capitals staffed by branch families. These appointed rulers—if they stayed in their posts and did not move to the capital for the high culture practiced there—had to deal with regional warrior powers that were not integrated into the state after the Hojo fell from power. These independent warlords fought one another and the appointed officials to extend personal control. The officials took half of all taxes paid, as per the shogun’s authorization, and levied troops. These troops were supposed to be in case of invasion, not to fight for control over Japan. This situation would explode out of control starting in 1467.

Japanese history in this encyclopedia begins and ends with Chinese influence on the rise. But in the middle years it was mostly responsible for its own
take on beauty. It is true that Japan borrowed what it liked best about foreign ideas. It is also true that it modified these ideas or discarded them entirely when they did not fit Japan, such as the case with the examination system or walls around a city.

Further Reading

2. RELIGION

When first encountering East Asian religions, many challenges occur to the Western-educated reader, in part due to differences from Europe. Instead of believing in only one religion, East Asians often follow the teachings and rituals of two or even three religions. For example, in Japan a person might have a Shinto wedding and a Buddhist funeral. In China, a high official in the Song dynasty would follow Confucianism in his work but upon retirement would often retreat into the countryside and practice Daoism (written “Taoism” in earlier transliterations). In addition, the word religion is somewhat problematic itself. Many of the so-called religions that started in or migrated to China, Korea, and Japan began more as philosophies and expanded into a more religious form as they became popularized for the peasants. These philosophies/religions greatly influenced East Asian cultures, even if the people of the region did not necessarily confine themselves to one exclusive belief system. For ease of use and consistency, we continue to use the word religion.

In addition to the four religious traditions of China, Korea, and Japan, East Asia developed older ideas that some in the West consider “ancestor worship.” Most scholars reject this label, while others call it semireligious. At a funeral, during certain holidays each year, and perhaps on the deceased’s annual death day, families provide real or symbolic food, items, or money for use in the afterlife and to honor the past. “Ancestor commemoration” might be a better term for what was practiced more extensively and further back along the family tree by large, wealthy families, lineages, or clans in China. Although part of ancestor worship worked itself into Confucianism, filial piety, and family rites, much of the folk tradition that grew up with ancestor worship split off and became subsumed into Daoism in China and Korea, Buddhism sometimes in China and Japan, or kept its separation as did Shinto in Japan.

In China, three religions came out of the period of great societal and political upheaval during the Eastern Zhou Period (771–256 B.C.E.), which overlaps in part the Warring States Period (453–221 B.C.E.). The tumultuous Eastern Zhou began with the slow downfall of the one controlling state and the creation of many different states, all fighting one another for survival or supremacy. The end of the Warring States Period led to the end of feuding Chinese
kingdoms and instead a single Chinese Empire, the Qin (although it only lasted a handful of years). At the societal level, the slave-like farmers of the Western Zhou Period (1122–771 B.C.E.) became landowning peasants during the Eastern Zhou, and in a few, rare cases, fabulously wealthy. In addition to war and societal changes, urbanization began as more and more land fell under the till. The three religions, Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism, competed with other new ideas in what Chinese call the “Hundred Schools” — not literally one hundred, but *hundred* meaning “many.” At almost the same time in India, state creation, incessant warfare, and urbanization led to changes in religion leading eventually to Hinduism, as well as belief systems opposed to Hinduism on different levels such as Buddhism and Jainism. New philosophical ideas also began in contemporary Greece. When periods of division or uncertainty hit Korea and Japan, so too did new ideas from China lead to religious conversions, primarily Confucianism and Chinese-style Buddhism.

**Legalism**

Ideas fought one another figuratively during the Hundred Schools, just as a hundred states fought each other literally until only one controlled all of China. The Qin state began its conquests with Legalism as its state ideology. Through ruthless war, the Qin achieved victory. The Qin dynasty inaugurated imperial China in 221 B.C.E. with the first emperor. Under Legalism, the leader of the state was always right and ordered repressive laws for the people to follow. An individual only existed to serve the state in wartime and harvest time. People need laws to regulate their behavior because according to Legalism people are evil, or at their best lazy. Laws had stiff penalties, including death. A whole family might pay the punishment, under the theory that collective responsibility made rebellion less likely and families would not shield a law-breaker. Leaders raised taxes to obscene levels in peacetime to help pay for wars already waged; in some ways the populace looked forward to war as a period of less repression! Luckily for the Chinese people, the Qin dynasty only lasted until 207 B.C.E., as peasant unrest over repression and taxes helped to eliminate those who sought to continue the Qin. Unfortunately, Legalist ideas would continue in future dynasties such as the Han and the Sui, and even in more recent times with the Cultural Revolution under Communist Mao Ze-dong (1966–1969) or the Tiananmen Square massacre in June 1989 under Deng Xiaoping.

**Daoism**

Leaders imposed Legalism to create a repressive future; Daoism harkened back to an idealized past just after the discovery of cultivation. It cared more about the individual. It too came out of the Hundred Schools era but unlike Legalism played a much more positive role in Chinese history. The term *Dao* comes out of the first text of Daoists, the *Dao De Jing*, usually translated as “The Way and Its Power.” Supposedly written before the works of Confucius by the mysterious Laozi (although some doubt Laozi ever existed), *Dao De Jing* preaches following the ”Way”; yet the Way cannot be defined: “The Way that can be named is not the eternal Way.” Not only is the Way nameless, so are its
ideas behind how the world or society functions. Much of the *Dao De Jing* continues in this vague and cryptic way, leading some to speculate that the text, written in verse, is also a guide to meditation. In the midst of vague philosophizing, the book also offered some advice for attempting to solve the troubles of the Eastern Zhou Period: “Do not prize possessions and the people will not steal.” Perhaps even more difficult to enact by leaders of the time was this pithy sentence: “The best ruler is one whose presence is barely known by his subjects.”

A key term of Daoism is *wu wei*, an idea also difficult to describe. It means “nonaction.” Daoist texts describe a butcher who cuts meat for years without ever sharpening a knife by simply following the meat where a microscopic gap already existed. Modern equivalents include firing the perfect tennis shot made without applying much swing to a racket or scoring a lay-up in a basketball game without any conscious thought of dribbling the ball or shooting. In these examples the mind is absent from the action; one’s body simply flows to what is right after lots of practice. Water is another example of *wu wei* in action: water yields, flows down, and fills pools, but over the years its channel cuts through rock.

The second Daoist classic was named after its author, *Zhuangzi* (Master Zhuang). Again, some do not believe Master Zhuang Zhou lived, using as evidence the fact that the work in question was written over a couple centuries. Zhuang extolls the beauty of nature and meditation in everyday life and avoids advice to rulers. The book in many ways seems a direct attack on *Confucianism*. Confucius himself appears at times, only to be outargued or made the fool by Zhuang Zhou. As we see, Confucianism holds to the importance of ritual and honoring parents and loved ones. When Zhuang’s wife died, instead of mourning her ritually and avoiding public displays of cheer as a Confucianist would demand, Zhuang sang and played drums. When he was chastised by a friend for quitting his mourning, Zhuang replied that his wife long ago had no spirit and no body, then had a spirit, then was born with a body. With death came another change. If he had continued to mourn her it would show he did not understand the Way.

Zhuang challenged Confucian and other philosophies’ emphasis on morality. Good and bad, right and wrong, true and false, all these distinctions become problematic if one was to understand the Way in its totality. Avoid drawing distinctions, wrote Zhuang. Hence it makes sense that ideas of the *yin* and *yang* (the dualities that worked together—evil and good, female and male, weak and strong) found their way quite early into Daoism and helped to move it from its philosophical form into a more religious one.

The *Zhuangzi* also engages in some interesting metaphysics, not in the sense of discussing gods or the hereafter, but rather being and existence. Zhuang described a dream he had where he was a butterfly and did not know he was Zhuang Zhou. When he awoke, he was not sure he was Zhuang who had dreamed he was a butterfly or a butterfly now dreaming he was Zhuang. Maybe all life was but a dream. That would fit into Zhuang’s discussion of death as just another part of life. In fact, Zhuang theorized that the dead might be wondering why they clung to life!

Soon the *Dao De Jing* and *Zhuangzi* would be interpreted for new times, partially due to repression by Legalists and partially due to the nature of the written word. The Qin dynasty ordered many books burned, and in other cases
these “prepaper” books fell apart when the leather strap holding the bamboo slats rotted away and when put back together often became rearranged. But as only the most educated could read classical Chinese with its thousands of ideograms (and the fact that pre- and post-Qin ideograms were often different), Daoism came to the common folk through a more religious outlook. Toward the end of the Han dynasty (202 B.C.E.–220 C.E.), a Daoist religious movement known as the Celestial Masters won acceptance with the peasantry in the spiritual and civic realms, actually conquering and governing parts of China. The Celestial Masters helped move Daoism away from its roots to a religion focused on nature, the yin and yang, healing, and even trying to cheat death! With the fall of the Han (220 C.E.) and the Period of Disunity (316–588), Daoism became further entrenched in the north, as the Celestial Masters continued their teaching and healing services (even providing free food to travelers). Soon they added meditation and breathing exercises. Some wealthy patrons began searching for everlasting life from religious Daoists, who emulated later European alchemists in handling exotic ingredients to concoct supposed life-sustaining elixirs. Ironically, mercury often turned up in these potions, leading to horrible suffering and death instead of everlasting life.

Daoism also faced competition from a new direction, the coming of Buddhism into China. During the Northern Wei dynasty, north China’s Emperor Taiwu persecuted Buddhists from 446 C.E. until his death in 452, gaining him ceremonial trappings of Daoism, as well as the support of Confucians. A second Buddhist purge of north China occurred from 574 to 578; just like the first it was an attack on the wealth and political power of Buddhists by destroying monasteries, not forcing individual religious change. In this case Daoism became the official state religion, but the advent of the Sui dynasty and reunification 10 short years later brought Daoism away from imperial sanction and back into steady competition with Buddhism and Confucianism. The Celestial Masters faded with a revived strong, central state, and Daoism splintered into different religious groups founded on beautiful mountains away from cities. Many former Confucianist government officials would retire to mountain areas to spend their days reflecting on the Way and drawing or painting the landscapes. Daoism for the common people, on the other hand, tied itself to folk traditions and local gods.

The emperors of the Sui, Tang, and Song dynasties drew equally on what became known as China’s “Three Teachings”: Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Each time emperors pushed for more universal recognition of Daoism, like having the Dao De Jing required reading along Confucian classics as part of the examination system (Empress Wu) or statues of Laozi placed throughout China (Emperor Xuanzong), emperors would also proclaim the importance of Buddhist teachings or sponsor Buddhist festivals. Only when the Mongols overran China and established the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368), did the emperor favor a religion, in this case Tibetan Buddhism; but as the Mongols also practiced religious freedom and only occupied all of China for 90 years, Daoism maintained its importance.

As for other East Asian states, Daoism influenced the culture of Korea and Japan, but never to the extent as in China. Daoism first came to Korea from Chinese emigrants and conquerors during the Han dynasty, around 109 B.C.E. By the time the Chinese empire collapsed and the last Chinese either left or merged into the Korean population, Daoism, Confucianism, and even some
Buddhism had made their way to the Three Kingdoms of Korea. Daoism, with its love of nature, ended up merging well with the local folk traditions and gods, whereas Confucianism and Buddhism ended up the most powerful influences. As for Japan, Daoist ideas on nature and meditation struck a nerve. The Chinese worldview came to Japan through Korea between the fourth and sixth centuries, and Japanese leaders officially adopted Confucianism and Buddhism after the start of the Sui dynasty (around 604 with Prince Shotoku and his Seventeen Point Constitution). The Japanese kept Shinto, their nature-worshiping and animistic religion. Hence Daoism lost out in formal allegiance, yet it influenced Japanese culture, especially through Zen Buddhism.

Confucianism

Confucianism also began during the Hundred Schools Period, around 500 B.C.E. It looked to an idealized past of the Shang dynasty (1766–1122 B.C.E.) or the Western Zhou Period (1122–771 B.C.E.), times where people understood their place in society and family. Master Kong Qiu, Latinized Confucius, thought order was the answer to the chaos of his times, when a lower ranking peasant could climb to the top of the hierarchy and almost constant war plagued the land. Perhaps jealously fueled Confucius: his family was of poverty-stricken nobility. Confucius turned to books and histories of the past and perhaps wrote or collated parts of them—the historical record is vague. These “Five Classics” — Book of Odes, Book of History, Book of Changes, Book of Rites, and the Spring and Autumn Annals (this last book a history of the recent Eastern Zhou past)—became the foundation of Confucianism. The Confucian canon would also eventually include works or proverbs by Confucius or his key followers, the “Four Books”: Analects (sayings of Confucius), Book of Mencius, Great Learning, and Doctrine of the Mean. Confucius idealized the early years of the Western Zhou and believed that society could be saved if it replicated the past through understanding old books, renewing old rituals, and reinstating systems of order. A natural order existed before; replicate it again and conflict and chaos will evaporate.

Confucius himself wanted to be a sage, a scholar who could advise the rulers of his time. Instead he became a great teacher, imparting his ideology to willing disciples chosen for their ability and not their birth. Confucius philosophized about the here and now, not the hereafter. He placed emphasis on good government, morality, and ethics. Rigid hierarchy also played a large role in his philosophy; he combined the idea of knowing one’s place in society with patriarchy and filial piety (respect for one’s parents). These ideas became explicit in his
Five Relationships: ruler to subject, father to son, husband to wife, elder brother to younger brother, and friend to friend. Notice that all the relationships but the final one showed hierarchy, women only fit into the system in a subordinate role (as wife), and one only existed in relation to others. Each of these relationships was reciprocal, however, with the subordinate owing the superior respect and obedience, while the superior owed the subordinate benevolence. A benevolent ruler might forgive taxes a drought-stricken region.

Benevolence (ren in Chinese) and ritual (li) played key roles in Confucianism. In fact, benevolence under Confucianism is very similar to the golden rule of Western thought, only in a negative form: “Do not do unto others what you would not wish yourself.” Those below needed to treat you with loyalty and obedience, performing the proper rituals. These included 3 years of mourning when a parent died. The ruler needed to observe the correct rituals to please the gods and allow his rule to continue. But ritual should not be observed blindly; real, sincere feeling had to occur during the rites or they were useless. The ruler, like the father, also served as a model of behavior, teaching morality through his actions. Confucius did not believe laws prevented immorality; laws just created criminals. If those at the top of the social hierarchy acted morally and with benevolence, the lower ranks of society would behave well, too. At the top, just below the ruler, stood the scholar-official (junzi in Chinese), to explain Confucian ideology to the leader.

Confucianism preached the importance of hierarchy, but with a small rebellious streak. A leader was only a leader if he behaved as one, with benevolence to those below and propriety in rituals. If a leader did not provide those below with benevolence or shirked his ritual duties, the leader could be replaced. But ordinarily Confucianism would be used historically by the elite to keep order; rebellions were started by Daoist secret societies at first, then Buddhist secret societies once Buddhism became popular in China.

Mencius is the Latinized name of the second key extoller of Confucianism, one Meng Ke, who lived and wrote around 300 B.C.E. He brought into Confucianism two ideas many associated with Confucius: All people are good and can become sages, and the leader rules because of the mandate of heaven. Mencius argued that all people are good. As evidence, Mencius pointed out that all people would be shocked to see a child fall into a well; this, he said, was humaneness that he saw as the glimmerings of benevolence. Because benevolence is within everyone, so is the possibility of sagehood, if only one studied and applied Confucianism. And because sages could best predict how to respond to the current conditions in China, it was right and proper for a king to cede his rule to a sage. Not surprisingly, this never happened.

Mencius also argued a king only ruled with the mandate of heaven. The Xia, Shang, and Eastern Zhou dynasties lost out not because of the actions of rebels who should be shunned, but due to losing the mandate of heaven. The mandate provided good weather and compliant subjects. In return the king engaged in proper rituals and treated his subjects with benevolence. Natural disasters or rebellious peasants might mean the king was losing the mandate, hence his overthrow or even regicide was divinely inspired and not immoral under the Five Relationships. Worthy men established the new dynasties under the new mandate.

Not long after the days of Mencius, Qin dynasty took over China; Confucianism had to go underground or face elimination. The few Confucian scholars
who tried to stand up to the new emperor met hideous deaths, and the Qin emperor burned books to keep Confucianism or any other philosophies out of the hands of his subjects. Copies of books that survived often were just piles of old bamboo straps with writing of an older form of Chinese than introduced (and kept) by the Qin. The Han dynasty realized it was the heir to the Qin, so continued many Legalist practices. But a clever scholar-official figured out a way to put Legalism and renewed Confucianism together. Confucianists claimed that laws were unnecessary and a ruler should lead by example to get the people to do good. Although perhaps true in the time of the Shang, Zhou, or even the Warring States Period, he argued, the world of the Han was much different. It needed the laws of the Legalists in conjunction with the moral example of Confucianists, just like the world needed the dark of the yin with the light of the yang. Confucianism became part of the ruling ideology of China, at the expense of a little corruption from Legalism and mysticism/religious ideas from the yin/yang (just as Daoism had been mildly altered by the introduction of symbol and its principles).

Also during the Han, the emperor sponsored an imperial university to teach Confucianism. It began with fifty students; in one hundred years three thousand students attended. With the Sui and Tang dynasties, the university continued to grow in size, as more and more government positions required the passing of exams based on Confucianism (and for a brief time on Daoism as well). By the Song dynasty and then during the Ming, almost all central government positions required passing the Confucian exams. These exams were open to all in theory, allowing the best and the brightest to pass the exams and work in government. Yet the difficulty of learning the thousands of characters of classical Chinese, as well as the Confucian canon and commentaries, meant normal members of the gentry ran the government bureaucracies. Only rarely an intelligent peasant boy, backed by his village, earned a spot in government.

By the time of the Sui dynasty, Confucian temples and shrines could be found in all provinces. Religiously Confucianism remained important for rites the emperor engaged in or sponsored for the good of China, and at the family level for the poorly named “ancestor worship.” But Buddhism, starting slowly at the end of the Han dynasty, briefly overshadowed Confucianism. From 800 to 1200, important scholar-officials studied Buddhism, before some rejected its philosophy. Using ideas gleaned from Buddhism or even Daoism, these scholars created Neo-Confucianism.

The Neo-Confucian movement brought new ideas to Confucianism. Yet the Confucian exams remained unaffected by these changes until a generation after the death of Neo-Confucianism’s most important thinker, Zhu Xi (1130–1200). Zhu used the two terms qi and li in much the same way as earlier scholars had attached the yin and yang to Confucianism or Daoism. In this case, li (a different Chinese character than “ritual”) meant “principle,” and qi, like in Daoism, meant “energy,” as in Tai Qi (sometimes still written in the old transliteration as “T’ai Chi”). Just like a house needed a plan (li) before beginning building with materials (qi), people were on the path of goodness (li), but needed to be taught to obtain the qi, its outward expression. This was an elegant solution needed to prove Mencius correct in the face of contradictory evidence: if all people are good, why do so many do bad? The answer: not enough training. One must study the Confucian canon but also look within oneself through meditation and reflection, just like Chan Buddhism. With
these Neo-Confucian teachings and rulers leading by example, all people
could eventually be good.

Zhu’s Neo-Confucianism became the accepted interpretation of Confucian-
ism for passing the exams and getting the appointment to government posi-
tions during the Later Song dynasty and until the twentieth century. This
would be one of several problems with Neo-Confucianism (or its predecessor).
No longer would an examinee dare to interpret the Confucian canon himself;
this led to students and teachers valuing memorization not intellectualism,
and leading to a weakened Chinese intelligencia when the Europeans arrived
by sea. In addition, Neo-Confucianism was also behind a backlash against
women. Footbinding became popular for the gentry’s daughters during the
Song dynasty. This incredibly painful procedure, which kept the girl/woman’s
feet the size of a 5-year old’s, pushed women out of society, where they had a
place before, and into their homes’ shadows. Finally, although Confucianists
made intelligent government officials, the Confucian importance of family and
thus making sure one’s children were well taken care of made some scholar-
officials less than honest when it came to remitting tax receipts. This embezzle-
ment by men the government depended on eventually led to financial problems
and thus the beginning of the end for many dynasties.

As for Korea and Japan, both societies were profoundly influenced by Con-
fucianism. After 1391 and the establishment of the Yi dynasty, Korea became
perhaps more Neo-Confucian than even China! In Japan’s case, the Seventeen
Point Constitution reflects equal parts Confucianism and Buddhism. But nei-
erth Korean kings or Japanese emperors (let alone Japanese regents or Japa-
nese “shogun”) ended or even modified their respective hereditary systems
like China did for all but the emperor. The examination system in non-China
East Asia, when offered, was superfluous.

Buddhism

Buddhism arose in the Nepal region of South Asia around 500 B.C.E. Prince
Siddhartha Gautama worried about what life meant once he realized at age 29
that he would become sick, age, and die. Giving up his father’s palace, his
wife, and his son, Siddhartha became an ascetic, living with no possessions
and starving—popular philosophical strategies for the region at the time. After
6 years of mistreating his body like this and almost starving to death, and ap-
parently no closer to the answers to suffering he sought, he took food and
drink. Then, while meditating, the answer came to him, a middle way between
treating himself with luxury and maltreating his body through pain and hun-
ger. He described his Four Noble Truths: humans suffer, desire causes suffer-
ring, there is a way to stop suffering and achieve liberation, and that way to
liberation is the Eightfold Noble Path (ways of treating oneself and others, in-
cluding meditation until one loses thought of a “self”). Humans suffer because
they seek pleasure, worry about losing pleasure, or wish they had pleasure
again, and stubbornly believe in their individual soul. Humans had forgotten
to live in the moment and recognize the community of living creatures. Sid-
dhartha, called by his new followers Buddha (“enlightened one”), developed
an order of monks for those to practice his teachings and spread his ideas.

Clearly the Buddha had created a philosophical way of dealing with the sor-
rows of life: Live simply, live for the moment, treat all living things with respect,
and be ethical. True enlightenment, “nirvana,” only came after long hours of
meditation, something only open to celibate and poor monks willing to beg for food before meditating each day. The mysticism associated in South Asian culture with meditation and the word of the Buddha and his teachings soon transformed philosophic thought into a new religion, with the Buddha as a god. Buddhism then took three paths: the traditional teachings of the god Buddha (now in Sri Lanka and South-East Asia); Mahayana (“Greater Vehicle”) Buddhism in East Asia, where even laypeople could obtain enlightenment, through worshiping the original Buddha or one of the many to come; and Tibetan Buddhism, a more complicated form of Buddhism with a hierarchical system not seen in other religions practiced in East Asia.

According to legend, Mahayana Buddhism first arrived during the Han dynasty. But Buddhism did not become a popular choice among the Chinese until the Period of Disunity. Then, like during the Warring States, China was undergoing upheaval and so welcomed what at first glance seemed very un-Chinese. The first sects of Mahayana Buddhism that arrived still favored the monks and had a complicated cosmology that said the world was an illusion or was empty. Monks had strict vows of celibacy and shaved their heads to show dedication to their order. Both of these actions insulted their parents and ancestors by not providing a new generation to follow Confucian or ancestor rituals and harming the body “given” to you by parents. But Buddhism, by discussing what happened when you died (transmigration of the soul, similar to reincarnation) and sorrow itself, provided to the Chinese ideas not available under Legalism, Daoism, or Confucianism.

Buddhism’s popularity exploded in the Tang dynasty. Empress Wu, although backing both Daoism because of supposed family ties to Laozi and Confucianism as part of the examination system, claimed to be the current incarnation (called a Bodhisattva) of the future Buddha (Maitreya) to come at the end of the world. The two most popular sects of Chinese Buddhism were Pure Land and Chan Buddhism. Pure Land believed the world was in terrible shape, but luckily Buddha had foreseen this, and explained secretly to a few followers that one specific Bodhisattva (being of wisdom) could help ordinary people achieve enlightenment. By believing in his saving grace and reciting his name (“Amituofo” Buddha—Amida in Japanese) in true devotion, a follower could be reborn in the land of paradise. Many Chinese did not understand this stay was temporary, assuming the Pure Land was heaven. Theoretically they would come back to earth and help others obtain enlightenment before permanently seeking it themselves as Bodhisattvas under Mahayana Buddhism were supposed to do. Just at the high point of Buddhism in China, Emperor Wuzong, a devote Daoist, attacked Buddhism. During his brief reign (840–846), due to his Daoist beliefs, xenophobia toward foreigners (with Buddhism obviously foreign), and acting on his chance to take back lands into taxation, Wuzong defrocked over two-hundred fifty thousand Buddhist monks and nuns (leaving only forty-nine monasteries and eight hundred monks), sold off their lands, destroyed 4,600 temples, and wrecked forty-thousand shrines. His death in 846 saved Buddhism in China, but not Pure Land; instead Chan Buddhism gained adherents to be the most popular form of Buddhism in China.

Chan Buddhism (called Zen in Japan) favored monks in their quest for enlightenment, believing meditation the key. But Chan Buddhism also provided churches for regular peasants to take part in, making up for the loss of Pure Land, and those churches survived the coming of the Mongols and their adherence to Tibetan Buddhism. Other forms of popular Buddhism also remained,
albeit underground: Buddhist secret societies. Different versions helped to weaken or even destroy many of the Chinese dynasties since the Sui.

Korea accepted Buddhism early from China and was the key cultural transmitters to Japan. Although the folk religion in Korea already absorbed Daoism, Buddhism found almost universal acceptance. Japan, too, welcomed Buddhism. Japan also had many different sects vying for power. Some of the earliest actually took to the streets to fight government officials and each other over temple appointments. By the time the warrior classes in Japan made their first push at dominance to move the capital away from the Kyoto in 1185, the most popular forms of Buddhism in Japan were Pure Land (this time, the lay members repeated Amida’s name many times to insure entrance into the Pure Land) and Zen (Chan Buddhism for Japanese), which added thinking about illogical puzzles called “koan” to meditation to achieve enlightenment.

**Shinto**

Japan’s original animistic, folk religion survived the coming of new religious ideas. The Japanese coined “Shinto,” meaning “way of the gods,” after Buddhism arrived and absorbed a few local gods. But what were gods, called “kami,” under Shinto? Gods were anything awe inspiring in a beautiful, powerful, or even scary way. Nature often played this role, probably because people in Japan came from Korea; Japan has far more beautiful mountain forests than the Koreans did by this point in history. A giant tree could be a kami, as could a mountain or even an interesting boulder. Even a man could be a kami if he had incredible abilities; upon death he might obtain even more fame as stories about his exploits got more and more exaggerated and people’s knowledge of his kami-hood spread.

Shinto also provides multiple explanations on how the world, and more important, Japan, was created. One family claimed the sun goddess was a direct ancestor and used those stories to gain control of the state and become Japan’s emperor. Shinto, however, does not handle death or a woman’s menstruation well. Anyone who touched a dead body or animal was considered unclean; eventually an outcaste class developed from those who performed such jobs, called “burakumin.” If a woman happened to touch a wrestling ring, Shinto priests would have to help rebuild it before refereeing Sumo wrestling again. Japan therefore differs from Korea and China, and for that matter almost all the world, in that its original religion survives into the twenty-first century!

**Further Reading**


3. ECONOMY

China

Chinese wealth comes first from the surplus grain generated by overworked and overtaxed peasants. During the Period of Disunity, north China tried to help the peasantry and maintain a strong tax base by implementing the equal field system. Yet due to climate, north China grew wheat, barley, and millet. It was south China that could grow rice. Growing rice requires close work with neighbors to drain or flood fields at the proper times. The more people who worked in a rice field, the greater the yield, although obviously there was an upper limit to the output of the crop. In fact, owning animals to help farm was a luxury restricted to the rich peasant during these dynasties. When China was reunified under the Sui dynasty, the government squandered its newly found southern resources on wars and extravagance, with the exception of the Grand Canal, which allowed goods to head north to the capital from the Yangzi River region for half the year.

The next rulers of China, the Tang dynasty, made China the richest country on earth, first by lowering taxes on the peasants. It then built up transportation and irrigation using corvee labor; sometimes they were part of the same system. Canals in the south linked the many small rivers and lakes. Travel by land had been made easier centuries earlier with rules requiring carts to have the same axle lengths, but trade by land was not as lucrative as trade by sea, even in this age of lost ships. China’s isolated position led to trade in two directions: east across the sea (from there north to Korea and Japan, or south to southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean) or northwest along the Silk Road. It was said at the time that trade with China’s northern capital Changan was so great the sky was obscured with dust from the caravans coming in all directions, as China sold silk, tea, and some ceramics to traders from as far away as North Africa. But the Tang was a more Buddhist society than Confucian, so merchants did not face the discrimination of future dynasties like the Ming.

Silk was highly cherished by the elite throughout the known world. Although silk is a natural by-product, the West did not find out the secret of its creation for centuries. Silk traveled from China into the West through the Silk Road. The Silk Road started in China and traveled through Central Asia and into Constantinople. This Silk Road helped create the major trading centers of Central Asia. Silk grew expensive as each new trader along the route took his own share of the profit before selling it to the next merchant. However, the fall of Rome in 476 hurt the silk trade for a couple of centuries. Yet the market for it rebounded, even as Arab traders figured out how to get to China by sea. Trade always continued along the Silk Road, but the weakening of the Tang led to a couple centuries of turmoil in China.

The Chinese were also able to build many trading ships, called “junks” during the Tang and Song Periods—these ships grew massive by the start of the Ming. These junks were primarily based out of southeastern China, helped along by the Yangzi River and the extensive canal systems of the region. Seaports proved readily available in the south, whereas the Yellow River moved too rapidly and chaotically to allow for much carrying trade. Many trade routes were opened that would have been the envy of the West.
to the East Indies, Africa, India, and even the Middle East, although Chinese sailors had to compete for trade, especially with Arab merchants.

During the early Song, the increases in trade and resource development led to a period of relative prosperity. With the sea lanes protected by a Chinese navy, China's wealth increased. These Chinese warships even made use of rockets to fight off attackers (usually pirates). The technology of the Chinese ships were impressive and the best in the world. Ships could carry hundreds of passengers or tons of exotic goods. Intricate sail systems helped the ships travel easier and faster. The junk's compartments were watertight, which helped preserve ships that struck reefs and would otherwise be lost at sea. Differences such as these facilitated the Chinese Empire's rise as an important trading partner.

Trade by sea brought in many exotic goods. From India and Africa came prized ivory. Coral, pearls, crystal, cloves, and incense were also bought from foreign markets. On the other hand, China was a major exporter. People throughout Asia, Africa, and Europe demanded Chinese goods, which were seen as the pinnacle of craftsmanship or simply out of the ordinary. Many Europeans and Middle Easterners bought goods such as silks, porcelain, other ceramics, and tea at high prices. However, many of the rich Chinese during the Song dynasty were enamored of foreign goods and became ravenous purchasers. To pay for these goods, gold and silver (especially silver) were traded out. This large amount of specie, or hard currency, leaving China led to a large foreign debt. This trade deficit hindered the Chinese imperial budget and placed disproportionate power in foreign hands.

The Song dynasty showed weakness in fighting its wars against different nomadic groups, but it did have a strong economy. Paradoxically, its economy grew again when the Jurchen conquered north China, sending a flood of refugees southward. These newcomers arrived just in time; Vietnamese rice strains coming into the Southern Song dynasty allowed two crops of rice a year in areas south of the Yangzi. More peasants meant a greater yield. The Southern Song economy exploded, leading to commercialization of agriculture and the monetization of the economy. Peasants now paid their taxes in coin rather than in kind.

Although most of China dealt with dirt roads that turned to mud in the rainy season, the Southern Song capital of Hangzhou had paved roads to facilitate travel and trade. Hangzhou, located along a canal a short distance from the Yangzi, was a tremendous center of trade. This was the largest city in the world at this time. There were ready supplies of the major foodstuffs: rice and pork. Secondary foods such as salted fish could also be found easily. It was said that in the city things could be found that were not found in all of the rest of the empire.

There were different markets in Hangzhou for just about everything. There were shops for flowers, olives, oranges, pearls, medicinal plants, and books. Within the city, due to its commercial and imperial status, were service buildings such as inns, restaurants, taverns, and tea houses. In the lake near Hangzhou were hundreds of boats serving similar purposes. The city was known for being one of the premier makers of jewelry in all of China.

Goods in demand in the West such as salt and different spices were easily available in Hangzhou. The markets sold other rare goods such as perfumes, pets, and mosquito repellant. Workers also performed intricate tasks such as repairing ovens and making instruments out of bamboo. Rivers and canals connected to other nearby cities, making the transferring of goods easy.
China was also one of the first nations to create porcelain. The practice was not learned in the West until the eighteenth century, thus providing China a valuable monopoly. Porcelain is so difficult to make because it involves heating pure clay to very high temperatures. This form of ceramics was highly esteemed and delicate, making Chinese traders rich. Chinese trade in porcelain was so well known and prevalent that the word *china* means the same as the ceramic. Products of porcelain were anything from teacups to plates to figurines. Chinese porcelain at the time of the Song was almost the finest in the world, second only to neighboring Korea. And its abilities to make these items only increased with the coming of the Ming dynasty.

China’s coinage was developed centuries before with the famous cash coin, and new coins were still made 1,000 years after its first appearance (see *Money*/*Coinage*). This copper coin with a square hole in the center, had the value of one-thousandth of a Chinese ounce of silver (37.301 grams). These coins were often strung together with string in “hundreds.” Despite the name, the strings were likely not exactly one hundred cash coins, depending on the inflation/deflation of the period. The main trouble with cash coins their weight and bulk. The state banned the export of these coins. Song officials believed export would take away from the Imperial stockpile of precious metals and cause economic hardships if the coins were unavailable for the peasants to pay taxes. China used weighed amounts of gold and silver—never minted—for exchange.

In the eleventh century, the Song dynasty introduced paper money. This paper made trade easier. A merchant carrying many strings of cash would have been severely impeded by their sheer weight. This new paper money was backed by the state and further backed by promises of gold or silver. Just as in early Western paper monies, there was an admonition on the bill that stated that counterfeiters would be summarily killed. The introduction of paper money was a major first in the world of commerce and state power. Yet the Song printed too much money, leading to economic woes. When the Mongols conquered China they too tried their hand at paper money, this time backed with silk. The Yuan dynasty too overprinted the currency, and the system collapsed.

Under the Song, the Chinese economy changed rapidly and dramatically. Many forms of resource extraction became easier and cheaper. Paper making became quicker, and salt processing less laborious. The coal and iron industries grew markedly, becoming the most advanced the world. Coal usage and trade also increased as more coal was burned as forests were being depleted. When Marco Polo traveled to China during the Yuan dynasty, one of the most impressive things to him was the use of coal. The Chinese were also the first people in the world to use natural gas and crude oil for energy. These could be burned for heat or for light. Oil was not used in the West until the nineteenth century.

During this period, the city of Quanzhou, in Fujian province, overtook Guangzhou (Canton) as the main trading port of the Chinese Empire. Quanzhou was not only a major center of Chinese culture, but also brought in other cultures to create a melded society. There was a large mosque in the city for its large Muslim population. In addition, two pagodas were built in the Indian style. In this manner, trade not only brought in physical goods, but also traditions and religions.

During and largely due to the Mongol invasions, the Chinese population fell dramatically. In 1220, it is estimated that 108 million people lived in China.
By 1229 this number fell to 75 million. Although China’s population was still the largest in the world, this sharp decline badly damaged trade. To make matters worse, floods, droughts, and harsh winters made growing food more difficult, and the subsequent fall in food production led to starvation and malnutrition. Diseases such as the Black Death also assisted in the striking fall in the Chinese population. Yet all was not desolation. An awestruck Marco Polo visited Hangzhou during the Yuan (Mongol) dynasty. He called Hangzhou “the most noble city and the best that is in the world.” And he had already travelled to the capitals of the Mongol empire for comparison. But China would come out of the Mongol with economic troubles.

Even with the Mongol domination and the other terrible circumstances, the silk and porcelain trade remained strong. In the south, cotton became a major cash crop. Although the Chinese had known about cotton since the third century, cotton growing expanded dramatically during the Southern Song Period and continued under the Mongols. The cotton trade made it easier to clothe the many peasants of China.

The conquest of the Mongols helped tie China indirectly to the West. With the Mongol Empire traversing from China and Korea all the way to central Europe, the one empire helped spread Chinese ideas to the West. But by putting the profits of trade in the hands of the middle man, the Yuan dynasty damaged the Chinese economy and hurt the reputation of foreigners and merchants. The Chinese emperors of the Ming dynasty would take actions to prevent merchants from gaining much power in the future.

One of China’s most prevalent trading partners from the Tang to the Ming was the Arabs. With the expansion of the Arab empires, trade with China increased dramatically. The Arabs desired Chinese goods such as tea and silk. It is through the Chinese that peoples such as the Turks and the Arabs learned the secret of gunpowder. With their strategic location, the Arabs and later Turks were an excellent intermediary between China and Europe.

The Chinese government also needed trade to supplement its military. China needed to trade with central Asia for horses to build its cavalry. Usually the nomadic groups gelded the horses to prevent Chinese breeding programs. This lack of horses is ironic because the Mongols that invaded China were masters of cavalry. Lacking horses put the Chinese military and government at a large disadvantage and help explain the loss of the Northern Song dynasty and the victory of the Mongols.

Tea was a major trade item of China. Tea was a favorite drink of the elite and the poor. This drink also caught on in the West eventually. But it was nomads north of China that used tea as more of a food source than a drink and so purchased many tons of it across the Great Wall. Much of the tea was grown and transported from central China and Szechwan province. Tea leaves needed to be cured before they could be mixed with water. The tea was not only a major portion of the commercial society of China, but also served to improve public health. Because tea water needed to be boiled, many microorganisms that could have led to epidemics died. Tea is still popular in China today and is still exported.

The printing press was a Chinese invention not adopted in the West for many years. Although the press was a tremendous feat of science and literature, it was not a dominating force in China. Because calligraphy was highly prized and the fact that there were so many different Chinese characters, the
usage of the printing press was seen as almost unnecessary. Calligraphers could be cheaply hired, and their work contained a more personal touch. The printing press became an important tool, however, for the printing of paper money and edicts.

Some scholars trained in economics wonder why China’s society advanced to a money economy during the Song dynasty but did not make the jump to an industrial, capitalist one. Instead, the nation remained between medieval ways and modern ones. This is an ethnocentric way of looking at China. Capitalist development is not the only path to modernization. It turns out that in China there have always been so many people that it was cheaper to hire them than to build a machine to do the work of one hundred men. In addition, rents and loans to peasants paid landlords and moneylenders well—between 20 percent and 100 percent a year—that it made little sense to invest money in capitalist ventures that paid only 10 percent (and usually worse). Better to buy more land. Europe, with its dearth of people after the Black Death, turned to machines to keep society advancing. That was not the Chinese experience.

Although China did not trade overland as much as its geographical borders might suggest, it did trade with the nations south of the kingdom. Vietnam was an important trading partner, a key source of tin. Other lands of Southeast Asia brought to China tropical and other exotic woods. Chinese traders became familiar with these regions. To the northeast the Chinese traded with Korea and Japan, both by sea.

Chinese resource industries were helped by the fact that China contained many different geographical landforms of the world. With deserts, forests, an ocean, jungles, and mountains, all sorts of resources were available within one empire. Trade surpluses were maintained for centuries, even though they would later become large deficits, especially during the Yuan dynasty. With a uniform writing system, trade became easier. China’s large population made the gathering of resources cheaper and more efficient.

Korea

Korea in many ways served as the direct conduit between its two larger neighbors: China and Japan. In many ways, Korea has been forced to play second fiddle to them in history, but in trade Korea has its own traditions. Chinese culture and goods traveled across the Yellow Sea to the Korean peninsula on its way to Japan. Because Korea is Japan’s closest neighbor, often trade relations with China were done through Korea, whether divided into three kingdoms or unified into one.

Korea is best known for its ceramics trade. Korean ceramics are not only of great aesthetic quality but are unmatched for sheer quality. After adapting the technique of making porcelain from the Chinese, the Koreans made great strides in its production. The Koreans created inlaid porcelain, which enables better looking sculptures of higher quality. Although Chinese porcelain is much better known and traded in the Western world, Korean porcelain was of much higher quality. Quality is so much higher that historians today still revel in the level of skill of the medieval Koreans. The quality of thir-teenth-century Korean porcelain would not be replicated in the West for almost 600 years.
Korean ceramics makers became a staple of the society. Many pieces of Korean earthenware still exist today. Their intricacy of designs and illustrations are such that even Chinese wares are nowhere near the quality. Ceramics were the most highest prized of Korean traded goods. Many different types of ceramic ware were made. These included tea cups (tea was imported from China), bowls, and figurines. Yet Chinese influence could be seen on many of Korea’s ceramics. Korean earthenware, however, created its own identity as time progressed. It is this distinctiveness that helped Korea put its own name on ceramics and their trade. Often these pieces would be painted with slices of life or other parts of Korean culture. The most valuable were the celadon in different colors of green, or the light green glaze uniformly crackled that was developed after numerous mistakes.

In many ways, the ceramics industry was how Korea was best known. Stuck behind China geographically made it difficult for it to stand out. Trading of these ceramics helped buoy the Korean economy. Today, these porcelains are studied as classics.

Korea is home to native gold mines, making its trading capabilities far larger than its geographic size. Being home to gold and silver mines helped Korean precious metals be traded across the world even if its point of origin was not known. In addition, Korean jewelers made jewelry of the highest quality. There was much demand among the rich in Korean society for jewelry. Most of the people in medieval Korea were farmers.

During China’s Song dynasty (960–1279) Korean trade boomed. In the harbor of Yesong, near the capital, major buying and selling occurred. Ships came in from as far as the Arab world. The Koreans were able to trade the Arabs fur, leathers, and porcelain. Trade with close neighbor Japan that started even earlier, in the mid-500s was brisk as the two neighbors built a lucrative business relationship, especially for religious art. Korea was able to carry on trade that went geographically far beyond East Asia. This is fortunate for the Koreans as it only bordered one state, China, and could have been dominated economically had the Chinese wanted to do so.

The Koreans’ largest trading partner was its giant neighbor China. The Chinese considered the Koreans as a legitimate civilization, as it offered tribute to the current Chinese emperor. The Chinese traded Koreans silk, their own porcelains, and printed books. This is particularly important because Korea used the Chinese for writing official documents, so both could read what the other wrote. Korea did not develop its own alphabet that would last until the fifteenth century. To China, Korea sent gold, silver, and ginseng. The gold and silver trade was especially important due to the large number of gold and silver coins the empire minted. After the Chinese aristocrats began to buy foreign goods excessively, Chinese gold and silver disappeared. Thus Korean precious metal became even more valuable than before.

Korean boat makers were particularly skilled. When the Mongols invaded Korea and China they forced the Koreans build them two massive fleets to conquer the recalcitrant Japanese. With a nation surrounded by water on three sides, one can easily see why ship making became so important and widespread. Fishermen also used these well-crafted Korean boats and brought fish and shellfish onto the Korean markets. Once the Mongols were on the run, Korea went through a period of Neo-Confucianism that briefly treated merchants poorly.
Japan

Japan is even more geographically isolated than China. The islands of Japan are inhabited by people of Japanese ancestry who arrived from Korea. The Japanese trade relied exclusively on sea routes for trade, especially with the Koreans. The largest problem for Japan was its lack of a market system for so many centuries. It took convincing the other clans to allow the imperial family to rule, then copying the Chinese governing system before Japan would urbanize with one city—the capital Heijo (Nara), built out of wood to avoid earthquake problems in a scaled-down replica of China’s Changan.

Early in Japanese history, much of the land was controlled by familial clans. During the Taika reforms of the seventh century, much of the land in the nation was nationalized through the equal field system borrowed from China. By doing this, much of the power of the clans was reduced. In addition, the state’s power became greater as the only one able to tax. The first person to give his land to the state was Prince Naka No-Oe, the initiator of the Taika reforms. Under the Taika reforms, the land was to be redistributed to the peasants through a census. Each male over the age of 6 was to receive 2 tan of land, while females would receive one and one-third tan. Even after this redistribution, the administration of the land would be done by the local authorities. Nobles were entitled to more land under the redistribution than the poor. This land equalization, which kept the tax base intact, was supposed to take place every 6 years afterwards to avoid corruption. Yet the system would not survive 100 years.

The property tax was approximately 2 percent to 3 percent of its value per year, paid in kind. Religious institutions like Buddhist monasteries or temples were exempt. Peasants were also expected to perform corvee duties each year. Corvee is unpaid labor for the state. In this case, corvee was owed to the national government as well as the local one. Usually corvee was 10 days per year. However, it could be extended to up to 60 days, and if there were special projects peasants could be forced to work extra time.

In Japan, cities were not a natural occurrence. Although in other societies, cities were built and maintained as centers of trade, this did not occur in Japan during this time. With a lack of domestic or foreign surplus, trade was seen as unnecessary or ignored. However, the Japanese did develop its capital cities by copying their neighbors, the Chinese. The Japanese again copied the Chinese capital when building Heian (Kyoto).

The Taika reforms and equal field system soon fell into disuse. Many of the edicts surrounding it were simply not followed. Land redistribution started to fail as other groups of Japanese began to consolidate large tracts of land. Buddhists, aristocrats, and government officials were able to consolidate great amounts of tax-free land. With the lack of tax revenue and the dissolution of nationalized land, the central government became substantially weaker. This was a problem, as trade in luxuries had finally begun in Heian, especially in high-quality silks.

With the declining of the government came the rise of the warrior class, the bushi (origins of the samurai). War broke out, and the winner, the Minamoto family, started the Kamakura Period, ruling from near where modern Tokyo is today.

Under the 1232 Joei Code and Confucianism, Japanese society was broken down into four classes. These were the bushi, peasants, artisans, and merchants.
Under this system the upper classes were not given preferential treatment as compared to peasants. Land began to accumulate in the hands of the warriors as their power increased.

With the Mongol invasion came the weakening of the military class. They had not been rewarded for their meritorious service twice in defeating the Mongols. This gave rise to moneylenders. In 1297 an edict was made attempting to forgive all outstanding debt. Instead of solving the problem, this simply led to more disputes. Due to all of these circumstances, land became concentrated in the upper echelons of the military, rather than in the hands of any soldier.

During the fourteenth century, the standing of independent farmers increased. The state had less control over lands. Local constables began taking half of the land of owners. With corruption on the rise, the economic well-being of the average citizen diminished.

As with China and the rest of the world from 400 to 1400, the most common profession was farming. As in China, rice was the most common staple. However, under strict Zen Buddhism animal meat was forbidden to be consumed. However, the Japanese did eat fish, and some called birds “mountain fish” to consume them.

Unlike Korea and China, the Japanese imported porcelain during this period. Japan had little trade with the outside world during this time period. The Chinese did not favor trade for trade’s sake, even though Japan desperately wanted Chinese goods and culture. To China, Japan did not have very many desirable goods. In addition, China saw the Japanese as simple barbarians. With China open to trading partners such as the Arabs, Europe, the Turks, and Vietnam, Japan’s products seemed almost insignificant. Japan, did, however trade samurai swords, fans, and painted folding screens to China in exchange for Ming art and religious items. In the second half of the fourteenth century, Japan sent a series of trading ships to China. The Chinese saw this ship as bringing tribute instead of trading goods. However, this was still beneficial to the Japanese as the Chinese sent gifts back of greater value than those sent to China. Japan also had trade with its closest partner, Korea, especially in the sixth century.

One way that Japanese citizens made money was through the practice of piracy. These Japanese pirates would harass Chinese trading and fishing vessels. By using these tactics, Japanese pirates became a scourge on Chinese maritime activities, then the most advanced in the world. Piracy did not stimulate trade with China, and it would be two centuries before the Japanese closed their borders to foreign ships under the Tokugawa regime.

Further Reading
4. THE ARTS

Describing the arts for three cultures as different as China, Korea, and Japan over a thousand-year period poses many problems. It is probably best to see “The Arts” as high art tied to the elite class, public art tied to politics or religion, and low art of the commoners. All three of these countries, but especially China, hold history in high regard, making the retelling of the past and historical fiction fertile grounds for storytellers in different media. In fact, some historical dramas are really meant to criticize current leadership, meaning playwrights can act as journalists or even politicians.

China

Three forms of art were considered necessary for the Chinese elite to learn: calligraphy, poetry, and painting. All three were completed with the same tools, unlike in the West: brushes and ink on either paper or silk. Sometimes ink of many colors would be used as a watercolor-style painting. Many times part of the painting would have poetry either describing the scene in the painting or elaborating on the feeling the painting was meant to evoke. But paper and silk deteriorate over time or can be victims of wars and other property destruction. Some Chinese works from pre-Yuan times survive only in Japan or in written descriptions.

The painter Gu Kaizhi (344–c. 406) attempted to frame the subject’s essential character in his works. It is said that by adding three hairs to a man’s chin Gu could depict the subject’s inner wisdom. Perhaps Gu’s most famous work is painted on silk, named “Admonitions of the Instructress to the Court Ladies.” This artwork shows the tendency to practice all three arts together, because the panels of art alternate with text.

With the advent and rise of Chan Buddhism in the Late Tang and Song dynasties, monochrome art again took center stage. Simple black ink drawings of items like bamboo, or splashed ink onto silk to see its creation in a flash (with uninspiring versions thrown away). Eventually Chinese tired of or rejected the Chan Buddhist–inspired works (especially with the coming of Neo-Confucianism), although the Japanese continued to admire these paintings.

Evoking feelings did not mean all Chinese painters did not try to be “realistic” by trying to show a three-dimensional world or painting wondrous landscapes and nature in abundance. This was especially true of painters interested in Daoism. Oftentimes these landscapes would have small images of people, like a house, boat, or an old man, just barely visible. The paintings would also not lead the eye to any one place; all parts of the painting were to be perused. Fan Kuan (d. c. 1023) is perhaps best known for this style in his painting “Travelling among Streams and Mountains.” In Fan’s work, humans are placed in a smaller scope than of other artists. Fan painted the work in dark tones and used the painting to portray an unusually large setting, dramatizing the land.

Painting was so important to elites that “freshness” in Chinese art—meaning to try to be original in subject and style, especially important considering the number of sheer counterfeit paintings sold to collectors at the time—was reinforced at one point by an edict by the emperor. This edict stated that artists were not simply supposed to copy the style of those who preceded them, but
instead artists should attempt to paint their subjects in the way in which they actually appear.

Calligraphy is one of the most frequent expressions of elite Chinese art, surviving more often than paintings. The Chinese written language is made up of over ten thousand unique characters; the old style of Chinese writing was a tapestry of inking. Only the richest segments of society were able to learn to read and fewer were able to create the magnificent calligraphy of the true gentleman.

Calligraphy flourished in China after the fall of the Han dynasty. Chinese calligraphy was one of the major outlets for the Chinese upper classes, taking simple writing and transforming it into a unique art form. According to one Tang scholar, one written character of Chinese was enough to show the onlooker the character of the writer. In these calligraphic traditions, flow and rhythm were more important to the writer than even legibility.

In Chinese society, it was considered imperative to a gentleman to be able to be able to write passable poetry. Although calligraphy required only a few words or a short phrase, poetry would be longer, and written in a more official style of characters to be easily legible to the literate. Poetry became an important vehicle of expression; even Korean and Japanese men would create poetry in Chinese. Poetry appeared on paintings, and for many paintings, only the poetry, reprinted in wood-block or type-set books (both Chinese inventions), survives to the present day. In fact, this poetic ability was required to pass China's examination system, during the Tang dynasty. As a result, there are over forty-eight thousand different poems preserved from the Tang dynasty by 2,200 different authors.

One of the seminal poets of the Tang was Du Fu (712–770). Du wrote in an altogether new style of poetry, a regulated verse called lushi: eight lines of five or seven characters per line, with rules about tone, rhyme, and parallelism. Du wrote about all sorts of subjects but was most famous for his compassionate stories of commoners. One of his most poignant poems tells of an army recruiter preparing to take a man for military service. Only two males remain in the village: an old man (in the process of fleeing) and an infant. A grandmother offers to go to the army instead, insisting that she is useful because she can at least cook.

During the time of the Neo-Confucian revival, China experienced a new era in its history. During the Song dynasty (pronounced “soong”), a torrent of new poetry was created. In fact, at least 3,812 poems still exist. Much of this Song dynasty-era poetry focused on the difficulties encountered by ordinary Chinese. Some of these were set to song, which increased their familiarity—but it must be remembered that spoken Chinese differed from location to location, whereas written Chinese stayed the same, and that the tunes have not often survived to the present day. Other subjects that came up in Song poetry included remarks about government policy or other issues of the day.

Although some paintings, calligraphy, or poetry might become famous and pass into society as a whole, public art exists for the enrichment and education of the masses. In western portions of the Chinese Empire, Buddhism played an integral role along the Silk Road in caves made for adherents as well as proselytizing. Statues of Buddha spread rapidly starting during the Period of Disunity, and even more so in the Tang dynasty, as emperors often commissioned the works. Chinese art was briefly influenced by India. Yet this “skinny
Buddha” would be replaced in future dynasties by the common “fat, happy Buddha”—Chinese could not explain through their culture how one so thin could be successful or content.

At the city of Keifing during the Festival of the Lanterns, statues of Buddhist gods were constructed for all to see. These popular deities were shown in thanks of another successful year. Dragons were paraded showing their green cloth exteriors. These dragons were made with wicker interiors and made to show jubilation. From a distance, these dragons looked not just almost realistic, but also as though they were actually flying. To a peasant, however, this was quite the sight. From his pavilion, the emperor shared in the good times.

Although many of the large-scale sculptures and buildings of the Tang Buddhists have not survived to the present day—or were sealed off to protect them, as happened along the Silk Road—historians are able to see smaller artworks that still exist. Many of these sculptures set in bronze are of the Buddha. The Buddha in these pieces of art are skinnier and in a more agile form than those prevalent later. This cultural transformation shows how Chinese culture accepted Buddhism into its foundation. As years progressed, the Buddha fattened up, as his aspects became uniquely Chinese, especially for those in Pure Land Buddhism.

Architecture, in the form of pagodas, was also descended from Indian architecture, copied by monks who made pilgrimages to India. The top of the stupas, or buildings containing Buddha’s ashes, had many umbrella-like objects arranged on the roof, one on top of the other. So Tang dynasty pagodas featured floor with roofs made of colored tile alternating six, seven, or eight stories high; unfortunately, only copies of these structures still exist today in Japan. A few Song dynasty pagodas still remain, but most are from the Ming dynasty or later.

The Sui-Tang capital of Changan was planned before construction, intended to show the great power of China. At 30 square miles, it is the largest planned city in world history, allowing at least a million citizens. The layout of the city was intended to resemble the average Tang large house. There was a service area in the front where official business could be conducted and in the rear was a classic garden. Gardens on the properties of those rich enough to afford them included a pond. These gardens were meant to give the owner a sense of meditation, and the one built in the capital was meant to do this for the emperor. Architecture became a major part of the new capital. Places of worship were built for the Buddhism, Daoism, Zoroastrian, and even Christian faiths. However, the city lacked massive stone buildings, either to reflect feelings of the ephemeral popular in Buddhism or to prevent loss of life in the event of a major earthquake.

For the annual Chinese Festival of Lanterns, the common and noble people rejoiced for three days. There were troupes of dancers, as well as acrobats and singers. Often these performers danced or sang at the houses of rich citizens. However, even the urban poor could take part in the festivities. People often drank and sang during the nights as the city was lit up with charcoal, fireworks, and other fires. Celebrations seemed to unify Chinese society. Fancy costumes were crafted so that people could look their finest for the special days. Women wore special hats and went to see the celebrations. These special forms of wearable art were shown as sources of pride.
The victory of the Mongols over China coincided with the Golden Age of Chinese drama. At least 171 different Yuan plays survived to the present. One play from the thirteenth century was known as *The Romance of the Western Chamber*. This play by the writer Wang Shifu tells the tale of a romance between characters known as Ying-Ying, the girl, and Zhang, the boy. However, Ying-Ying’s mother refuses to allow the two to marry. In an earlier Tang version, the play ends tragically. However, in this version, the play concludes happily for all characters, including the conniving mother of Ying-Ying. Apparently the Mongols wanted happy endings!

During this golden age of drama a recurring theme was of justice. One included that of a judge based on Bao Zheng (999–1062). This character stopped even the most well crafted schemes of the corrupt. Other times, however, heroes are outlaws, defying laws to fight for what they believe is right. One of the innovations and important portions of theatre during this time is the use of music. Characters are tasked with singing, including Autumn in the Palace of Han, where the emperor sings. Even in *The Romance of the Western Chamber* the characters sing accompanied by instruments.

On the streets of Chinese cities, performers such as comedians, storytellers, and shadow puppeteers could be seen, helping to explain dramatic or comical episodes in Chinese history to the illiterate masses. Others like jugglers, acrobats, rope-walkers, and performers of animal acts could be encountered. Many times these performers could be seen near marketplaces or the entrance of bridges. There, people of all different economic classes would come to see the acts. These performers were frequently hired by the wealthy for the benefit of all during official celebrations, like holidays. These performers were able to spread Chinese culture even to the peasants with elaborate plays or music. Fortunetellers and mediums were common in China, for everyone from widows to the emperor himself.

Put together street theater, acrobats, singing, and drama, and Chinese opera comes to mind. Slightly different in presentation in the different provinces throughout China, opera played an important roll in bringing ideas about *Confucianism*, Daoism, and Buddhism to the masses, as well as Chinese literature and history (oftentimes the same thing). These exciting stories combined music, song, dance, acrobatics, comedy, and drama to entertain and educate. Music was in five tones and used silk to act as strings in traditional Chinese instruments. To this day Chinese opera holds an important place for the jumping off point of Chinese film, especially the martial arts spectatulars.

Art is enjoyed by elites and commoners alike, but it also can be made to sell. The Chinese knew the secrets of silk making (sericulture) centuries before any one else; the same was true of paper and porcelain. As craftsmen are wont to do, Chinese working in silk and porcelain spent many hours perfecting their craft, and adding color and patterns to their work. Three-color Tang ceramics became very popular for elites, in China as well as abroad; the years that followed brought even more fame (and sales) to Chinese pottery makers and sellers. The reason was the innovation of high-temperature kilns with the clays and glazes to take advantage of these newer techniques. They heralded what came to be called “china” in the rest of the world, or officially “porcelain.” During the Song dynasty, well-crafted porcelain became prevalent, both for tea-ware rich with iron glazing each piece turned out individually, patterns being difficult to imitate, to statuary of Buddhist *Bodhisattvas*, or Confucian
and Daoist leaders. Innovation would continue after the brief Mongol Period of the Yuan dynasty in the Ming dynasty, with its whiter white and later famous blue and white glazing. These ceramics were sought after then and are especially sought-after now, with “Ming vases” almost a television cliché.

Korea

Art in Korea followed the China pattern, when it was not just copying the Chinese style. Art was for the wealthy, but that art tended to reflect Chinese tastes. Public art, especially for Buddhist purposes, became the most important art form for the common people to enjoy. In fact, Korea became so well known for its Buddhist art that Buddhist monks began coming to Korea from all over Asia, as far away as India, to partake in the Buddhist temples, statuary, and paintings.

In 400 C.E., Korea was divided into three different kingdoms. The largest, Silla, was known for being a land rich in gold. This advantage played well for the Korean economy, as well as its art. Korean aristocracy wore elaborate jewelry, particularly using this indigenous gold. And because Chinese influence came more often by sea to Silla, this jewelry showed a surprising amount of artistic talent.

Buddhism came to Korea from China in the fourth century, and its acceptance accelerated in the next century. And as Korea periodically became a tributary state, Koreans went to China where they brought back more Buddhist ideas, statues, and texts (in Chinese). Temples and statues began to spring up across the peninsula. This trend accelerated once Korea was unified under Silla, with temples made out of ever-present granite. In 806, however, King Aejang banned new temple construction. That energy to proselytize moved in a new direction: Buddhist monks spread Buddhist carvings across Korea, fashioned bronze bells, and made many more statues of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas (the latter often tied to Korean shamanist “gods”). This period became known as the golden age of Korean art, even if few if any statues appeared out of gold (or even bronze) compared to granite.

The last version of public art was in theory for the elite that could read, but of course writing made these ideas spread eventually to the masses through public readings, storytelling, and dramas. Like Japan, early Korea had not developed writing. Instead, the Korean language, which is not related to Chinese in any way, eventually used Chinese characters based on sounds to write “Korean,” a system called idu (not used after the midfifteenth century). Educated Koreans thus could then write in Chinese and this form of Korean. Using woodblocks, the Koryo rendered a Korean version of the Buddhist cannon, first in 1087, and then, this version was destroyed by the Mongols (or lost, depending on the scholarly interpretation), a second was completed in 1251 and can still be viewed today. Koreans also created their first history, “History of the Three Kingdoms,” in 1145. Finally, Koreans argue they invented moveable metal type in 1234, before the Chinese and two centuries before the Germans.

However, the artwork that medieval Korea is best known for is its ceramics, of course influenced early on by neighboring China. These ceramics were considered of high quality and would sell to traders for transport abroad. Much of the pottery made in Korea was fired in “tunnel kilns” carved into a hill or mountainside.
Silla pottery was very elaborate, and the most exquisite examples come from the Three Kingdoms Period (for our purposes, 400–668). These ceramics include figurines of people and animals. Despite their small size, some of the statuettes still exist today, taken by archeologists from burial mounds. One of the most frequent forms of Silla ceramics found in burial sites was ceremonial urns, which became more prevalent after the introduction of Buddhism.

Ceramic roof tiles were used all across Korea, just as they were in ancient Rome. These tiles were used not only for religious sites or palaces, but also at places in the countryside. Some of these tiles were elaborately decorated and created as a form of art. One of the most popular decorations on the tiles was the lotus. Another was a face of a demon, meant to distract evil spirits.

During the time of the Silla Korea (668–918), Korean pottery began to use glazes, an idea borrowed from China. But the more elaborate tombs now favored by rich Koreans made grave robbing easy, so there are much fewer examples extant, even though some experts believe this period is the most truly “Korean” for the making of pottery and ceramics. It would be the next era, Koryo, when ceramics from Korea get their rightful fame. Even though the porcelain in the tenth and eleventh centuries reflect a great deal of borrowing from Song China, the Chinese highly prize these wares, considering them immensely well crafted. Ceramic experts claim they are among the most beautiful porcelains ever made!

Koreans exported many examples of celadon porcelain during the Koryo Period. It made an important contribution to the world of ceramics. By using this forgotten method, Korean pottery was able to become the prettiest, most complex in the world, especially that made in the eleventh century. Despite the heavy influence of Song China porcelain, celadon adopted a more Korean character over the next several centuries. In fact, celadon was the most widely made ceramic of Korea during this time. Three basic types remain the most popular forms of celadon. First is the differing green colors obtained from an iron oxide glaze difficult to duplicate. The more popular objects tend to be a celadon with soft green color, compared to the skies of the Korean peninsula during the fall, or, more commonly, to jade. The second form still uses this beautiful light green color, but through a controlled “mistake,” potters create a cracked pattern throughout the glaze over the piece. This form is called crackle glaze. Finally, the most distinctive celadon were decorated by overlaying glaze on contrasting clay bodies. Artists inlaid designs made up of small pieces of different colored clay adhered to the base clay of the piece. The layers were then carved away to reveal varying colors. Still, regardless of the popularity of celadon, other types of porcelains, including painted pieces, were also created.

However, Korean pottery suffered a severe setback with the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century. With the coming of the Mongols came the diminishing of Korean sovereignty and culture. Degradations of quality can be seen not only in Korean celadon, but also in their porcelains and other ceramics as well. Koreans were well aware that ideas from abroad and conquerors from abroad can mean the difference between art spreading outward or skills being diminished.

Japan

Japan was separated from other civilizations by the ocean. However, Japan was also indelibly changed by cultural diffusion. From the start to the end of
the period in question, Japan borrowed ideas from China and Korea, except in those times when the sea connection was breached—when China or Korea faced internal disorder or when the Mongols controlled them. Buddhism and Confucianism took Japanese elites by storm. In terms of the arts, Japan was influenced greatly by Chinese painting, sculpture, and architecture, for example. In early Heian architecture one can see foreign designs clearly showing the Chinese Tang dynasty influence. In fact, Tang-era buildings are better represented in Japan than China, due to losses to the tall Tang pagodas through war and earthquake. In Japanese sculptures, wood replaced the more traditional Chinese mediums of clay, bronze, and stone. Sometimes these sculptures were painted. However, the onlooker was to see the original wood grain.

Japan’s first system of writing came over the Sea of Japan from China, most likely by way of Korea. Japanese elites had to learn Chinese to have writing. This system of symbols represented words instead of sounds. From these characters arose an original Japanese form of calligraphy. Just as in China, the writer’s character and intellectual setting could be gleaned from the way that they drew characters. Japanese women, however, likely did not learn Chinese. They, or perhaps the famous monk Kukai, leader of Shingon Buddhism exposed to syllabaric languages in India, simplified a small number of Chinese characters to create a sort of alphabet so Japanese could be written. Unlike in other cultures, East and West, women wrote most of the Japanese literature from around 1000 onward.

The world’s first novel was Japan’s Tale of Genji by Lady Murasaki (her given name is unknown), written probably from 1008 to 1021. This novel has been translated into modern Japanese (and many other languages) and is still read to this day. It is a source of Japanese cultural pride, although attacked at first due to the sexual conduct in the book. It is a source of Japanese cultural pride, although attacked at first due to the sexual conduct in the book. The story takes place over 75 years, following three generations of the imperial family and five hundred characters in fifty-four chapters originally written in haphazard order, most likely to amuse ladies of the court and not for publication. The story became famous because the beautiful poetry—for a long time considered the only important Japanese language literature—written within the sprawling tale. Only later it became an icon as the first book in Japanese.

In brief, Tale of Genji is a story about looking for love where it is forbidden or unlikely to be found. The hero is not one by standard Western definition. His heroism lies in his capacity to be deeply moved and emotional through poetry, painting, music, and affairs of the heart. Most important, the novel helps to explain the aesthetics of Heian Japan, at least for the 5 percent of elite Japanese living in the capital. Elite women have their eyebrows shaved and drawn on higher than before and their teeth blackened. They wear many layered robes of fine colored silk but can be almost mortally embarrassed if one layer does not quite match the rest. Instead of the tune, the smell, or the sight, Heian Japanese elites, in contrast to Chinese, admired the transient nature of life heard in the last few notes of a song fading away, fragrance wafting on the breeze, or shadows present at dusk or dawn.

For Buddhist monks practicing esoteric Shingon Buddhism under Kukai, one form of art borrowed from abroad but manipulated for the monastic Japanese audience was the mandala. These mandalas were painted, trying to represent the universe as an art form including the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. In the center of the “Womb Mandala,” a lotus is situated in the center, to represent the heart of the universe. In the “Diamond Mandala,” a full 1,314 different deities
are represented. Kukai believed that words could not explain Shingon Buddhism, a special sect of Buddhism that would not survive long after his passing. Instead pictures would make the intellectual and emotional understanding of Shingon more easily.

The **Heian Period** came to a violent end with the rise of a warrior culture. These fighting men, slowly given the name samurai, began to engage with **Zen Buddhism**. Zen is all about making right actions, staying in the moment, and not worrying about death, all things a warrior needs to do. With the spread of Zen Buddhism came Zen gardens. These creative uses of rock and sand were meant to be true representations of patience and the awe of creation.

Like in China, drama flourished in medieval Japan but became a different aesthetic experience during the Ashikaga Period. The **noh** form of drama became popular in the fourteenth century, growing out of folk dances that paid homage to **Shinto** gods to provide an abundant harvest. In noh plays, again an upper-class phenomenon, Zen Buddhist simplicity reigned. The stage sits open on three sides, with the only background scenery an old pine tree painted on a wall. An all-male cast, with the lead either wearing a mask or holding his face frozen as if he has a mask, expresses feeling by symbolic gestures and movements while wearing a brilliant costume. The actors are accompanied by a chorus that chants narration in sing-song voices to help explain what is going on. The noh experience included five or six plays, which lasted for 6 hours, usually divided between stories about a god, a warrior, a woman, an insane person, and a demon.

As for samurai going to war, the samurai’s entire outfit was a work of art. Helmets and decorative armor showed different creativity across the main three southern islands of Japan. Above all, the sword of the samurai was immensely prized. Many samurai believed the sword a living object, imbued with supernatural powers. Japanese sword makers were revered as an honored class in society. These crafters went through elaborate ceremonies while creating these masterworks, the highest quality swords ever made. To make the blade, these sword makers followed an elaborate method of alternating layers of soft and hard steel to provide a sword with flexibility and superior sharpness. These special warrior swords were highly prized family heirlooms, passed down from generation to generation. They also fetched high prices when sold to China or Korea.

Japanese folding fans were invented in the seventh century. The Japanese creator modeled the fan after the physiology of a bat. At the imperial court, emperors would give folding fans away. Many times these fans were adorned with a favorite poem, a family crest, or a certain painting, all only visible when opened. Folding fans were too expensive for the common people of Japan, as were samurai swords, but both proved valuable for Japan to trade China or Korea for Buddhism texts, statuary, and porcelain. Japan’s arts were thus mostly for elites, no matter their origin.

**Further Reading**


5. SOCIETY

To explore East Asian society, it is necessary to do two things: describe Confucianism and its role in ordering society and specify individually each of society’s layered components, starting from the lowest (household), and conclude with how those lower layers interact on the state level. This method will not yield a perfect description of society. First, the thousand years of this study means many changes in society occurred: we will have to look at what was true for a longer time than not. This essay’s length also does not allow for regional or ethnic variation. In China, besides the majority Han people, are people living in China for centuries, many who look the same to the foreign eye, but whose cultures were (and are) significantly different. The Hakka and Uighurs are two quick examples, the former an ethnic group of north China pushed into southern China and becoming a boating culture, and the latter a nomadic group from the far west along the Silk Road. Even Japan has the Ainu, the original inhabitants of the four great islands, pushed north and east to Hokkaido by 1400. And the society’s description will be based on times where government was reasonably stable, not always true in China for over a third of the years in question.

Confucianism, one of the three great philosophical/religious traditions of East Asia, had by 400 indoctrinated the Chinese at all levels of society and even government, by 500 heavily influenced the different Korean states and their inhabitants, and by 600 had started converting the Japanese, helping create their nascent state. Confucianism in its simplest conception attempted to provide the alleged order of the past to the present so people understood their place in family and society, thus mitigating the possible chaos of the times. Thus it proposed a hierarchical system, the idea of knowing one’s place in society with patriarchy and filial piety (respect for one’s parents). These ideas became explicit in Confucianism’s Five Relationships: ruler to subject, father to son, husband to wife, elder brother to younger brother, and friend to friend. Notice that all the relationships but the final one showed hierarchy. Women only fit into the system in a subordinate role (as wife). Each of these relationships was reciprocal, however, with the subordinate owing the superior respect and obedience, while the superior owed the subordinate benevolence. A benevolent ruler might forgive taxes from a drought-stricken region, for example.

Benevolence and ritual played key roles in Confucianism. In fact, benevolence under Confucianism is similar to the golden rule of Western thought, only in the negative form: “Do not do unto others what you would not wish yourself.” Those below needed to treat you with loyalty and obedience, performing the proper rituals. These included 3 years of mourning when a parent died as part of filial piety. The ruler needed to observe the correct rituals for the state to please the gods and allow his rule to continue. But ritual should not be observed blindly; real, sincere feeling had to occur during the rites or they were useless.
Confucianism placed emphasis on good government, morality, and ethics. The ruler, like the father, also served as a model of behavior, teaching morality through his actions. Confucius did not believe laws prevented immorality; laws just created criminals. If those at the top of the social hierarchy acted morally and with benevolence, the lower ranks of society would behave well and not cheat or steal. Chinese government ignored this aspect of Confucianism, believing it too optimistic, as it ignored Confucius’s hope that a scholar-official would be allowed to rule.

The household serves as the lowest level of society. As a moralistic society, albeit with a specific law code for most of its history, China often kept track of its subjects through household registration (listing members of the household older than the age of 5 with their respective occupations), whether to implement positive projects like the *equal field system*, taxation systems like the *corvee*, or collective responsibility programs like the *li-jia* system, where any criminals not apprehended would result in punishment of many families for the crime. At the very bottom of the Confucian hierarchy within the household were girls and women (see *Women, role of*).

Throughout East Asian traditional society, the birth of a girl was not as happy a day as the birth of a boy. Male children were needed to continue the family name and take care of the ancestors, including the parents in old age and then death. In difficult times for the poorest peasant family, a daughter might be the victim of infanticide or be sold into service or prostitution (or concubinage in China if an elite could be found that wanted more permanent sexual partners). The girl would then have to work until adulthood (and perhaps beyond) as a poorly treated maid, or become one of the extra wives or concubines of a rich, old man, the difference being a concubine could be bought and sold.

The first 7 years for a daughter—assuming no infanticide or the regular deaths children faced in the years before modern medicine—were probably the most joyful. East Asian families let children of both sexes—although perhaps allowing even more freedom for boys—play, with a little work thrown in the more poverty a family faced. Seven years did not mean seven Western years, however, children’s ages were measured one for the birth, one at the first lunar New Year, and another year every lunar New Year, so a child 7 years of age might be only 5 years old in the Western reckoning.

The years of childhood after age 7 meant hard work, within the home with domestic tasks if the family had some money and in the fields and in the home if part of a poor-to-average peasant family. The family might make clothes to wear or sell out of local materials, be they hemp, cotton, or silk. And if a girl was not sold to a wealthy family or worse a brothel, she would expect to marry. A middle-income peasant family (or wealthier) would employ a matchmaker to find a suitable wife for their son from a neighboring village. If wealthy, the tie with another wealthy family would insure the continued prosperity of both. If normal peasants, an agreeable match would be all that was necessary. If poor peasants, the family might just seek someone from a nearby village. When the potential groom’s family of average peasant status or higher was satisfied with the match, it would send to the bride’s family a set of traditional, symbolic gifts like lacquer and glue to show the joining of the two in marriage, as well as a small dowery for the loss of a worker in the bride’s home.

The newlywed was usually just a teen-aged girl who had no choice over her marriage partner, and this part of life was the most difficult, especially if
married to the eldest son or a family wealthy enough to own a house and land for all the brothers to benefit from. Not only would she be expected to start a family and have children (hopefully sons) almost immediately—with all the dangers childbirth entailed—she was also run ragged by her new mother-in-law who had her working almost as hard as a slave. Because three generations—the father and mother, the newlyweds, and their new children—all lived under the same roof in an average peasant and higher family, the mother-in-law had the power as the elder and often abused that power. She would complain that the new wife was useless and did not do her chores properly. There were cases of suicide or fleeing back to her parents’ home due to this cruelty, which ironically the mother-in-law no doubt herself endured when she was a newly-wed. Conditions would likely improve upon the birth of a son, and of course the mother was owed respect by her children (and her nephews and nieces, if not adults yet). The birth of a series of daughters might lead her in-laws to send her back to her parents, divorced for not producing an heir or for lousy cooking (see Food)! But a new wife of a second son of average peasant background or lower would avoid the outward sadistic treatment—or just passive aggressive behavior—living in a home without a mother-in-law.

The woman’s middle years were still times of difficulty and sadness: surviving multiple births and experiencing the likely death of some of her children. If a peasant, she kept the home as well as worked the fields. If an elite, she might get some education to pass on to her sons and daughters, and before the Song dynasty and Neo-Confucianism—which often confined her in her own home because of footbinding—she might play a role running the family or extended family.

Becoming a mother-in-law as her eldest son married and brought his new wife to live in the home was the high point of many East Asian women’s lives. But it also meant, as she and her husband kept aging, her husband might die first. The life of an East Asian widow could go in two directions. If she had a son, her son and daughter-in-law would be expected to care for her until death. If she did not have a son, and lacked money after her husband’s death, life would turn out full of difficulties. Widows were forbidden to marry, so could not hope to have a second family if their husbands died first.

The eldest son within the household held the highest status for his generation or lower—as seen in the Five Relationships—and he could expect to lead the house when his eldest son was old and wise enough to take control of the family. But there were expectations placed on the eldest son, as in most cultures, particularly taking care of aged parents and generations that preceded his: the so-called ancestor worship. If in a rich peasant or higher household, he was also responsible for taking care of his younger siblings, although he did have a large measure of control over them in matters such as marriage. A rich family would also invest in education, learning to read and write, as well as how to understand the Confucian classics. Government positions, starting in the early Tang dynasty with around one-third of such positions, soon required passing through the examination system. By the late Song, all jobs needed degree holders, and the study of Neo-Confucianism.

China’s household system comes to the fore in legal matters. If a member of a household commits a crime of violence or property, the perpetrator usually confesses. If not, the leader of the household might pressure him to confess. If that did not work, the state would torture a confession out of him. Punishment
would shame the criminal, and most important his family, as this local level justice had its greatest effect on the family’s reputation.

A group of households made up a village. The imperial government could not reach down far enough to appoint officials at this, or even district level, in an era of slow transportation and nonexistent modern communication technology. The richest and most established family’s head would lead the village as a gentry, whose jobs (usually unpaid by the state) included tax collector, police, and judge, all in one. It made sense therefore that not all the local tax revenue made it to imperial coffers. The villagers, especially those living in south China, also needed to work together to get the crops planted and harvested. This was even more true in the south, because farming rice takes much coordination throughout the growing season—when to plant, flood fields, dry fields, and harvest worked better when villagers worked as a team. And of course the corvee needed to be dealt with in a fair manner at the village level to avoid one family losing more than one worker at a given time.

The next step up, a group of villages, would have a centralized market within a few hours, sometimes a small town and other times just another village. There peasants could exchange news, gossip, and goods, not to mention finding eligible marriage partners for their children. If a town, it had a wall around it, so landowners could live in relative safety from unhappy tenant farmers (or nomadic invasions, if in north China). In the early years of Chinese unification, one market town (or just “market village”) and its assorted villages likely made up a district, the highest level of government still controlled by local gentry. In the middle of a successful dynasty, with the resulting population explosion, it might be four or more market towns/series of villages in the district, all run by a local gentry. At this level in China, the Confucian class hierarchy came into use. The four classes, from top to bottom, were the scholars (essentially gentry—those who owned land but rented it out rather than cultivate it themselves), peasants, artisans, and merchants. This hierarchy had nothing to do with wealth, but on importance Confucians placed on the profession for helping the state. Peasants, except for a brief period in the Song dynasty, provided the majority of the taxes for China (or any East Asian premodern country) through agriculture, not even counting the food grown by the hard-working class. Artisans were tolerated, but Confucianists never trusted merchants, considering any profit they made to be theft or at the very least unfair dealings—after all, merchants created wealth by buying low and selling high. Not on this descending scale because Chinese considered them so unimportant or unsavory were soldiers, bandits, prostitutes, and other undesirables. But this is a class system, not a caste system. It was possible to move within this hierarchy within one’s lifetime, or more important, move one’s family within a generation or two. All it took was hard work and luck to become a rich peasant and perhaps leading gentry of a village, or intelligence with education to pass the exams and become a scholar-official at the central government level.

In Korea and Japan, the Confucian hierarchy was different—and much more permanent—in part because these two countries never eliminated hereditary offices like China did by the time of the Song dynasty (except for the emperor). Korea’s hierarchy placed at the top the civil officials and the military officers, together called the yangban (the two orders). Next came a small group, the chun-gin (middle people), lower ranking government officials. Below these hereditary
aristocrat ranks came the commoners and peasants called the yangmin (good people), whose taxes and corvee labor supported the government and aristocracy. Their poverty was obvious: trade was conducted usually in barter. At the very bottom, making up at least thirty percent of the population, were the chonmin. The “lowborn” were made up of slaves descended matrilineally, government workers in mines and porcelain factories, and workers made outcast because of Buddhism, like the burakumin in Japan: butchers, tanners, leather-workers, and entertainers. Japan’s four steps of the class system resembled China’s, but the top of the class structure changed from the early years (starting c. 700) with the effete aristocracy on top and to the warrior class for Japan’s militarized period after 1185. The rest of the hierarchy followed China’s, and outside the list were the entertainers and finally the burakumin, so outcast that contemporary maps did not reveal their villages.

In China, all classes mixed in the many urban centers, cities walled off from the countryside that allowed for traded goods to move and be sold throughout the huge empire. The small size of Korea and Japan relative to China meant that trade had not progressed to the imperial level. In fact, most trade in Korea and Japan was by barter. Most spectacularly were the capitals of China’s various dynasties, all facing south. These cities could hold a million-plus subjects and were defended by miles of city walls and towers. Japan decided that capitals are what countries needed, so they created capitals on the model of China, but on a reduced scale without walls. Koreans also copied Chinese capital cities.

The top ranks of the hierarchy ran their respective countries through inherited position in the case of Korea and Japan, and by the examination system in China for much of the period in question (save the emperor, of course). Passing a series of examinations, usually on Confucianism, allowed the degree-holder the right to be placed in the numerous positions the central government staffed. The early Tang dynasty divided China into first ten (later fifteen) large circuits that resemble modern day provinces in their borders; over 350 prefectures; and more than fifteen hundred counties managed by magistrates and other officials, the lowest part of the central bureaucracy chosen by exam. There were rules about how to choose these officials: they could not be from the same area as the job; they had to change positions periodically; and they could not work with assistants from their same region.

For the top degree-holders with experience, or mandarins, central government positions in the capital would be the ultimate promotion. Under the emperor were three departments: Department of State, Imperial Secretariat, and the Imperial Chancellery. The last, under the chancellor, was next in command after the emperor and served as a chief advisor. The Secretariat helped create policy and write imperial decrees. The main, daily, essential tasks of government were entrusted to the Department of State, which included six ministries: Officials, Finance, Rites, Army, Justice, and Public Works. The Ministry of Officials appointed, promoted, and demoted the officials that helped run the government through the use of the examination system. The Ministry of Finance gathered both census data and the taxes that allowed the state to function. The Ministry of Rites attended to Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist matters, including state ceremonies and rituals. These state rituals became increasingly important over the years as emperors moved away from the public worship of their own imperial ancestors, and these public ceremonies became the way to
show the emperor was the father of the nation in a very Confucian manner, and thus held the mandate of heaven. The Ministries of Army, Justice, and Public Works all functioned as might be expected by their names, with the exception that the Ministry of Army dealt with the organizing the military just in times of peace.

In a few dynasties, the Confucian scholars at the top of the government faced an implacable foe: the eunuchs. Originally created to guard the emperor’s wives and concubines, there numbers sometimes grew and were used as secret police to help certain heirs realize their dreams of becoming emperor, only to find out too late that the eunuchs would continue to control them, even on the throne itself. If the dynasty’s emperors were smart enough to avoid using eunuchs, palace intrigue might continue, but this time between consorts, wives, and concubines and their respective children. That is not to say that Confucian scholars/government officials were blameless when it came to law breaking, especially corruption. One could argue that a Confucianist’s first duty is to provide for his family, so stealing a small percentage of tax receipts would be in keeping character rather than an immoral, illegal act frowned upon by his colleagues.

Just because the focus to this point has been on Confucian order does not mean Daoism and Buddhism not are practiced by the Chinese, or that Buddhism does not have an especially important influence on elite Koreans and Japanese. None of the religions mentioned, even Shinto in Japan or Korean shamanism, require repudiation of other faiths. One could be married in Japan through a Shinto wedding and be laid to rest in a Buddhist funeral. The focus is on Confucianism more because of the three traditions, it is the least religious and plays a larger role in the secular world than the other two or indigenous religions. Besides, for the lower classes that make up the majority of the populations, Buddhism and Daoism are too intellectual for much of the 400 to 1400 years. However, for those Confucianists so entrenched in the government—and for those who could not get government positions due to the lack of them or through failure at some point in the examination system—retirement meant moving to a more secluded part of the empire and starting the practice of Daoism. It might not be Religious Daoism, with its fixation on finding the magical elixir to live forever, although it might. It might just be the fondness for nature, painting, and obscure poetry inspired so much by Daoist thought.

The intellectualism of Buddhism slowly waned with the introduction and growing property in East Asia of Pure Land Buddhism. It believed the world was in terrible shape. Luckily Buddha had foreseen this and explained secretly to a few followers that one specific Bodhisattva (being of wisdom) could help ordinary people achieve enlightenment instead of the “hard” way by becoming a monk or nun. By believing in his saving grace and reciting his name (Amituofo Buddha in Chinese, Amita in Korean, and Amida in Japanese) in true devotion, a follower could be reborn in the land of paradise, the Pure Land of the West. Many Asians did not understand this stay was temporary, assuming the Pure Land was heaven. Theoretically they would come back to earth as Bodhisattvas and help others obtain enlightenment before permanently seeking it themselves. Just at the high point of Pure Land Buddhism in China, Emperor Wuzong defrocked over 250,000 Buddhist monks and nuns (leaving only forty-nine monasteries and eight hundred monks), sold off their lands, destroyed 4,600 temples, and wrecked forty-thousand shrines. His death in 846 saved Buddhism in China, but not Pure Land; instead Chan Buddhism (called
Seon or Son Buddhism in Korea and Zen Buddhism in Japan) gained adherents to be the most popular form of Buddhism in China. Even though this form of Buddhism was really for monks willing to put hours and hours of meditation to work, churches of Chan sprung up in China. It must be remembered that however peaceful Buddhism proclaims itself, in Chinese history secret Buddhist societies have helped organized disgruntled (or starving!) peasants to fight against the state, and in the long run have become successful.

That revolutionary impulse of Buddhism is not really found in Korea or Japan. Korea first accepted Buddhism early from China and were the key cultural transmitters of it to Japan. Silla Korea, as the imitation Tang dynasty, government also controlled the Buddhist orders and temples. It used art, dance, music, and literature to try to bring Pure Land Buddhism to the masses. Only in the fourteenth century did Chan overtake Pure Land in popularity in Korea. Pure Land Buddhism came to Japan much later, during the wars to conclude the Heian Period. It pushed its adherents to chant “Namu Amida Butsu,” or nembutsu when said quickly. It required ten pure moments to achieve the help from Amida, along with one’s good works. Only a few years later, during the start of the Kamakura Period, a splinter group called True Pure Land Buddhism also pushed chanting the nembutsu. Its difference lay in priests being able to marry (priests inherited control of the church) and in how only through the hard work of Amida could one achieve rebirth in the Pure Land. A criminal, because of his evil, was closer to being sent to the Pure Land if he only believed because nothing he did in his life would warrant such a reward. Nothing but the nembutsu and the gift granted by Amida would allow entrance into the Pure Land. These two forms together quickly became the most popular sect of Buddhism in Japan.

The change in sects of Buddhism practiced in Japan also helps explain the change in the treatment of the people. When heavily esoteric forms of Buddhism dominated the capital, the aristocrats treated the peasants as animals and ignored them whenever possible. What these Heian Period aristocrats considered beautiful was not necessarily the obvious. Instead of the tune, the smell, or the sight, Heian Japanese elites, in contrast to Chinese, admired the transient nature of life heard in the last few notes of a song fading away, fragrance wafting on the breeze, or shadows present at dusk or dawn. Because marriages were arranged as part of political expedience, men and women in Heian Japan apparently had many secret affairs, tales of courtly love. But a man would fall in love with a women not based on her beauty—women often hid behind screens when courting—but on her writing style or poetry recited. Genji excelled at dance, poetry, and calligraphy, and could cry in front of people should his love be out of reach. Genji is not a hero by standard Western definition that always puts his feelings out of reach to fight the bad guy.

Buddhism and these forms of aesthetics did not push into the lower classes for many centuries to come. Once the military took control of Japan from the twelfth century onward, the introduction of Pure Land Buddhism became very popular among the peasantry. But the warrior, and some artists, pursued Zen Buddhism instead. Although meditation had long been a practice of Japanese Buddhists, it was not until the twelfth century that Zen first arrived in Japan from China. It pushed the ideas of meditation and koans (literally “public cases,” but really logic puzzles meant to snap the mind out of its harmful logic), the keys needed for enlightenment. Warriors became the chief nonmonk
practitioners of Zen, needing the clarity of meditation, the elimination of fear of death, and the ability to make repetitive moves until one could attack without thinking. Zen also had a large impact on Japanese arts and culture of common folk, including noh theater.

As can be seen, East Asian societies share far more than they differ, at least in the period 400 to 1400. The Confucian-based system of control—in the family, village, and country—does not stop the practice of other religious traditions in China, Korea, or Japan. But there are major differences. The warrior on top of the Korea and late Japan hierarchy contrasts with the Chinese soldier far below even fourth place. Chinese soldiers behaved little better than bandits. It is bandits that Chinese peasants often became when high taxes and a brutal economy left them landless and without hope, living where two provinces come together to avoid patrols from either area. It made sense that Confucianists, so enamored with order, would look down on those who could challenge such order. Usually the dynastic cycle, as explained in the “Historical Overview” section, meant the dynasty had little time left once the bandits became prevalent, and a new dynasty with renewed effort to help the poor peasants for a generation would occur.

Further Reading

6. SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

China

China led the world in science and technology for centuries. Some historians have wondered why it was not China in the fifteenth century to discover the rest of the world (instead of the Europeans), or why capitalism did not develop until China was turned into a semicolonies at the end of the nineteenth century. Both questions make the mistake of assuming that the path taken by European countries to trade and conquer the world or move from feudalism to capitalism was the “normal” path. It turns out that two of China’s greatest strengths for the longest time—Confucianism and its population—would serve to prevent either from occurring. It proved cheaper to hire a man to do heavy lifting than to build a machine. More money could be made owning and renting out land than traditional corporations pay to investors. Confucian distrust of merchants prevented continuing exploration or even the ships necessary for long-distance trade. An empire has more to react to than a small nation-state; tremendous Chinese borders needed defending for thousands of miles, more than an individual Western European nation could imagine. Finally, although these inventions were first created and used in China, that fact does not preclude independent creation 1,000 years later by Europeans for many of the
items. Obviously, silk, paper, gunpowder, porcelain, and the compass all came across the Silk Road to Europe long before they spurred on Europeans to try and make these items themselves.

Several technological innovations predating the fifth century in China are worth mentioning before describing the advances between 400 and 1400. Silk and sericulture developed approximately 2700 B.C.E. remained a secret of the Chinese culture for millennia. Paper made out of cotton and plant fiber for writing was probably invented in 105; earlier versions were used for protecting bronze mirrors or making paper clothing (including shoes), blankets, and even armor. The Chinese also used it for sanitary purposes like toilet paper. Cast iron allowed China to make iron tools in large numbers by the fourth century B.C.E. The waterpower made smelting easier by 31 C.E. The waterwheel was in widespread use by the third century to mill minerals and grain. Related to the waterpower and invented in the fourth century B.C.E. were pneumatic and hydraulic pistons. Three hundred years later came the belt drive (first century B.C.E.). Pistons and the belt drive were not seen in Europe for at least another 1,500 years. Chinese used the chain pump—an application of the waterwheel to move water, rather than power other machinery—to irrigate land. The Chinese developed a system of agriculture for intensive hoeing and row cultivation—not endorsed in Europe until the eighteenth century—in the sixth century B.C.E. In addition to the iron hoe, made possible through cast iron, the efficient harnessing of horses for the plow or transport of crops improved the efficiency, although farm animals proved much less common historically in China than Europe. The now-familiar collar harness may have been in use as early as the first century B.C.E., as was steel made from cast iron and the drilling for and use of natural gas.

Mathematics was already highly advanced by the fifth century. Decimals, places, zero, pi, extraction of higher roots, negative numbers, algebra of geometry, were all long in use far before Europe or even the Arab world.

The compass had been in use since the fourth century B.C.E., with the great advancement of having the magnetized needle floating in water to allow more accurate readings developed by the eighth century. It should come as no surprise that Chinese science had discovered and studied the declination of the earth’s magnetic field in the ninth century, even though the Chinese used their compass to determine south. By the eleventh century, Chinese scientists understood that heating or cooling iron influences its magnetic field. That same century, experiments with magnetic fields succeeded in making compasses without lodestones.

China, with lots of rivers and gorges, needed bridges, something science and mathematics excelled at making possible. In the sixth century came the invention of the suspension bridge. But other bridges were also possible. In 610, Li Chun designed a segmented stone arch bridge that still stands today, 500 years before anything similar in Europe could be built. It is important for its use of a segmental arch rather than the semicircular arch familiar in Roman architecture as well as four semicircular arches at either end. The semicircular arch allowed for a stronger structure using less material while the four smaller arches further reduced material and weight as well as to reduce the likelihood of flood damage by allowing the water to flow more freely. This Great Stone Bridge spans almost 125 feet, greater than the largest Roman whole arch bridge still standing. The so-called Marco Polo Bridge, a bridge near Beijing described
by the Genoan traveler built in 1189, includes eleven segmental arches and spans 700 feet. More amazing still, both of these bridges are still in use today!

Some bridges did not quite survive as long. A pontoon bridge—built by attaching boats together, secured on shore with huge iron anchors in the shape of oxen—survived 350 years of use over the turbulent Yellow River. It was washed away in the eleventh century during a tremendous flood, dragging its iron oxen anchors along with it! These anchors ended up deep in the river, but though they could be located recovering them would require some innovation. Using principles later put into use in the 1950s to recover the ship Andrea Doria, the Chinese filled two large boats with earth. Divers connected lines to the sunken anchors and then the earth was slowly removed. The increased buoyancy caused the oxen to rise enough that they could be dragged to shore by simply steering the boats that way. Once close enough they could be dragged out from the shallows.

Often considered iconic of American ingenuity, the paddle wheel boat has been invented by the Chinese in the fifth century. The designs used varied tremendously in size and complexity. The first of these boats were used militarily in the early part of the century. Later designs used more and more men to power them. Where as the Mississippi riverboat centuries latter had one or two wheels, many of these boats had more—one had eleven!

The lock, or pound-lock, familiar to anyone who has traveled by or near canals, was developed in the tenth century, hardly surprising given the civilization’s reliance on river travel. The locks work somewhat like an elevator or escalator made of water. The vessel enters one side, while the other side is closed. Then the entrance is closed, and the water level altered to match the other side. When these levels matched the second gate would be opened and the vessel could continue its journey.

Centuries before the Siemens-Martin process for steel manufacturing (regenerative furnace), a similar system was in use in China. Wrought iron and cast iron were mixed to create high-carbon steel. This was made possible in the fifth century by the double-acting piston bellows, already in wide use, to provide a constant stream of air. Keeping constant temperature makes the Siemens-Martin process possible. From this model, it is easy to see how the Chinese understood the basics behind a steam engine.

Some scientific or technological advances of the Chinese were more mundane. In the sixth century the modern match was developed. There is evidence to suggest that phosphorescent paints were in use in the tenth century. Almost taken for granted these days but a really important precursor to modern textiles is the spinning wheel. It is hard to date exactly, but a conservative estimate would be the eleventh century. It likely was an adaptation of the technology that had already been being used in sericulture to wind silk for centuries. Belt drive technology had been available since the first century B.C.E. and allowed these spinning machines to operate at extraordinary speed.

Some innovations remained unique to East Asia. The “permanent” lamp was an effort to conserve the fuel oil used for light. The process of burning the oil for light produced so much heat that half the oil was lost to evaporation. The solution to this was simple. The oil reservoir was surrounded with a second reservoir of water. This innovation has never been adopted in the West! Today, this water-cooled equipment is echoed in all manner of machinery, from the familiar automobile radiator to the liquid-cooled super computer.
The mechanical clock was developed in the eighth century. Although it could be used for telling time it was designed primarily as an astronomical and astrological instrument. Chinese astrology places more significance on the time of conception rather than birth so it was important to track the likeliest moments the emperor, his wives, and his concubines started life. Astrology meant the Chinese watched the heavens closely and were the first to record observations of comets, solar eclipses, and supernova. Over the centuries several of these clocks, at first powered by water, faced troubles with the freezing of water with the changing seasons. Later versions of these clocks would use mercury as the powering liquid. These were not wall clocks, but three-story towers. It would be over 500 years before the technology made its way to Europe for tracking the hours in monasteries.

One of these clocks featured an innovation now common on roadways all over the world: the chain drive. In 976, one scientist needed a more efficient way to transfer power to his clock, and he stumbled upon the by-now-familiar system that transfers power from the pedals to the wheel of bicycles everywhere began.

Just as astrology tries to describe the person by observing the universe, Chinese scientists looked to using items in the world to extend life and possibly cheat death. Scientists, especially Daoists seeking the secret elixir of life, began categorizing plants, herbs, animals, and even parts of animals, to determine if they contained any useful properties. Thus was born Chinese medicine. Some of its practice causes troubles today, when rare or endangered animals are killed for small body parts supposedly giving the cure for impotence or cancer, but for centuries this medicine was important to Chinese culture.

Chinese science and medicine depend on what Western Europeans today might consider superstitions, but Chinese have been using techniques based on these simple observations about people and the world in general for thousands of years. The Chinese believed that energy or qi moves throughout the body at different times, and that qi can affect different organs or body parts. Through belief in the yin (negative energy) and yang (positive energy), as well as the five elements that make up all matter (metal, wood, water, fire, and earth), Chinese doctors use acupuncture (stabbing with little needles) and moxibustion (burning small cones of the mugwort herb) on the right places to affect matter and energy.

Chinese medicine understood much about the human body even before the medieval period. It understood the circulatory system (sixth century B.C.E.), circadian rhythms (humans function on a 24-hour physiological and psychological cycle that is highly dependent on the cycle of light and dark or day and night), and endocrinology (science of hormones, glands, and organs) by 400. By the seventh century Chinese physicians could correctly diagnose diabetes and would recommend dietary changes similar to those still recommended today. Diagnosis was made by the sweet taste of the urine; the physician would recommend the patient forgo starchy and sweet foods as well as alcoholic beverages. Possibly earlier, but certainly by the seventh century, physicians were using animal thyroids to treat goiters. Even more striking, in the 900s Chinese doctors began vaccinating against smallpox. The method was simple. Because they could distinguish between the major and minor strains of the virus, scabs from those already exposed to the minor strain would be wrapped in cotton and placed in the nose of the patient to be inoculated.
against the disease. As today, every possible precaution was taken to prevent outright infection. In fact, the ideal “donor” of the scabs would have been one who had been inoculated himself.

Daoists also discovered gunpowder in their alchemist attempts to find the elixir of immortality around the ninth century. It is made up of potassium nitrate, charcoal, and sulfur. The Chinese made fireworks out of gunpowder, but there was an important military application as well. China always faced trouble from the north and the nomadic horsemen. Any way to disrupt their attacks, especially by hurting and scaring the cavalry, was useful. In the eleventh century Chinese made incendiary bombs to throw at siege engines and smoke bombs. By the end of the twelfth century, Chinese had cast iron grenades to throw at adversaries that could kill or maim many. In the thirteenth century, when parts of China tried to withstand the Mongol invasion, soldiers used rockets to attack horses from a distance; more experienced military men used the first guns in combat and cannonballs filled with explosives.

Movable type—so often attributed to Johannes Gutenberg—was first invented in China. Block printing on silk and paper had existed since the 700s. In fact, remarkable techniques were developed to produce near-photographic reproductions of three-dimensional objects as well as prints with three or four colors. When block printing proved impractical ink, rubbings of stone-engraved originals were popular quick solutions. In 1045, Pi Sheng invented movable type. These original type sets were made from baked clay, but later ones would be made from everything from bronze to various light woods. With the proliferation of movable type in China some truly staggering print runs occurred, even by modern standards. Printings of hundreds of thousands were not uncommon and possible millions. Over four-hundred thousand copies of a Buddhist text from the late tenth century still exist today.

The Chinese first invented checks, so a merchant did not have to travel with his trading wealth threatened by bandits or robbers. Money could be deposited in the capital, replaced with “flying money” (so named because the light paper was easy to lose to the wind) with him to more remote locations in the empire. The money would be safe, and once the transaction was complete safer ways of transferring money could be used, from other checks to lines of credit. This ninth-century invention paved the way for paper money as a government-backed method of exchange evolved from these merchant drafts. Copper cash coins weighed too much to use in large amounts over any distance, and for reasons that must be only cultural, China’s government did not mint coins in gold or silver until the twentieth century—Chinese did use weighed silver or gold in transactions, however. As the inventors of multicolored printing the Chinese were also the first to use the technique as a method of discouraging counterfeiters. But it was not counterfeiting that doomed the paper money experiment of the Song dynasty, but greedy government officials that could not help themselves but to print more money.

Finally, the Chinese had a monopoly on high-class ceramics. By the time of the Song dynasty the use of high-temperature kilns with new clays and glazes to take advantage of these fiery techniques, Chinese invented what came to be called “china” in the rest of the world, also known as “porcelain.” Well-crafted porcelain became prevalent, for tea-ware using iron glazings where each piece created during the Song dynasty remained a singular work of art and pattern perfectly imitated. Innovation would continue after the brief Mongol Period of the Yuan dynasty when potters in the Ming dynasty created porcelain with its
bright white appearance and later famous blue and white glazing. Ceramics from the Song and Ming dynasties were especially sought after in the medieval world by wealthy in other countries, and that search continues to this day.

Finally, when the Ming dynasty began, southern Chinese ship builders began to build ocean-going craft of a kind never before seen. Ships were larger than ever before, with the biggest coming in well over 400 feet long. To put that in perspective, Christopher Columbus’s flagship was 90 feet long. These tremendous ships also had the advantage of older technology from the first and second centuries—rudders and watertight compartments to prevent quick sinking, respectively. Yet after only a few decades, the emperor and his Confucian advisers burned the plans for these massive vessels as well as the ships themselves. The Confucian advisers pushed through laws limiting the size of ships constructed, in their push to prevent more merchant activity abroad and to put China’s focus on the north and the remnants of the Mongol threat.

Korea

Korea from 400 to 1400 was heavily influenced by Chinese science and technology. The small country only excelled in a couple of areas. Koreans always made superior ceramics and pottery throughout these years in question. They excelled at roof tiles, for example, as well as pots and serving items for the home. But in the Koryo Period, their fame grew in making celadon porcelain. Although Korean potters borrowed ideas from Song China, the Chinese highly prized celadon items, considering them immensely well crafted. Ceramic experts claim they are among the most beautiful porcelains ever made.

By using a forgotten method, Korean pottery was able to become the prettiest, most complex in the world. Celadon became more Korean over the tenth and eleventh centuries. Three basic types remain the most popular forms of celadon. First is the differing green colors obtained from an iron oxide glaze difficult to duplicate. The more popular objects tend to be a celadon with soft green color, compared to the skies of the Korean peninsula during the fall, or, more commonly, to jade. The second form still uses this beautiful light green color, but through a controlled “mistake,” potters create a cracked pattern throughout the glaze over the piece. Finally, the most colorful celadon were constructed by overlaying glaze on contrasting clay bodies. Artists inlaid designs made up of small pieces of different colored clay adhered to the base clay of the piece. The layers were then carved away to reveal varying colors.

However, the Korean celadon industry, so important for foreign sales, suffered a severe setback with the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century. With the coming of the Mongols came the diminishing of Korean sovereignty and culture. Degradations of quality can be seen not only in Korean celadon, but in their porcelains and other ceramics as well. Koreans were well aware that ideas from abroad and conquerors from abroad can mean the difference between art spreading outward or skills being diminished.

The second invention claimed by Korean historians is moveable metal type in 1234, two centuries before the Germans. This is a difficult claim to prove, because Chinese had been printing for centuries by this time and had used moveable type made of clay and wood. But because historians have no specific date for when Chinese printers decided to try metallic, moveable type, the Koreans get the credit for this invention.
Japan

Japan, too, depended on Chinese ideas for much of the period 400 to 1400. Like the Koreans, the Japanese artisans created in valuable trade goods. And like the Koreans, the Japanese came up with two key innovations. The first item, Japanese folding fans, were invented in the seventh century. The Japanese creator modeled the fan after the physiology of a bat. At the imperial court, emperors would give folding fans away. Many times these fans were adorned with a favorite poem, a family crest, or a certain painting, all only visible when opened. Even though quite small, maybe two hand lengths at the largest, folding fans were too expensive for the common people of Japan due to the art placed on one or both sides of the fan.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Japanese Weights and Measures, c 1100–1400</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Distance</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Rin 10 1 Bu 10 1 Sun 10 1 Shaku 6 1 Ken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.303mm. 3.03mm 3.03cm. 30.303cm 1.908m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cloth</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Shaku 25–30 1 Tan 1.25 1 Kujira-Shaku 2 tan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Hiki</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Land</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Ken 50–60 1 Cho 36 1 Ri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Square Measures</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Ken squared 1 Tsubo 30 1 Se 10 1 Tan 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Cho 10 1 Sq. Ri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>~3.35 sq m. ~100 sq. m. ~1,000 sq. m. 10k sq. m. 16 sq km.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Volume</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Shaku 10 1 Go 10 1 Sho 10 1 To 10 1 Koku</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 1 Hyo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.8 cl. 1.8 dl. 1.8 l. 18 l. 180 l. 720 l.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Weight</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Momme 100–180, varies 1 Kin 1000 Momme 1 Kan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.75 g. 3.75 kg.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Currency</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wado-Kaiho: (708–958) Mainly copper currency struck in Japan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mon: (958-late 1500s) Imported Chinese Sen coins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kan: 1,000 Mon</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Japan’s second great innovation, like Korean celadon, owed much to China, in this case Chinese steel makers. Many samurai—members of Japan’s warrior caste—believed the sword a living object, imbued with supernatural powers. Japanese sword makers were revered as an honored class in society. Rather than a single artisan, a smith made the rough shape, the apprentice folded and beat the metal, a polisher made the sword beautiful to view, and other craftsmen made the various, noncutting parts of the blade, like the hilt and sheath. These crafters went through elaborate ceremonies and methods while creating these masterworks, the highest quality swords ever made. Sword makers followed an elaborate method of alternating layers of soft and hard steel to provide a sword with flexibility to avoid breakage and superior sharpness. These special warrior swords were highly prized family heirlooms, passed down from generation to generation. They also fetched high prices when sold to China or Korea.

China dominated science, technology, and innovation in East Asia over the period 400 to 1400, which was not surprising considering its size and population compared to Korea and Japan. But its domination in these categories is far more substantial than other ones tackled in this encyclopedia. The fact that China remained ahead of Europe (and the rest of the world) shows the difference between Chinese innovators and Chinese so absorbed with memorizing Neo-Confucian texts to gain entrance to government through passing the examination system that the inventive spirit was pushed aside.

Further Reading

7. GLOBAL TIES

China

The Chinese Empire was one of the few nation-states of the ancient and medieval world that could be called a legitimate superpower. Chinese rule spread over an area that is larger than the continental United States. During the years 400 to 1400, China’s power and influence expanded and exceeded its previous size in the middle of this period.

China’s impact on the wider world cannot be easily overstated. Its impact helped Europe with important inventions that the Europeans would perfect in
the realms of war and discovery. Its inventions were exported more than any other country’s technology during this period. Other inventions were lost in time, to be reinvented by Europeans centuries later. China was at the height of its culture, wealth, influence, and technology while Europe was still overrun by barbarian hordes.

Yet China rarely had direct relations with many countries. Chinese believed that their civilization was the greatest on earth and ignored other cultural ideas. China’s mistreatment under the Mongols—a period where China was hooked into the world community in its simplest form, the Mongol empire—made Chinese even more xenophobic than before. And just in the heyday of Chinese technological advantages in shipping and interest in trade and exploration, its Confucian leaders pulled the plug and permanently ended Chinese naval supremacy.

In many ways, China started as accepting of foreigners and their ideas, even if Chinese did not want to change their ideas further than practicing the newest sect of Buddhism to make its way around China. China contained speakers from the Indo-European, Altaic, Sino-Tibetan, and Polynesian language families. However, most Chinese spoke one or more of the eight largest Chinese languages of the Sino-Tibetan language family. These languages could be as different as French and German. But China had a uniform system of writing that helped facilitate government function and trade. Many of the world’s most important religions could be found in China, even if Chinese did not necessarily practice them. These included Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Chinese freedom of religion for foreigners living in Tang China occurred even as many other nations and empires worked to crush opposing religious views.

China, even with its long borders, is relatively isolated from other countries. It is separated from north Asia by the steppe and desert. Mountain chains keep it from directly touching Central Asia. In the southwest, it is kept separate from the Indian subcontinent by the largest mountains in the world, the Himalayas. Dense jungles and rivers separate China from Southeast Asia. It has a large coastline, which facilitates sea trade and fishing. Many times it is easier to go by sea than to trek through the deserts, jungles, or mountains on China’s borders. To understand China’s global ties, it is necessary to cover briefly China’s influence on its East Asian neighbors.

China was the predominant cultural and trading force on the Korean peninsula. Through China came Korean adoption of Buddhism and the implementation of the Chinese writing style. China was Korea’s number one trading partner, even though Korea did trade with Japan and through Arab sailors as far away as the Muslim world.

Korea, well known for its pottery and other ceramics, learned much about creating porcelain from the Chinese. And the Chinese adored Korean celadon with its beautiful green coloring. Even after the Koreans learned the secret of porcelain and improved on it, they still imported the Chinese version.

Korea readily converted quickly to Chinese sects of Buddhism, as already explained in the essay on religion. However, the peninsula also took up Confucianism, including Neo-Confucianism under the Yi dynasty. Anything Chinese was of high cultural and commercial value. The histories of China and Korea are indelibly and inexorably tied together.
Some of the same things could be said of the Chinese–Japanese connection. Japan was for most of its history an isolated nation. Not only was it geographically isolated 200 miles off the mainland, but it had little relation to any other nations save China and Korea. Like Korea, Japan adopted Buddhism. This Buddhism came through Korea from China.

Also similar to Korea, Japan used the Chinese to develop a writing system. Just like Korean, Japanese is not even in the same language family as Chinese. Even though Japan eventually used another writing style—this time a simplified version of some characters to mimic the sounds of Japanese and thus be able to read and write Japanese. However, throughout the period all important or official communication was in Chinese.

Japan also traded with the Chinese, even though the trading contacts were not fully developed because of the danger of the extra distance to north China by sea. In many ways, Japan simply tried to copy China. Japan traded some of its innovations, such as illustrated folding fans, painted silk screens, and samurai swords to China in exchange for porcelain, art, and Buddhist relics. Japan also adopted the Chinese invention of the parasol. This umbrella was originally a valuable symbol of the imperial courts of the two countries. However, they trickled to the aristocracy and then to more common people. In addition, societal structures were borrowed from China. In many ways, the Chinese were like a parent in its cultural relations with Japan and Korea.

China was heavily influenced by India. From India came the Buddhist religion, which China adopted after some cultural modifications. Although China and India are of different language families, the two nations had substantial contacts. However, the two are separated by the Hindu Kush and Himalayan mountains, hurting the facilitation of more relations. Trade was frequent with India, especially through sea routes. Chinese ships traded indirectly with India for such goods as ivory. India desired Chinese precious metals.

India and China were the two largest populations in the world and shared a border along the mountains. Indian influence is particularly heavy on the Chinese province of Tibet. There Buddhism and Indian culture morphed Tibet into a capital for the religion. Even as Buddhism was repressed in India, it flourished in China.

When the Chinese traveler Fa Xian, a Buddhist monk, went to India, he returned to China easily. This was not done through the mountains, but rather he simply found a ship going from Ceylon to the island of Java back to Guangzhou. This shows the tremendous level of trade done by Chinese merchants. That same trip would be duplicated by Xuanzang, another monk, only this time entirely by land along the Silk Road two centuries later.

Chinese traders had visited east Africa at least 100 and maybe 300 years before Portuguese sailors did. The Chinese traded for valuables on the continent such as ivory and rhinoceros horn. Chinese even took a giraffe back to China, thinking it was a Chinese unicorn called kirin.

Part of the trade network heading west from China, Persia had long been a world power. The Chinese enjoyed relations with the Persians, including strong trading ones. The Silk Road, which started in China, traversed Persia on its way to Europe. Part of China even speaks the Persian language, in the far west of the country. Chinese paper money has even been recovered in archeology sites in modern Iran. Chinese high society adopted polo from the Persians.
The Chinese traded with the Muslims, Arabs after their rise in the seventh century and Turks. For a period, the Chinese and the Arabs were the two strongest empires on the planet. In many ways, the Arab civilization acted as a firm intermediary between Asia and Europe for trade, ideas, and weaponry. The religion of the Arab Empire, Islam, spread to China. Some people in the southern port city of Quanzhou were converts to the religion, although the majority of its adherents were Arabs being given freedom of religion. Heavy trading ties existed between the Arabs, and Chinese Empire made the idea of a prominent mosque in the city an obvious need.

Much trade occurred between the two, and Chinese technology, inventions, and science found themselves being transferred to the Arabs. In trade relations, the Arabs knew the Chinese merchants were honest, which increased Chinese prestige among the Arab world.

In the northwest, Islam spread amongst the Turks living along the Silk Road in Chinese Xinjiang province; it is still a Muslim stronghold to this day. This landmass takes up almost one-fourth of all of China’s geographic area, even though it is relatively underpopulated because of desert. Mosques are frequent structures in that part of China.

The Turks learned to use gunpowder. They developed cannons that would slowly but effectively cancel out the use of many medieval castles and other strongholds. This can be most clearly demonstrated by the Turks’ destruction of city walls in the powerful albeit weakening Byzantine Empire.

Chinese influence cut through Central Asia along the Silk Road. These important arteries helped create and keep wealthy important Central Asian cities, such as Bokhara and Samarkand.

China was also a major influence for the countries of Southeast Asia, especially Vietnam. Chinese writing style spread into Vietnam, which, as another member of the Sino-Tibetan language group, could use the system as written. They traded especially for goods like tin. The Chinese also led military intrusions into this area. Chinese and Vietnamese history is so intertwined that the Vietnamese do not like China even to this day. Chinese traded with other Southeast Asian countries, but they tended to be influenced more by India and Indian-style Buddhism or even Islam as filtered through India. Going back to China were things such as tropical wood and spices.

The Mongols under Genghis Khan built the world’s largest empire in history. The Chinese and Mongols were geographic neighbors and had relations for centuries before the invasion. The two were normally separated, however, by steppe and desert. When another nomadic called the Jurchen conquered north China ending the Northern Song dynasty, China had a buffer state until it stupidly allied with the Mongols against the Jurchen after the Mongols had already conquered central Asia and most of Russia. The Mongols took four decades to take all of China—south China was not the best place for armies specializing in cavalry. But when victory was finally achieved, the Silk Road would be safer than any time in history, and Chinese goods, technology, and ideas were spread across the Mongol realm all the way to central Europe.

The Mongols left their mark on China, as central Asian middlemen grabbed all the profits and made the Chinese more xenophobic than ever before. From the Mongol supremacy, other cultures were brought to China. The Chinese rejected borrowing them because of this distrust of foreigners.
and feeling—probably quite right at the time—that Chinese culture was the most advanced in the world at the time and did not need foreign ideas anymore.

Although the Mongols practiced general religious tolerance, many converted to Islam and Christianity. This helped bring Islam to the nomadic edges of China.

Before the years covered in this encyclopedia, the Chinese Empire made a tremendous amount of money from selling silk to the Roman Empire. But increased activity by nomadic groups temporarily made trade difficult in the fifth century, and Rome had other problems besides how much silk to purchase. Yet the fifth century also brought Christian monks to China and Mongolia. These monks, part of the heresy known as the Nestorians, introduced the faith to the Chinese but were much better at gaining converts with the Mongols. There were even Nestorian churches in the different Chinese capitals. This cultural transfusion was unique because Christianity did not again directly come to China for over a full millennium, besides the Mongolian Christians that practiced slightly corrupted versions of it.

After Rome fell, the Chinese carried on substantial trade with the Byzantine Empire, the successor state to Rome. These ties, however, were heavily strained by the Persian and Arab invasions of the latter. When the Byzantines and the Chinese first traded, the two were the most powerful nations on earth. Many Chinese goods made it to Constantinople, the Byzantine capital.

The most famous example of direct travel between the European world and China is that of the Italian Marco Polo. He was not the only European to come to Asia, nor even the only one in his family to come to Asia. But by writing a book and describing the wealth of the Mongol Yuan dynasty, Polo created a sensation. Comparatively speaking, at this time, Europe was relatively backwards. Polo saw how China was the premier power of the world in trade, culture, and technology. When Polo returned to Europe, he told disbelieving audiences of little black rocks that the marvelous Chinese burned for heat. He was, of course, speaking of coal.

The Europeans were indebted to the Chinese for many inventions. The Chinese innovation of gunpowder revolutionized the world of warfare. This invention came to the Europeans from the Chinese via the Turks. The Chinese invention of gunpowder also lent itself to a popular use in China and Western nations: fireworks. These celebratory rockets were perfected in China and used during state and religious celebrations. The crossbow had been invented in the West, but for some reason its knowledge had been lost. However, it was reintroduced to Europe by the Chinese, thanks to the Arabs.

The Chinese used the printing press and moveable type centuries before Johann Guttenberg “invented” it, which shows another theme about inventions—sometimes the idea did not come from China but was independently created by others. To be fair, a few historians see some circumstantial evidence that traces the idea for moveable type back to Asia, but nothing definitive. China also pioneered paper money. Even paper itself came to Europe from China, albeit long before 400. The Chinese invented the compass, which is perhaps the most important navigational tool ever created. Interestingly, Chinese used it to find south instead of north, important for their geomancy called feng shui.

Europe and China’s views of each other were filtered through the prism of in-between civilizations. China was revered in the West as a major power
during these years. Even though even the most educated did not know much about China, there was a clear understanding that China was a major force in many ways. Tales of the Chinese exploits came through sources such as Marco Polo and the Mongols. China played a major role in early European maps of Asia.

European demand for Chinese products was immense. Chinese silks and porcelain (known in Europe as china) went to Europe by land and partially by sea. Chinese silk layered the sheets of the kings and regents of the states of Europe. The finest foods were served on genuine porcelain, which was not invented in the West until the eighteenth century. European fascination of things Chinese became so great—especially in the post–Marco Polo world—that it helped get investors and nation-states interested in finding a direct connection, using this Chinese idea of a compass, and cutting out the Arab and Venetian middlemen starting in the fifteenth century. The Chinese were less enamored of things European, as they normally regarded the Europeans as barbarians, especially after the hard times of Mongol rule.

Korea

Stuck in history between China and Japan, Korea is often overlooked. In many ways, Korea is not just geographically in between China and Japan, but is also a study of being almost a balance between the two. Although Japan had few foreign contacts outside of East Asia and China visited far and wide in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean basis, Korea started off with relations with first their neighbors, then long-distance Arab traders, before closing off its foreign relations under China as a tributary state to take on the title of the Hermit kingdom by the sixteenth or early seventeenth century.

Korea is indelibly influenced by its massive neighbor, China. Korea adopted many practices first brought about by their neighbors. Korea also adopted Chinese for writing. Anything important or official would be written in Chinese for this period. This meant the only the rich or otherwise elite would be able to read or write, a common factor in world cultures in this period. After trying a system of simplified Chinese characters to be used as Korean sounds, Koreans left this complicated system for a logical phonetic system developed in the fifteenth century.

Chinese literature came into Korea, and demand increased. Chinese plays and poetry were considered the pinnacle of civilized writing. This prevented native Korean writers from flourishing, except in the Chinese language. Most important, Korea borrowed Chinese religions. Confucianism and Chinese-style Buddhism were enthusiastically embraced by Korea, even as shamanism and folk religion continued. Buddhist temples, monasteries, and statues were constructed across the peninsula. The nobility of Korea tried to model themselves after their Chinese counterparts. In many ways, especially early in its history, Korea tried to be a little China.

Just as with China, when Korea was building a new capital, it was planned out. This new city was copied from the amazing Chinese capital. Chinese architecture seeped into Korean styles. Such a connection showed that many of the similarities between the two nations was not simply on the surface but instead had affected all levels of Korean society and government. China was a
tremendous geographical neighbor as well as a dominating cultural and economic one. Most trade done by the Koreans was done with their western neighbor, usually by sea to Shandong peninsula from far-south Korea.

The Korean kingdom of Silla did not hesitate to ally itself with Tang China to defeat one of the other two Korean kingdoms in the seventh century. This was done even though victory (or even defeat) could have undermined Korean sovereignty. In fact, the Tang tried to dominate the Koreans, but Korea fought back. Still, the newly unified Korea became a tributary state to the Chinese Empire. In this role, Korea was still autonomous in its self-rule but relied on China for foreign relations. The Chinese saw the Koreans as a civilized nation, which was a fairly high complement. With Korea’s new status, trade continued unimpeded, and both sides generated incomes. This trade became especially important as China ran a trade deficit. Korean silver and gold help replace Chinese coins traded to foreign markets, even though the Chinese only used precious metals other than copper as weighed materials and not minted.

After the Chinese introduced porcelain to the Koreans, Korea became widely praised for its excellent quality pottery and other ceramics, especially the different greens of celadon porcelain. Korean artisans improved porcelain, making the highly prized inlaid porcelain and crackled glaze celadon. Korea traded these cups, plates, and figurines. Although Chinese earthenware is much better known, Korean ceramics of the period from the tenth to the start of the thirteenth century are considered of much higher quality and craftsmanship by those who collect Asian art. However, Korean society was so connected to China that Korea continued to import Chinese porcelain. In exchange, Korea sent precious metals. This gold and silver were important for the large amount of Chinese imperial coinage. Jewelry was another important and unique product of medieval Korea.

Korea also had a trading relationship with its other neighbor, Japan. Even though the Sea of Japan was treacherous, Koreans came to Japan with knowledge of Buddhism and even staffed the early monasteries and temples. Japan purchased many religious objects from Korea and sent Buddhist pilgrims back to Korea and sometimes from Korea to China to study. Later, Koreans traded porcelain and precious metals to Japan. This came to an end with the coming of the Mongols. The attempted invasion of Japan in the thirteenth century was launched from Korea by Mongols and Koreans in ships made in Korea. Koreans also had to contend with aggressive Japanese pirates after 1350.

Korea, like China, had trading partners with the outside world, only many fewer than the Middle kingdom (China) due to its small size. One Korean deepwater harbor traded with these foreign nations. Some of the clientele came from as far away as the Arab world. These traders purchased Korean furs and leathers. But for the most part Korea had very little effect on the world outside of East Asia.

Japan

The same could be said of Japan. Unlike China and Korea, Japan is geographically isolated from the rest of the world by ocean and sea. In times when other countries in East Asia are fraught with internal disturbance or foreign invasion, Japan creates its own culture and retreats from the outside
world. But when China or Korea have civilizations that have much to offer, the Japanese borrow and use what works best for their culture. In a few cases, Japan collected ideas and items from a much wider world, yet Japan had little presence on the global stage apart from providing some ideas to its East Asian neighbors.

The Japanese borrowed many ideas from the Chinese, including written language, architecture, music, law, and religion. At first anything important or official Japanese men wrote in Chinese, even though the Japanese language has nothing in common with Chinese, as it is an Altaic language. Later, someone—either Kukai, a Buddhist leader, or a group of women—simplified a set of Chinese characters to make the forty-eight separate syllables. Later a second “alphabet” of characters joined the first, both called kana. And even later, Chinese characters were used with the kana to provide a sophisticated Japanese language. At first the use of kana was relegated to Japanese poetry and writing by educated women.

Anything Chinese brought over in the sixth and seventh centuries was considered almost intellectually sacred by the Japanese. Chinese-style Buddhism spread in many flavors and sects throughout Japan. The dominant sects of this religion included Pure Land Buddhism and Zen Buddhism, both developed in China and undergoing only a few changes in Japan. Buddhist temples, first staffed by Korean monks, sprang up across Japan with statues of the Buddha. Japanese culture was not only formed by these outside influences, but many times native styles and traditions were combined with these foreign pressures to create something uniquely Japanese. Zen gardens are examples of how foreign stimulus was combined with native artistic and religious ways.

Japan adopted Chinese codes of conduct and laws early on, especially Confucianism. Japanese architecture in the seventh through ninth centuries is based on Chinese Tang dynasty buildings—in fact, the best examples of Tang architecture today is Japan. Even the most famous alcoholic beverage of Japan—sake, or rice wine—was invented in China.

Japan had a healthy trading relationship with its closest neighbor, Korea. Korea in many ways served as the conduit of communication, trade, and culture between its larger neighbors, especially in the beginning of Japan’s cultural borrowing from China in the sixth to eighth centuries. Later, Japan also traded for fine Korean porcelain, as the Japanese did not have the knowledge of how to create the ceramic in such beautiful forms yet. Korean gold and silver were also valued commodities. Mongols launched their two failed assaults on Japan from Korea.

On the other hand, the Japanese desperately wanted to trade with China. Being the richest nation in the world, China was a potential gateway to the rest of the world for Japan. China, however, saw the Japanese as barbarians who would not follow the proper traditions, with its leaders daring to put themselves up as equals to the Chinese emperor. Usually Japan was able to smooth over these disturbances and reopen trade. Japan traded its painted folding fans, samurai swords, and painted folding screens to China for Buddhist religious articles, Chinese art, and porcelain.

Japan had limited contacts with other peoples due to the movements of the monk Kukai, leading to some more Indian influence on Japan. However, in many cases Japan had no real relations with nations other than China and Korea. There was some indirect influence on Japan from India thanks to China. These influences included building styles and religion. Unlike the other two,
there was no substantial trading with faraway kingdoms for the import of exotic goods; Japan was too far away and did not offer the profits trade with China or even Korea allowed.

The West had little knowledge of Japan. Although trade with China had occurred on and off since ancient times, Europe did not have this same relationship with Japan. Western maps showed Japan as a loose group of islands off the coast of China or India. Western travelers did not visit Japan like Marco Polo in Asia.

Japan did have another set of relations with China, Korea, and Southeast Asia after the defeat of the Mongols. Japanese pirates began to prey first on shipping and then on coastal towns and villages. Even though China had the finest and most technologically advanced navy in the world, the Japanese pirates still succeeded in harassing Chinese trade ships and fishermen so much the Chinese rebuilt the Grand Canal to allow year-round transit. But after 1425, Japan did not have to worry about the might of the Chinese navy, as Confucianists against the power of eunuchs and merchants in China destroyed not only the ships but the plans to make them. Japanese pirates also harassed Korea and Southeast Asian islands. One group eventually settled in the Philippines.

Japan had little effect on the world outside of East Asia, but it did have a clever traveler relay his experiences and Japanese leaders did collect objects from other countries. That traveler was a Buddhist monk named Kukai. He visited China and learned the ways of a complicated form of Buddhism called Esoteric Buddhism. He also supposedly visited India, where he learned more of Buddha’s life and was introduced to Sanskrit. He learned to read this new language that used symbols to represent syllables. Some Japanese believe the basic ideas behind the kana and Japanese writing came from Kukai’s adventure in India. As for the collection of foreign goods, in Nara, the Japanese built a clever storehouse built of logs attached to their large Buddhist temple the todaiji. When humid, the logs expand and keep out the moisture. When dry, the logs contract, letting in a breeze. Inside the storehouse were (and are) over ten thousand objects of art from not only Japan, China, and Korea, but from India, Persia, Greece, and Rome, all collected in the eighth century. So though Japanese usually visited only China and Korea, and rarely did visitors from anywhere other than China and Korea grace their shores—with the exception of a few monks from India—Japan did try to be part of the global scene through its collection of books, weapons, mirrors, and jewelry from around the world.

Further Reading
Agriculture

Agriculture began in East Asia along the Yellow River. Its unpredictable flooding and swift currents had the benefit of bringing loess soil to a large part of the flat north China plain. In fact, it is from the loess that the Yellow River and the Yellow Sea get their names—the dirt appears a yellowish brown color in the water. This soil was (and is) rich in nutrients and only required wooden tools to farm. The Chinese grew first millet (in the West today millet is used as birdseed), then barley and kaoliang (sorghum), before the coming of wheat around 1500 B.C.E. Even before the first imperial dynasty, the Chinese had started to use metal agricultural tools and beasts of burden to help prepare the soil outside the Yellow River’s influence. Yet animals were expensive to feed, and most peasants plowed using only their own human power, leaving the oxen or water buffalo for the rich peasants to use.

As Chinese civilization moved southward, it came in contact with farmers growing rice. The Chinese soon adopted growing rice, which came mainly from the Yangzi River southward. Wet rice farming requires neighbors to work together to make sure water is added or drained from the different fields at the correct times. And the more people working on a plot of rice land (to weed and make sure the rice is growing properly), the higher the yield. There is of course an upper limit to this increase yield where it would be wasteful to add workers, but historically south China needed more workers, and this increased yield of rice could feed them. In any event, rice fields produced the largest number of calories per acre than any other foodstuff of the time. Whatever body of fresh water was nearby, the state worked to build irrigation systems through the use of corvee labor to increase the fields in cultivation; many Tang and Song dynasty irrigation systems survive and still work to this day.

So though wheat was for the more affluent in north China—turned into flour for noodles and dumplings—and millet for the poor, rice was the dish of choice in the south (and for the rich in the north after the creation of the Grand Canal). Peasants also grew bamboo (for the shoots), taro, melons, chestnuts, and citrus trees. To protect mandarin oranges, southern Chinese hung thin bags filled with reddish-yellow ants to kill pests, perhaps the first time humans used insects to control insects. Silkworms were another insect used by East Asian peasants who had access to the mulberry tree. The peasants killed the larva of the silk moth by tossing in boiling water to produce silk. Then it was just a question of winding
the silk and preparing it for sale. Better-off peasants also raised pigs, chickens, ducks, and geese. Most important, Chinese grew soybeans. Soybeans served as protein—either eaten alone, turned into *doufu* (bean curd or tofu in Japan), or made into a soy flour for baking or other uses—for those who could not afford to eat meat or those whose religion forbade meat. Soy oil could be extracted for use in cooking or lighting lamps, with the residual soy mash fed to livestock. Soybeans also made excellent plants to use in crop rotation. Bacteria associated with the plant served as a nitrogen fixer for the soil, allowing a greater yield for the next crops grown on the associated land. Soybeans grew best in river valley soil in north China and later Manchuria (and in Korea and Japan).

Soybean cake would be used as fertilizer after the seventeenth century, but before—and even during its use, as there was never enough soybean cake to be used by all Chinese farmers—the traditional fertilizers were animal and human feces. “Nightsoil” was its euphemism. Its use meant peasants would do their best to use their own outhouse, collectors would scour cities for the commodity to sell in the countryside, and water and many raw vegetables could not be consumed. This was due to all the bacteria and viruses from the nightsoil that first contaminated raw vegetables and then with a rain ran off farmland and into rivers and streams. That is one reason for stir-frying—getting food hot enough to kill the dangers present in the water—and for drinking so-called white tea. Although Chinese would prefer to drink real black, fermented tea, one too poor to buy it often would drink “white tea,” which was just water boiled long enough to be safe for drinking.

Taxes on agriculture were the most valuable for the Chinese state, with the exception of a brief period in the Southern Song dynasty when taxes on merchants temporarily rose to great heights. That is one reason peasants were placed in the second spot of the Confucian class system. But as the dynasty continued, free, tax-paying peasants began to dwindle. Peasants who lost their lands became tenant farmers or, in hard times, escaped to the countryside along the border between two or more provinces and pillaged as bandits. Elites rarely paid taxes on their lands, meaning it was in the state’s best interest to keep land in the hands of the peasants. Hence the starting of the equal field system, which lasted into the Tang dynasty before indifference set in (with similar effects in Korea and Japan). The equal field system was an attempt to maximize land in the hands of independent peasants to keep the tax base from crumbling.

Korean agriculture started out with rice and soybean farming in its many river valleys. Growing rice also required the cooperation of the local peasantry. In Japan, rice too was cultivated before 400, although probably later, as rice was likely introduced by Korea. To please the Shinto gods or kami, scare off the demons, and record a large harvest, the biggest toughs in two nearby villages would battle in sumo wrestling. In addition, villagers put on folk dances and plays to pray for a large harvest or to give thanks for the harvest. These folk traditions later evolved into noh theater. In Korea and Japan, fishing was even more important than raising livestock for the people’s diet (and health). The Chinese on the coast or rivers could become fishermen, but to provide maximum protein benefits per acre of land in south China, farmers with excess or depressed land would construct fish ponds.

Further Reading
Ancestor Worship

Ancestor worship is too strong of a phrase for what is an ancient practice still performed throughout East Asia. At best it involves semireligious ceremonies performed by families at funerals, during certain holidays each year, and perhaps on the deceased’s annual death day. The oldest surviving son had the responsibility to provide for his dead parents (and sometimes all the ancestors) real or symbolic food, useful items, or money for use in the afterlife and to honor the past. The family was home for living and spirit worlds. These ceremonies stressed the importance of family and generational continuity. Ancestor commemoration might be a better term for what was practiced more extensively and further back along the family tree by large, wealthy families, lineages, or clans in China, and only for a few generations in Japan and Korea. Although part of ancestor commemoration worked itself into Confucianism, filial piety, and family rites, much of the folk tradition that grew up with ancestor worship split off and became subsumed into Daoism in China and Korea, Buddhism sometimes in China and Japan, or kept its separation as did Shinto in Japan and folk religion in Korea. For example, in Japan the Buddhist Obon Festival is when people return to their ancestral family places to clean their ancestors’ graves and honor their ancestors’ spirits. Koreans do it on the anniversary of their ancestors’ deaths and for famous Confucian scholars and kings. In China, joss sticks (incense) are placed in the offered items or with messages.

Further Reading

Ashikaga Shogunate (1336–1477)

Some historians date this period of Japanese history all the way through the Warring States Period (1477–1603) to the Tokugawa victory at Shimonoseki (1600), but doing so makes it seem that Japan has a legitimate government from the end of the Onin War (1467–1477), when a contest for shogun broke out, to 1603, when Tokugawa Ieyasu became the new shogun. Other historians date the start of the shogunate with Emperor Go-Daigo’s Kemmu Restoration in 1333, where he sought to return the power to rule to the emperor. It makes more sense to use the date Go-Daigo retreated southward after Ashikaga Takauji decided to turn on his former ally.

The Kemmu Restoration only briefly put the emperor back into power. His foe, then ally, then foe again—Ashikaga Takauji—attacked Go-Daigo when he realized the emperor planned to make his son shogun and could not reward his allies enough. Ashikaga’s second changes of sides pushed the emperor south and out of power, although he could not muster the troops necessary to finish off Go-Daigo. Ashikaga instead founded the Ashikaga shogunate in 1336, using Kyoto as his capital and thus unifying those who reigned (a branch of the imperial family that disagreed with Go-Daigo) with those who ruled as shogun. It would not be until the third shogun, Ashikaga Yoshimitsu (r. 1367–1395), tricked the Kemmu supporters into coming back to Kyoto to resume
their traditional and restricted role in government that the country was again unified. Once they arrived, they were denied positions, leading some historians today to note that the imperial line of the twenty-first century may not be the correct line.

Yoshimitsu’s main interests were cultural pursuits. These were made easier with the choice to keep the capital in Kyoto near the emperor. With the rise of the Ming dynasty, trade between China and Japan reopened. Japan traded its famed samurai swords, illustrated folding fans, and painted silk screens—all Japanese inventions—for porcelain, great paintings, and sculptures of the Ming. The influx of art and ideas from China, combined with the huge following of Zen Buddhism that the trade with China further encouraged, all had a huge impact on religion, aesthetics, and culture in the Ashikaga shogunate. Followers of Zen brought new styles of architecture through imitating Chan temples. Zen’s inward-looking nature, Japanese ideals of beauty, and Ming Chinese sensibilities all worked together to create iconic Japanese arts: noh theater, the rock garden, flower arranging, and the tea ceremony. Zen Buddhism also influenced the economy and later politics through loaning money at between two and 10 percent a month.

However powerful the regime seemed in Kyoto, it was actually weaker than the Hojo regency. It tried to control the countryside through regional capitals staffed by branch families. More distant relatives were in charge of province-sized areas on the frontiers of Japan. These appointed rulers—if they stayed in their posts and did not move to the capital for the high culture practiced there—had to deal with regional warrior powers that were not integrated into the state after the Hojo fell from power. These independent warlords fought one another and appointed officials to extend personal control. The officials took half of all taxes paid, as per the shogun’s authorization, and could levy troops. These troops were supposed to be in case of invasion, not to fight for control over Japan. Like Ashikaga Takauji himself, the bushi were hard to trust. They could change sides at any time. Sometimes they even placed sons on both sides of the battlefield to “win” no matter the outcome. Untrustworthy warriors help explain why Japanese chess, shogi, has pieces of only one color. When one captures an opponent’s piece, the next turn you may place that piece behind his lines as a traitorous unit. Chess, after all, is a simple simulation of war.

The fixation of the shogun on cultural pursuits and the fighting in the countryside showed weaknesses in the structure of government in Japan that those in the fifteenth century would exploit, ending the Ashikaga shogunate in 1467.

Further Reading

Bodhisattva

Bodhisattva literally means “a being of wisdom.” In the branch of Buddhism called Mahayana Buddhism, people believe that an enlightened person chose
to keep their spirit available on earth to help others achieve enlightenment. The main difference from the old doctrine to Mahayana Buddhism was the belief that everyone had a Buddha nature in them and could be saved, and not just by becoming a monk. Bodhisattvas, who already understood enlightenment, could help one achieve personal nirvana, but one was supposed to come back to life as a baby and help others, for then you were a Bodhisattva too. Most Chinese, Japanese, and Korean believers did not understand becoming a Bodhisattva to help others but did understand that under Pure Land Buddhism a future Buddha was promised as Bodhisattva to help anyone obtain the Pure Land upon death if they would call out and ask for help. Occasionally there were those who claimed to be the current Bodhisattva incarnation of the future Buddha called Maitreya. This female Buddha would come at the end of the world to save those last humans who believed.

Further Reading

Burakumin

The Japanese class system, modeled after Confucianism, had four classes, but the burakumin existed outside the class system entirely. This group is made up of people who were considered outcasts from birth or due to the jobs they performed that were considered ritually unclean under either Buddhism, Shintoism, or both. These jobs included butchers, tanners, shoemakers, or people who handled dead human bodies like gravediggers. One could become a permanent member if one’s family continued to perform these tasks, or perhaps burakumin status came about due to minor ethnic differences or having had long ago descended from slaves.

In censuses, the outcasts were not counted. Their villages were not even marked on official maps. Some of the outcasts were considered inherently unclean and as such people avoided them. This caused widespread bigotry and cruelty toward them. They were not able to marry outside of their birth caste. They were also not allowed to speak with members of other castes or enter into their houses. They had to live in their segregated villages. They could not wear wooden clogs, nor any clothes not made of cotton. Strangely enough this discrimination still exists to this day.
Chan Buddhism

Chan Buddhism is part of the Mahayana (“Greater Vehicle”) Buddhism in East Asia, although some of its ideas about meditation and becoming a monk harken back to early Indian Buddhism and Daoism. Everyone has the Buddha in them, it just takes individual effort underneath a master to find the path and follow it.

Chan was one of the two most popular sects of Chinese Buddhism, the other (and more popular during most of the Tang dynasty) was Pure Land Buddhism. At the high point of Buddhism in China near the end of the Late Tang dynasty, Emperor Wuzong, a devote Daoist, attacked Buddhism. Wuzong defrocked over two-hundred fifty thousand Buddhist monks and nuns (leaving only forty-nine monasteries and eight hundred monks), sold off their lands, destroyed 4,600 temples, and wrecked forty-thousand shrines. His death in 846 saved Buddhism in China, but not Pure Land; instead Chan Buddhism gained adherents to be the most popular form of Buddhism in China.

Chan Buddhism (called Zen Buddhism in Japan) favored monks in their quest for enlightenment, believing meditation the key, but also practiced kun-gan, logic puzzles designed to shake up one’s view of the world and allow enlightenment to come. Chan was divided into two schools in China, one that believed in slow progress to enlightenment through working with a master and the other that believed enlightenment came in a sudden stroke. But Chan Buddhism also provided churches for regular peasants to take part in, making up for the loss of Pure Land houses of worship, and those churches survived the coming of the Mongols.

Korea accepted Buddhism early from China and was the key cultural transmitters to Japan. In late Silla Korea Chan Buddhism slowly filtered into Korea. Called Seon Buddhism, it received kungan puzzles and meditation training on a large scale during the Mongol occupation. In 1354, Seon groups tried to work together under the Jogye Order, becoming the largest sect of Buddhism in Korea and stressing meditation, monasticism, and asceticism. Japan, too, welcomed Buddhism. Probably the second most popular form of Buddhism in Japan starting in the Kamakura Period was Chan, called Zen Buddhism in Japanese. The warrior class particularly used the philosophy behind Zen to empty their minds in combat.

Further Reading

Clan

In early Japan, especially before the foundation of the Chinese copycat state during the Nara Period the clan or uji controlled western/southern Japan as military groups on horseback. The uji was also how elites traced their descent to a common ancestor, usually a kami or Shinto god. An example of a kami as
a common ancestor was the imperial family with the sun goddess. The system also made the leader of the clan the chief priest under Shintoism and secular ruler. Members of the clan or uji all worshiped the same kami. Eventually some of these uji weakened and became subordinate to the more powerful ones. After the shake-up, what was to become the imperial clan found itself the most powerful clan, a first-among-equals status, due to its military might but more importantly its diplomacy through marriage alliances. Plus it made some sense that the leader of Japan should be related to the sun goddess, the most important kami, thought leaders of many uji. Because of Japan’s mountains and rugged geography, the imperial clan let the other clan leaders manage the internal affairs of their regions and peasants living there as unelected and unchosen governors. In fact, the word to describe this government was the same in early Japanese as the word for religion. Once the imperial house strengthened with the coming of the Nara Period, the uji at the top became a cultural and political aristocracy, having the power to tax their original areas of control as well as being paid enormous stipends from the central government’s tax receipts. By the late **Heian Period**, the term *uji* was more about the trained clan warriors who could raise armies through their control of the countryside. Some of the most powerful were related to some of the families that intermarried with the imperial house, but these uji—and others away from the capital—all prided themselves on skill of battle as bushi or warriors. Their battles for control of first the countryside and then the state led to the end of effete civilian rule and to the bakufu or tent (military) government of the **Kamakura Period**. (To avoid confusion with the term *clan* and the militarist uji, the term *lineage* will be used here to describe the extended kinship systems used in China and Korea.)

**Further Reading**


**Confucianism**

Confucianism, one of the three great philosophical/religious traditions of East Asia, started in China in the fifth century B.C.E. Confucianism looked back to an idealized past of the Shang dynasty (1766–1122 B.C.E.) or the Western Zhou Period (1122–771 B.C.E.), times where people understood their place in society and family. Master Kong Qiu, Latinized as Confucius, thought this past order was the answer to the chaos of his times, when a lower-ranking peasant could climb to the top of the hierarchy and almost constant war plagued the land. Perhaps jealously fueled Confucius—his family was of poverty-stricken nobility. Confucius turned to books and histories of the past and perhaps wrote or collated parts of them—the historical record is vague. These “Five Classics”—Book of Odes, Book of History, Book of Changes, Book of Rites, and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (this last book a history of the recent Eastern Zhou past)—became the foundation of Confucianism. The Confucian canon would also eventually include works or proverbs by Confucius or his key followers, the “Four Books”: *Analects* (sayings of Confucius), *Book of Mencius*, *Great Learning*, and *Doctrine of the Mean*. Confucius believed that society could be
saved if it replicated the past through understanding old books, renewing old rituals, and reinstating systems of order. A natural order existed before; replicate it again and conflict and chaos would evaporate.

Confucius himself wanted to be a sage, a scholar who could advise the rulers of his time. Instead he became a great teacher, imparting his ideology to willing disciples chosen for their ability and not their birth. Confucius philosophized about the here and now, not the hereafter. He placed emphasis on good government, morality, and ethics. Rigid hierarchy also played a large role in his philosophy; he combined the idea of knowing one’s place in society with patriarchy and filial piety (respect for one’s parents). These ideas became explicit in his Five Relationships: ruler to subject, father to son, husband to wife, elder brother to younger brother, and friend to friend. Notice that all the relationships but the final one showed hierarchy. Women only fit into the system in a subordinate role (as wife). Each of these relationships was reciprocal, however, with the subordinate owing the superior respect and obedience, while the superior owed the subordinate benevolence. A benevolent ruler might forgive taxes a drought-stricken region, for example.

Benevolence (ren in Chinese) and ritual (li) played key roles in Confucianism. In fact, benevolence under Confucianism is very similar to the golden rule of Western thought, only in the negative form: “Do not do unto others what you would not wish yourself.” Those below needed to treat you with loyalty and obedience, performing the proper rituals. These included 3 years of mourning when a parent died as part of filial piety. The ruler needed to observe the correct rituals for the state to please the gods and allow his rule to continue. But ritual should not be observed blindly; real, sincere feeling had to occur during the rites or they were useless. The ruler, like the father, also served as a model of behavior, teaching morality through his actions. Confucius did not believe laws prevented immorality; laws just created criminals. If those at the top of the social hierarchy acted morally and with benevolence, the lower ranks of society would behave well, too. At the top, just below the ruler, stood the scholar-official (junzi in Chinese), to explain Confucian ideology to the leader.

Confucianism preached the importance of hierarchy, but with a small rebellious streak. A leader was only a leader if he behaved as one, with benevolence to those below and propriety in rituals. If a leader did not provide those below with benevolence or shirked his ritual duties, the leader could be replaced. But ordinarily Confucianism would be used historically by the elite to keep order; rebellions were started by secret societies in China’s other two great teachings.
Mencius is the Latinized name of the second key extoller of Confucianism, one Meng Ke, who lived and wrote around 300 B.C.E. He brought into Confucianism two ideas many associate with Confucius: all people are good and can become sages and the leader rules because of the mandate of heaven. Mencius argued that all people are good. As evidence, Mencius pointed out that all people would be shocked to see a child fall into a well; this, he said, was humanity that he saw as the glimmerings of benevolence. Because benevolence is within everyone, so is the possibility of sagehood, if only one studied and applied Confucianism. And because sages could best predict how to respond to the current conditions in China, it was right and proper for a king to cede his rule to a sage. Not surprisingly, this never happened.

Mencius also argued a king only ruled with the mandate of heaven. The Xia, Shang, and Eastern Zhou dynasties lost out not in the end because they lost mandate of heaven. The mandate provided good weather and compliant subjects. In return the king engaged in proper rituals and treated his subjects with benevolence. Natural disasters or rebellious peasants might mean the king was losing the mandate, hence his overthrow or even regicide was divinely inspired and not immoral under the Five Relationships. Worthy men would then establish new dynasties under the new mandate.

Not long after the days of Mencius, Qin dynasty took over China; Confucianism had to go underground or face elimination. The few Confucian scholars who tried to stand up to the new emperor met hideous deaths, and the Qin emperor burned books to keep Confucianism out of the hands of his subjects. Copies of books that survived often were just piles of old bamboo straps with writing of an older form of Chinese than introduced by the Qin and used ever since. The Han dynasty realized it was the heir to the Qin, so continued many of these Legalist practices. But a clever scholar-official figured out a way to put Legalism and renewed Confucianism together. Confucianists had claimed that laws were unnecessary and a ruler should lead by example to get the people to do good. Although perhaps true in the time of the Shang, Zhou, or even the Warring States Period, he argued, the world of the Han was much different. It needed the laws of the Legalists in conjunction with the moral example of Confucianists, just like the world needed the dark of the yin with the light of the yang. Confucianism became part of the ruling ideology of China, at the expense of a little corruption from Legalism and mysticism/religious ideas from the yin/yang.

Also during the Han, the emperor sponsored an imperial university to teach Confucianism. It began with fifty students; in 100 years three thousand students attended. With the Sui and Tang dynasties, the university continued to grow in size, as more and more government positions required the passing of exams based on Confucianism (and for a brief time on Daoism as well). By the Song dynasty and then during the Ming, almost all central government positions required passing the Confucian exams (really Neo-Confucian exams by the Southern Song dynasty). These exams were open to all in theory, allowing the best and the brightest to pass the exams and work in government. Yet the difficulty of learning the thousands of characters of classical Chinese, as well as the Confucian canon and commentaries, meant normally members of the gentry ran the government bureaucracies. Only rarely an intelligent peasant boy, backed by his village, earned a spot in government.

By the time of the Sui dynasty, Confucian temples and shrines could be found in all provinces. Religiously Confucianism remained important for rites
the emperor engaged in or sponsored for the good of China, and at the family level for the poorly named “ancestor worship.” But Buddhism, starting slowly at the end of the Han dynasty, briefly overshadowed Confucianism. From 800 to 1200, important scholar-officials studied Buddhism, before some rejected its philosophy. Using ideas gleaned from Buddhism or even Daoism, these scholars created Neo-Confucianism. Confucianism in this new guise roared back into the limelight as the most important of the three teachings.

As for Korea and Japan, both societies were profoundly influenced by Confucianism. After 1391 and the establishment of the Yi dynasty, Korea became perhaps more Neo-Confucian than even China! In Japan’s case, the Seventeen Point Constitution reflects demands adherence to Confucianism, as well as Buddhism. But neither Korean kings or Japanese emperors (let alone Japanese regents or Japanese “shogun”) ended or even modified their respective hereditary systems like China did for all but the emperor. The examination system in non-China East Asia, when offered, was superfluous.

Further Reading

Corvee

Corvee is free labor performed by East Asian peasants as part of taxes or tribute. Peasants would work a certain number of days a year, or in hard times, a few days a month. This work was done for local warriors who owned their land in feudal Japan, or to local officials in China’s empire. In China the work usually consisted of building or repairing irrigation systems, flood-control devices, canals—30,000 miles of canals connecting rivers, lakes, and each other by 1400—and fortifications. Conscription for military purposes was usually considered over and above the corvee and therefore in a different category. By the time of the Southern Song dynasty, artisans and merchants could pay extra taxes to avoid serving the corvee, and poor peasants having trouble paying the new, monetized taxes, could work extra days of corvee to meet their tax responsibilities. Increased corvee was high on the list of peasant complaints toward the end of many Chinese dynasties.

Further Reading

Daoism

Daoism is the second of the three great teachings of China. Daoism harkened back to an idealized past further back than the Shang to just after the discovery
of cultivation. It cared more about the individual than the state. The term *Dao* comes out of the first text of Daoists, *Dao De Jing*, usually translated as “The Way and Its Power.” Supposedly written before the works of Confucius by the mysterious Laozi (although some doubt Laozi ever existed), *Dao De Jing* preaches following the “Way”; yet the Way cannot be defined: “The Way that can be named is not the eternal Way.” Not only is the Way nameless, so are its ideas behind how the world or society functions. Much of the *Dao De Jing* continues in this vague and cryptic way, leading some to speculate that the text, written in verse, is also a guide to meditation. In the midst of vague philosophizing, the book also offered some advice for attempting to solve the troubles of the Eastern Zhou Period: “Do not prize possessions and the people will not steal.” Perhaps even more difficult to enact by leaders of the time was this pithy sentence: “The best ruler is one whose presence is barely known by his subjects.”

A key term of Daoism is *wu wei*, an idea also difficult to describe. It means “nonaction.” Daoist texts describe a butcher who cuts meat for years without ever sharpening a knife by simply following the meat where a microscopic gap already existed. Modern equivalents include firing the perfect tennis shot made without applying much swing to a racket or scoring a lay-up in a basketball game without any conscious thought of dribbling the ball or shooting. In these examples the mind is absent from the action; one’s body simply flows to what is right after lots of practice. Water is another example of *wu wei* in action: water yields, flows down, and fills pools, but over the years its channel cuts through rock.

The second Daoist classic was named after its author, *Zhuangzi* (Master Zhuang). Again, some do not believe Master Zhuang Zhou lived, using as evidence the fact that the work in question was written over a couple of centuries. Zhuang extolls the beauty of nature and meditation in everyday life and avoids advice to rulers. The book in many ways seems a direct attack on Confucianism. Confucius himself appears at times, only to be outargued or made the fool by Zhuang Zhou. Confucianism holds to the importance of ritual and honoring parents and loved ones. When Zhuang’s wife died, instead of mourning her ritually and avoiding public displays of cheer as a Confucianist would demand, Zhuang sang and played drums. When he was chastised by a friend for quitting his mourning, Zhuang replied that his wife long ago had no spirit and no body, then had a spirit, then was born with a body. With death came another change. If he had continued to mourn her it would show he did not understand the Way.

Zhuang challenged Confucian and other philosophies’ emphasis on morality. Good and bad, right and wrong, true and false, all these distinctions become problematic if one was to understand the Way in its totality. Avoid
drawing distinctions, wrote Zhuang. Hence it makes sense that ideas of the yin and yang (the dualities that worked together—evil and good, female and male, weak and strong) found their way quite early into Daoism and helped to move it from its philosophical form into a more religious one, or, for lack of a better term, Religious Daoism.

The *Zhuangzi* also engages in some interesting metaphysics, not in the sense of discussing gods or the hereafter, but rather being and existence. Zhuang described a dream he had where he was a butterfly and did not know he was Zhuang Zhou. When he awoke, he was not sure he was Zhuang who had dreamt he was a butterfly or a butterfly now dreaming he was Zhuang. Maybe all life was but a dream. That would fit into Zhuang’s discussion of death as just another part of life. In fact, Zhuang theorized that the dead might be wondering why they clung to life!

Soon the *Dao De Jing* and *Zhuangzi* would be interpreted for new times, partially due to repression by Legalists and partially due to the nature of the written word. The Qin dynasty ordered many books burned, and in other cases these “prepaper” books fell apart when the leather strap holding the bamboo slats rotted away and when put back together often became rearranged. Only the most educated could read classical Chinese with its thousands of ideograms (and pre- and post-Qin ideograms were often different), so Daoism changed. Although it started out as more of a philosophy for the educated to question, Daoism came to the common folk through a more religious outlook.

As for other East Asian states, Daoism influenced the culture of Korea and Japan, but never to the extent as in China. Daoism first came to Korea from Chinese emigrants and conquerors during the Han dynasty, around 109 B.C.E. By the time the Chinese empire collapsed and the last Chinese either left or merged into the Korean population, Daoism, Confucianism, and even some Buddhism had made their way to the Three Kingdoms of Korea. Daoism, with its love of nature, ended up merging well with the local folk traditions and gods—which also survived—whereas Confucianism and Buddhism ended up the most powerful influences. As for Japan, Daoist ideas on nature and meditation struck a nerve. The Chinese worldview came to Japan through Korea between the fourth and sixth centuries, and Japanese leaders officially adopted Confucianism and Buddhism after the start of the Sui dynasty (around 604 with Prince Shotoku and his Seventeen Point Constitution, which had a small taste of Daoism in it). Ironically, Daoism’s biggest influence in Japan turned out to be Zen Buddhism.

**Further Reading**


**Early Tang Dynasty (618–751)**

Most Chinese historians herald the first half of the Tang dynasty as the peak of Chinese culture and China’s preeminent place in world culture. The fall of the Sui dynasty led to a mad scramble for power. The winner over these pretenders
and the peasant armies was another Chinese-nomad military governor of the
north who proclaimed power in 618 and spent the better part of eight years
consolidating his hold on China using the same Turks as mercenaries—Tang
Gaozu, the first emperor of the Tang dynasty. After his second son killed his
other sons, Gaozu abdicated in 626 to Emperor Taizong and served behind the
scenes as retired emperor until his death in 635.

The Tang dynasty made China the largest, richest, most powerful, and most
civilized country in the world, the shining example Japan would follow. Chi-
inese historians consider Taizong one of the greatest of all emperors. He helped
create a governing, bureaucratic system utilized from this period forward to
the twentieth century (see Tang Governance) by Chinese emperors to control
their vast empires, including a system of laws and divisions of the state down
to the county level. Besides these reforming efforts, Taizong also got to the
root of government problems: peasant distress. He and his father understood
that the Sui dynasty’s collapse was mostly due to peasant discontent. So the
equal field system began anew, this time on a larger scale than ever before. In
addition, the tax system allowed flexibility. If people wanted to avoid spend-
ing time doing corvee, they would simply pay extra taxes. If others wanted to
avoid taxes, they could spend more time with corvee. And corvee included
militia duty, which guaranteed a large army cheaper than mercenaries.

Agricultural production grew rapidly in the first century of the Tang, and
government revenues increased with only moderate tax rates. Large landlords
when the equal field system was implemented and Buddhist holdings were
hardly affected by the changes. In fact, both were exempt from taxation. Large
landholders (usually officials at the district level or local level—below the
county level) and government officials in charge at the circuit level (like mod-
ern provinces), prefectural level, and county level practiced a lavish lifestyle
that soon promoted the growth of the economy, including the import trade:
Chinese silk for foreign luxuries. Chinese historians and storytellers alike de-
scribed the billowing dust created by constant fl ow of luxury goods to the
capital from almost every direction.

China’s capital reverted to Changan, along a Yellow River tributary. It was a
planned city—the largest planned city built to that point and perhaps the largest
ever. It stretched over 30 square miles, not including the extensive palace
grounds, which, like the city itself, faced south. One million people lived within
city walls, while perhaps another million lived just outside the perimeter. The
city became the most prosperous, civilized, and cosmopolitan city in the world
for its time. Many foreigners, especially Arab traders, arrived through the im-
pressive 500-foot city gate to conduct business and were afforded religious tol-
eration during their stay as a result. China and the Byzantine Empire periodically
connected in these years.

Although the Tang emperors created stability within China’s borders as
long as the census and redistribution of land under the equal field system
continued, wars with their neighbors began quickly. Although some of the
Turk allies who made Gaozu and Taizong emperors remained loyal, other
groups attacked their erstwhile ally, invading from the north all the way to the
capital across the great north China plain. A successful counterattack, coupled
with disorder among their enemies’ leaders, allowed China to recapture the
Silk Road—lost during the Han dynasty—and the oases the caravans de-
pend on, by 648. The subject peoples conquered in the far west, although
officially part of the Tang Empire, had relative autonomy on local matters and would shake off Chinese rule when the Tang dynasty grew weak.

The Tang dynasty also fought with its eastern neighbors, the three kingdoms of Korea. The war proved difficult at first. But once the Chinese went back to their classic ploy—use barbarians against barbarians—the Tang, with an alliance with one Korean state, Silla, defeated the rest. The result was a unified Korean state with local autonomy, but a tributary state of China nonetheless.

Then an abnormality occurred in Chinese history. The concubine of an ill emperor started running China from behind the scenes in 660. When he finally died, she deposed her eldest son and ruled though another son, before deposing him. Finally, in 698, she dropped the facade and proclaimed herself Empress Wu, ruling until forced out in a coup in 705 when she was 82 years old. She expanded the examination system, pushed China’s borders to their furthest extent in all directions, and encouraged the worship of all three of China’s great traditions as equals: Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. In fact, Buddhism reached its highest point of political and economic power during her years in charge—in this case Pure Land Buddhism.

Chinese historians consider the early years of the 700s as the high point of the Tang dynasty and China in general, politically, economically, and culturally. New Emperor Xuanzong had reformed the coinage, repaired and extended the Grand Canal, and briefly renewed land registration for the equal field system. Yet soon he would withdraw from politics and let his chief minister rule as a virtual dictator. First came the abandonment of a militia army for an expensive, paid mercenary force. Frontier generals led nomadic troops in great numbers to protect China’s new gains, sometimes with little thought of loyalty. More problems plagued China as Arab forces beat Chinese armies in 751; a deepening social crisis arose as fewer peasants paid increasing taxes. Finally, Buddhist monks took away land from the tax rolls, ignoring yet again the equal field system. Unfortunately for peasants not yet born, no dynasty would ever again succeed in implementing land equalization. See also Late Tang Dynasty.

Further Reading

Education

Education in China was divided between religious (Buddhist and Daoist especially through their churches and monasteries/nunneries, where they taught religious views, healing, and rarely martial arts) and secular, which included Confucianism. As the Tang dynasty made the examination system increasingly important in getting government position—and by the Song almost all government positions were obtained by passing the different exam levels to become the so-called mandarins—it made sense that the government reestablished the imperial university to teach Confucianism. By imperial decree, at the high point of the Tang dynasty, schools spread down to the county level, with government-sponsored education supposedly teaching over one-hundred thirty thousand students out of around fifty million people. This was not a large number per se, but it was leaps and bounds larger than any other society
at the time and does not include private schooling or tutoring, or religious training for the future monks and nuns of Buddhism and Daoism. After learning the ten thousand-plus characters necessary for reading, secular education included the Confucian classics, etiquette, divination, medicine, mathematics, music, poetry, calligraphy, plays, fiction, and history.

These activities of the educated help to explain why the Chinese think historically, constantly remarking on the present with examples from the past. It also showed that as the examination system became the sole route to higher bureaucratic positions with the Song and Ming dynasties, there were no restrictions based on class on who could attend the schools and take the exams. If a smart peasant child—often through the efforts of a village to hire a tutor collectively or through a lineage—read well and understood the Confucian classics, he could attend schools or perhaps even the imperial university to prepare for the exams. Of course the elites had the advantage of money for lessons and the time away from the fields to learn to read and write to become by far the majority of the test takers, but by at least allowing a form of meritocracy over aristocracy, China became a model for the West during the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century. This model, however, had a huge weakness discovered centuries later—memorization over independent thought.

The disadvantage of the Chinese educational system were its reliance on memorization and, with the coming of the Zhu Xi form of Neo-Confucianism, the move away from one’s own interpretation of Confucius to instead a slavish copying of Zhu Xi’s ideas and even the format of his essays. By focusing on memorization, Chinese bureaucrats lost the ability to think for themselves on the fly and thus leading to troubles for China in the nineteenth century vis-a-vis the Europeans.

Koryo Korea adopted in 958 a Chinese-style civil service examination system, emphasizing mastery of Confucian ethics. Korea’s educational institutions quickly followed suit, yet the educated became Sinophillic (ones who love China). The government schools were really just for the elites of Korean society. A number of petty restrictions based on class prejudice kept the potential pool of the poor scholars quite low and helped exclude all but the elite from many government schools.

In Japan from 400 to 1400, education was restricted to those wanting to become Buddhist monks or nuns and the elite of the capital city. Toward the end of the period, a burst of learning by the bushi class began, but the coming of well-educated samurai who could cut down and kill peasants for not knowing their place before crafting an exquisite haiku poem would have to wait until the seventeenth century.

Further Reading

Emperor Taizu (d. 976)

With the collapse of the Tang dynasty, China fell into multiple states. The lack of control over the majority of China did not stop elites from bestowing the title of emperor over and over to a series of short-lived dynasties. One night,
in 960, the head of the imperial guard awoke to find the yellow robes of the emperor being thrown over his body. General Zhao Kuangyin realized he could be killed and replaced at any time, just like his predecessors, so he sought a solution as Emperor Taizu (r. 960–976). First, he worked hard to limit the power of other generals. He invited the most powerful generals to a banquet. There he succeeded in persuading them to relinquish their military posts in return for generous rewards. By detaching the generals from their military units, Taizu found a way to attach the military units to the state. The central government quickly exerted strict control on the military, even though it was primarily a mercenary force. Periodic and mandatory rotation of its commanders and eliminating the post of military governor helped for the conquest of the rest of China and the founding the Song dynasty—pronounced “soong”—had begun (normally this period is called the Northern Song dynasty). Like unifiers before him, Taizu applied moderate force to those opposing him and welcomed those to join him when defeated. However, a seminomadic group made Manchuria and parts of north China its home. With the help of his brother and successor, the Great Wall would serve as the dividing line between China and a seminomadic conqueror, the Liao, for three generations.

Further Reading

Empress Wu (d. 705)

During the Tang dynasty, an abnormality occurred in Chinese history: a woman became emperor for the only time in Chinese history. At first, she was just the concubine of an ill emperor. She started running China from behind the scenes in 660. When her husband finally died, she deposed her eldest son, Zhongzong, and then ruled through her other son, Ruizong. Finally, in 690, she dropped the facade, deposed Ruizong, and proclaimed herself Empress Wu, ruling until forced out in a coup in 705 when she was 82 years old. Chinese historians find her one of the most ruthless, unscrupulous, and tyrannical rulers in Chinese history, but this might be an exaggeration based on historical Chinese sexism. She killed many of the imperial clan, using terror against her opponents. But her paranoia created more opponents than reality would dictate: she ended up murdering many more than just her outright enemies.

Empress Wu did do some good in her years in control of the Tang dynasty, from expanding the examination system, to pushing China’s borders to their furthest extent in all directions with military victories. She also encouraged the worship of all three of China’s great traditions as equals: Confucianism because of and through her rule and
as its literature played the strongest role in most of the examinations; **Daoism**
because she believed her family was descended from its founder; and Bud-
dhism from her belief that she was the Bodhisattva of the final Buddha to
come as the world ended—Maitreya. In fact, Buddhism reached its highest
point of political and economic power during her years in charge—in this case
**Pure Land Buddhism.**

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**Equal Field System**

This was first utilized by the Tuobans in the **Northern Wei** dynasty during
the **Period of Disunity**. The nomadic conquerors, unfamiliar with how to tax
agriculture, decided to use the ideas of leading Confucian-educated Chinese
landowning families to help increase and stabilize taxes over the long term,
called either “land equalization” or the **equal field system**. The idea behind
this system was to maximize the number of landholding peasant families to
create an enduring tax base. Theoretically all regular farm was now owned by
the monarch or state, but allocated for use based on family size by a peasant
for his lifetime. When the peasant or members of his family died or moved
away, some or all of the land went back to the state for renewed distribution.
If the family grew, it would receive more land for every person older than the
age of 5. Orchards, however, would belong forever to the peasant’s family for
starting the long process of growing the trees without immediate reward. In
reality, the system as used during the Northern Wei, **Sui dynasty**, and part of
the **Tang dynasty** did little to harm the large, landowning Chinese families, or
more importantly take away their land. But other than allowing this concen-
tration of land to continue, the system worked remarkably well for 300 years,
guaranteeing the king or emperor with a stable tax base and more quiescent
peasants—it even led to increased agricultural yields as new and marginal
lands were brought under cultivation.

Within a few short decades after a brief reintroduction, land registration
was again discarded. The equal field system ceased to function, leading to a
social crisis where landed peasants paid more and more taxes as the elite
avoided them and created more tenant farmers.

Japan tried to copy China’s equal field system during the late **Yamato Period**
and early **Nara Period**. It lasted only a century before its collapse due to exempt-
ing aristocrats, changing the rules on bringing new land into cultivation, and
tendency to allow hereditary land ownership as the years progressed.

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Eunuchs

Eunuchs were castrated males who played a large role at certain times in Chinese history at the government and economic levels. In Chinese histories, eunuchs are often blamed for the decline and fall of a dynasty due to their corrupt ways, placed into opposition with honest Confucian officials by Chinese historians. But Confucianists most often have written the histories of China and neglect the corruption of Confucian officials in their taking of bribes or tax receipts—taking care of their families was more important than the state to these Confucianists. And conversely some eunuchs worked hard to help China.

Eunuchs in China had all their genitalia cut off before their 12th birthday. This was very dangerous in the world before the twentieth-century’s antibiotics. Supposedly almost half the castrated died from the procedure. Those that survived kept their genitalia in a small box that would be buried with their body, thus satisfying at least part of their filial piety obligation to leave their bodies in (almost) the condition of their birth. They obviously failed the obligation to produce offspring.

Eunuchs provided China (and Korea, who used eunuchs to a lesser extent) with the same services as elsewhere: guarding the wives and concubines of the emperor to prevent illegal pregnancy. The educated eunuchs could teach members of the imperial family. From there it was only a short distance to power. Because they did not have families, and often served in intimate settings, eunuchs found that Chinese emperors and the imperial family trusted them with more and more governing tasks. Some eunuchs served as chief advisers, generals, an admiral, and chief of the secret police. But Chinese eunuchs, by choosing among the newcomers, created artificial “families” that took later formed factions that fought for power, prestige, and profits, the latter from the tax receipts from the empire.

Although a form of punishment in the Sui dynasty, castration created a new class of Chinese who could live close to the imperial family. These eunuchs rose up in power the eighth century, just after the high point of the Tang dynasty. One, as general in the invasion of Vietnam, was guilty of horrible atrocities. By the ninth century, eunuchs took charge of the secret police and became virtual masters of the country. Eunuch factions chose eight out of the nine emperors to mount the throne after 800 and fought with the Confucian officials, although eunuchs won more than they lost. Only conflict between eunuch factions kept them as a class away from total control over the last years of the dynasty.

The Song dynasty used eunuchs, but not to the same extent as the Tang, believing the eunuchs helped lead to the downfall of the previous dynasty. There were some wealthy eunuchs in the Southern Song, however. The Mongol Yuan dynasty did not face troubles from the eunuchs, but the next dynasty would. Imperial family members in the Ming dynasty starting in the midfifteenth century would rely on the help of eunuchs for running the government and maneuvering for succession, disregarding the first Ming emperor’s warning not to trust eunuchs. In 1400, just after his death, there were only a few hundred eunuchs in the capital, but that number would swell to tens of thousands. Confucianists did have the last word on maritime expeditions, canceling them not only because they aided merchants, but because Admiral Zheng He was a Muslim eunuch. But afterwards eunuchs became more and more powerful and helped cause the dynasty to weaken and fall in the seventeenth
century, and historians cite many examples of corrupt eunuchs stealing millions of ounces of silver in tax receipts starting in the late fifteenth century.

Further Reading

Examination System

The examination system was an idea to allow top government officials—those positions chosen by the imperial government and not local ones that the gentry filled—to be placed based on passing a series of exams that would push the smartest to the top. To help the exam takers, the idea of the imperial university of the Han dynasty was reborn and expanded to teach Confucian ideas starting with the Sui dynasty. The percentage of government positions given to the degreed candidates, the so-called mandarins, varied based on dynasty, with the tendency to give more jobs to these educated elites as the years went by. The exception was the Yuan dynasty, which allowed exams for 20 years before abolishing them briefly for 7 years until resumption in 1342. But even with the examination system, the Mongols only appointed a small number of mandarins, instead using a simplified test that guaranteed Mongols the majority of positions. Some historians argue that the great beauty and large numbers of paintings, poetry, and drama of the Yuan Period occurred because the educated classes had so much time on their hands due to their lack of employment by the dynasty.

The examination system was open to all in theory, allowing the best and the brightest to pass the exams and work in government and make China a meritocracy. Yet the difficulty of learning the thousands of characters of classical Chinese, as well as the Confucian canon and commentaries, meant normally members of the gentry ran the government bureaucracies. Only rarely an intelligent peasant boy, backed by his village, earned a spot in government.

The examiners had to worry about cheating and favoritism. The exam takers would write their answers while locked in cells to prohibit cheating. At least one creative student wrote his answers on an undershirt and simply took it off and copied it for the test. To prevent those who graded the exams from recognizing the handwriting of a test-taker or being influenced by his name, other scholars would copy the answers and put a number on the answers instead of a name to keep the examination system fair.

The Sui dynasty’s first emperor, Wen (r. 589–604), first sought to create a strong central government in his reunification of China. To give access to government positions to those he just brought back into imperial China, he established a limited examination system to choose officials and a series of rules (adopted by other dynasties as well) to prevent corruption by officials: local officials could not appoint subordinates; officials could not serve in their native place; and officials could serve no more than one tour of duty in the same location. Although Emperor Taizong, the second emperor of the celebrated Tang dynasty, was most famous for his bureaucratic system of rule and his legal system—utilized from this period forward to the twentieth century by
Chinese emperors to control their vast empires—he also increased the positions granted to those passing the examination system. Instead of the haphazard system of the Sui, the exams were used for filling positions that were newly created or when a position would become vacant due to the official in question lacking an heir. This meant about one-third of all positions during the early Tang. His Ministry of Officials appointed, promoted, and demoted the officials that helped run the government, down to the local magistrate, leaving local affairs to the local gentry. It was under Tang’s Empress Wu, the only female to rule in her own name, that the examination system became even more important, although again not universal. Because she believed her family was descended from Laozi, creator of Daoism, the test in her and husband’s day also had questions about Daoism to answer. After her expulsion from the throne in 705 at the age of 82, Confucianists resumed their monopoly over the questions.

The wars that ended the Tang and started the Song left a strange situation among the rich and poor, educated and uneducated. Some longstanding gentry families had lost everything, and new families had become wealthy. Only holding a degree allowed the elites to separate themselves from just those who owned land. The Song dynasty instituted an examination system more fair than ever before, used up until the twentieth century (with the exception of the Yuan dynasty) and ending hereditary officialdom (save the emperor and during the Yuan dynasty). All central government officials would be chosen based on Confucian exams; for five hundred spots over one hundred thousand competed—that second figure would grow throughout the centuries, making it difficult for those who completed the exams to obtain an appointment. The printing press—not just a block printing but with moveable type—in full use made Confucian books for study widely available. Of course the usual degree earner came from a wealthy, educated family; it took time to learn classical written Chinese, let alone the Confucian canon. But once in a while, a smart village boy received backing from his neighbors (or his lineage) to allow him to study, take the exams, and make the village (or lineage) famous.

Also during the Song dynasty Neo-Confucianism replaced older Confucianism. Its most famous scholar, Zhu Xi, looked at Confucianism through the lens of his own time. For example, people were born good but needed training and self-cultivation through meditation to show this goodness to the world. Zhu’s ideas became the orthodox interpretation of Neo-Confucian thought. So important were his ideas that in the late Southern Song, his was the sole interpretation used to pass through the examination system; students even needed to copy the format of his writing for the tests, the so-called eight-legged essay. The downside to Zhu’s work is that it led to stagnation among China’s intellectuals, who needed to memorize the style and substance of one particular version of Neo-Confucianism from the thirteenth through the nineteenth century. No longer would a degree seeker dare to interpret the Confucian canon himself to show off his brilliance. Students (and those who graded the different levels of the examination system) instead valued memorization not intellectualism, leading eventually to a weakened Chinese intelligencia.

The Yuan dynasty either ignored or marginalized the examination system, so it was up to the first emperor of the Ming dynasty (Taizu), to bring it back in all its glory. Taizu was a harsh and autocratic ruler, executing those who spoke out or even made a pun on his name or position. He restored the imperial
university and examination system to full prominence in 1382, holding the
tests more often than ever before.

As for other countries, Korea, as the country most apt to copy China, also
used the examination system, although never to the extent China did. **Koryo Korea** adopted in 958 a Chinese-style civil service examination system, em-
phasizing mastery of Confucian ethics. Although implementing this system
helped broaden the possibility of upward social mobility for talented Koreans
of low social background in theory, it, like other memorization tests, tended to
stifle intellectual creativity and kept educated Korean Sinophillic (ones who
love China). Besides, the system really had the effect of continuing aristocratic
rule. The difficulty of mastering written Chinese, the lack of time to learn the
Chinese classics, the exclusion from many government schools, and the num-
ber of petty restrictions based on class prejudice kept the potential pool of the
poor quite low, unable to take any real advantage of the theoretical opportu-
nity Chinese ideas allowed commoners. Status was essentially determined at
birth. High government posts went to those at the top of the “bone ranks,” a
hereditary and not merit-based system.

The Yi dynasty took hold in Korea with the expulsion of the Mongols in the
late fourteenth century. The new dynasty was profoundly influenced by Neo-
Confucianism. Some scholars have argued that Korea became perhaps more
Neo-Confucian than even China, with the exception of allowing anyone to
take part in the examination system to obtain government positions—the sys-
tem still only catered to the elite.

Japan experimented with the examination system with the Taiho Code es-
tablished in 702. Not only did the code divide the country into three levels of
administration and used the **equal field system**, but it also set up the examina-
tion system for Japan. However, it really only worked for minor positions in
the aristocracy: Japan would remain controlled by hereditary rule, unlike
China, and would soon let the tests fall by the wayside.

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**Feng Shui**

Feng shui is Chinese geomancy that is practiced also in Korea and Japan;
*feng shui* literally means “wind-water,” with water the yin of the yin–yang du-
ality. Water is also one of the Five Elements so important to geomancy (fire
and wood are yang, water and metal are yin, with the earth in balance be-
tween yin and yang). It was a part of **Religious Daoism**. Feng shui was used
at the time to decide where to put cities, graves, and houses. The Chinese in-
vented the magnetic compass to insure buildings and cities faced south (like
the needle did in China). Geomancy sought to increase the positive energy
flowing to the people while pushing away the vapors or negative energy. It also
meant trying to live in peace with nature. A geomancer might warn a landowner not to dig in certain parts of his land. The feng shui specialist might also tell a government official to build a pagoda to block the vapors coming out of a stagnant lake near the capital; nonmoving water was even more charged with yin than flowing water.

Koreans followed a similar system of geomancy. Theirs, however, mixed the original Chinese ideas with Buddhist thought, a combination that greatly influenced traditional Korean thought. A government bureau in Silla Korea, headed by an official of either the first or second bone rank, built more Korean Buddhist monasteries on top of high mountains at certain points to have a beneficial influence on the surrounding terrain. These locations were chosen by geomancy.

In Japan, geomancy was mainly used for choosing grave sites, building sites, and city sites. It used topography and yin–yang ideas to come up with the best settings for these places. It was more popular in the Heian Period and helped choose the placement of the capital of Heian/Kyoto, the only real city until the sixteenth century.

Further Reading

Flower Squires
Flower squires is an organization set up in Silla in the sixth century before unification of the Korean peninsula. In Silla, one of Korea’s three kingdoms, Buddhism was welcomed and made the state religion. Its king, who, like his successors, took on Buddhist names, hoped it could help the unification process. These were the days, after all, when three kingdoms divided the peninsula in state building, religion, and philosophy. Only a few years after the king converted his kingdom to Buddhism in 527, the king created the flower squires, in Korean the hwarang. The flower squires were an elite corps of aristocratic youth who attended an exclusive military academy dedicated to the protection of Silla and Buddhism. The deity worshiped by the flower squires was the last Buddha Maitreya, in Korean Miruk; most Koreans in this period followed suit. Only later did the majority of Koreans change to Pure Land Buddhism.

Chinese culture greatly influenced the flower squires. At the flower squires’ military academy, the initiates were taught the six traditional arts of China: etiquette, music, archery, riding, writing, and arithmetic. They even learned swordsmanship, stone throwing, javelin throwing, ladder climbing, and polo. They wore incredible, awe-inspiring clothing and makeup. They followed a new code of behavior called the Five Commandments, which was mostly Confucian with some Buddhism mixed in: loyalty to the King, filial piety toward parents, sincerity in friendship, courage in battle, and discrimination in killing.

There were several hundred bands of flower squires by the seventh century, and they worked successful to create a unified Korea under Silla after the coming of the Tang Chinese. From their ranks the king was able to choose good generals, brave soldiers, and able ministers, all depending on the aristocratic ranks of the individual.
Food

Most Americans understand that ethnic cuisines change greatly when adapted to U.S. taste buds. So it should not come as a surprise that the foods eaten in East Asia from 400 to 1400 were very much different from American versions of Chinese, Korean, and Japanese food. But differences go further than this. Before the Columbian exchange starting around 1500, many common foodstuffs were simply unavailable to the Asian Old World until introduced from Native American cultivators. Foods such as corn, hot peppers, and peanuts—all part of a dish called “Hunan chicken” in the United States today—were unheard of in China before 1500. In fact, it is hard to narrow down a historic cuisine like China’s in any event, as the huge size of the empire—even just counting the acres of arable land—dwarfed that of Western Europe. So where you would have French, German, or Italian cuisines in Europe, Chinese people had far different foods depending on which part of the country they lived. There were, however, similarities between Chinese, Korean, and Japanese foods for those who lived by the ocean or sea. All three civilizations ate kelp and fish. Especially useful in soups, kelp provides a fullness of flavor also called savory, the fifth of the different kinds of tastes the human’s taste buds distinguish. This savory sense, called umami today by researchers from the Japanese (xianwei in Chinese), was first discovered by Asians long before Western scientists finally concurred. Finally, fish and seafood delicacies did not count as meat for the Buddhists in these countries, just as in contemporary Christian Europe—and if Chinese lived too far from the sea, the extensive river and lake systems of inland China at the time teemed with fish and river varieties of prawns.

When one thinks of food and China, rice races to the top of the list. But traditional China was north China, where the first Chinese grew millet (in the West today millet is used as birdseed), then barley and kaoliang (sorghum), before the coming of wheat in around 1500 B.C.E. Wheat was for more affluent in north China—turned into flour for noodles, dumplings, and steamed bread—and millet for the very poor. Rice was the dish of choice for those living south of the Yangzi River (and for the rich in the north after the creation of the Grand Canal). Peasants also grew bamboo (for eating the shoots), taro, melons, chestnuts, bananas, lychee, and palm and citrus trees. The better off also ate long-domesticated pigs, sheep, chickens, ducks, geese, and much more rarely oxen, cattle, or camel. They ate as much of these animals as possible, making delicacies out of sweetbreads and deep-fried intestines, for example. The oxen and cows ate too much grain compared to the calories the meat or milk would provide (plus most Chinese lacked an enzyme in their stomachs to digest cow’s milk properly). This led peasants to use these large beasts as work animals only or not keep them on the farm at all. For most of the period 400 to 1400, if one lived well away from cities and towns, Chinese could expect to hunt game or even vermin for food. They consumed bear, deer, marmots, otters, pheasant, elephants, monkeys, rabbits, snakes, rats, cockroaches, and turtles. In fact, under the Mongols much of north China and Manchuria served as private hunting grounds for the elite. And from abroad, elite Chinese dined

Further Reading
on peaches from Samarkand; pistachios, figs, and dates from Persia; mangoes from Southeast Asia; and pine nuts and ginseng roots from Korea. But most important, Chinese grew soybeans. Soybeans served as protein—either eaten alone, turned into tofu, or made into a soy flour for baking or other uses—for those who could not afford to eat meat or those who decided to follow meticulously Buddhist religious restrictions on meat.

Because China’s traditional fertilizers were animal and human feces, water and many raw vegetables could not be consumed directly if one lived in a place with lots of farmland or many towns and cities. All the bacteria and viruses in the “nightsoil”—the euphemism for human feces used as fertilizer—contaminated the vegetables and when rain came it washed into rivers and streams. That is why Chinese cooking called for quickly increasing the temperature through boiling, steaming, broiling, roasting, and frying—getting food hot enough to kill the dangers present in the raw food. Baking was rarer, with no “oven” in a regular Chinese household—even rich ones—made for the job. By placing food in a pot or wrapping it in clay and throwing on embers one could get an approximation of baking. Chinese cut up food into small pieces before cooking to allow a diner to eat using just chopsticks, and if soup, a spoon.

In terms of beverages, starting in the sixth century in the south and the eighth century in the north tea became a popular drink, especially among monks and nuns wanting to stay alert during meditation. Tea came from the hilly regions in China’s southwest and remained a secret for many centuries. Nomads often traded or raided for tea, using it with mare’s milk or sheep’s milk as a soup instead of just a drink. Although Chinese would prefer to drink tea, one too poor to buy it often would drink “white tea,” which was just water boiled long enough to be safe for drinking. Wine was available to the elite, but rice wine was drunk all over China. Rice wine is perhaps a misnomer, as the beverage was manufactured through brewing like beer. In the north millet was used, in the south rice. In addition, nonalcoholic fruit juices—including the invention of an instant fruit drink—slaked the thirst of middle-income peasants and richer Chinese.

Korea’s cuisine was influenced constantly by China and once due to Mongol invasion. Because of peninsula-moderated the weather, rice could be grown in most river valleys, while peasants in the northern plains struggled with wheat and uncertain rainfall. Korean peasants thus ate similarly to the Chinese peasant: vegetables and a tiny bit of meat or fish mixed with noodles, dumplings, and rice. The Mongols left behind the habit of eating grilled meat (still popular in Korean restaurants to this day), as well as a taste for black pepper that needed to be imported. Among the food innovations by the Koreans were fermented kimchi (in theory any fermented vegetable with seasonings, but usually meaning spicy Chinese cabbage) and fermented soybean paste called *misoo*.

The Japanese copied outright from the Koreans miso as the starter for soup, whereas the elites of the Heian Period ate wheat noodles like the Chinese did—it would be seven centuries before common Japanese ate wheat noodles. The elites also ate polished white rice and suffered stomach disorders as a result—rice needs its husk or an infusion of vitamins for a consumer to get the full dietary benefits of rice. During Heian times Japanese elites cared more for how food looked and was presented over its preparation and taste. This ideal continues to this day to some extent: Japanese gauge if they are eating properly if they have eaten food of every color. Also during Heian times Buddhism
was so popular in the capital that the eating of meat virtually stopped there. There was even a brief attempt to end the eating of fish, but it did not hold up over the years. Those living in the mountains, even Buddhists, decided that because fish were difficult to catch in the quick-moving streams, birds were an acceptable alternative as “fish of the air.” And to appease elites in the capital who longed for boar’s meat, Japanese Buddhists collectively looked the other way as a boar was also declared a bird!

Peasants ate rice as gruel but did not polish the rice, which left the nutrients intact. They also lived on other grains and vegetables with a little fish. With the rise of the bushi or warrior class in the Kamakura Period, hunting resumed for the new elites, and cuisine moved a step closer to modern Japanese food. The warriors also demanded rice; it became a custom that warriors had to be paid one and a quarter pounds of rice daily. Eventually modern delicacies like sashimi (sliced raw fish) or sushi (fish with vinegar rice) became popular for those who could afford them. Apparently tofu (soybean curd) came about very late in the Ashikaga Period to help the peasants eat a useful animal-free protein. And by this late date the Japanese had adopted the chopstick (early on they used a two-pronged wooden device to eat) but discarded the spoon, preferring to bring the soup bowl up to their lips to drink. Zen Buddhist monks brought over tea, and the Japanese began drinking leaves picked earlier and not fermented like Chinese black tea. The elites even turned the whole tea-drinking experience (the tea ceremony) into a highly ritualized form that helped Zen Buddhism teach some of its ideas.

Further Reading

Footbinding
Footbinding was a vivid and crippling reminder that Chinese elite society had changed after the fall of the Tang dynasty and help stand for the Neo-Confucianist backlash against women. Footbinding became popular for the gentry’s daughters during the Song dynasty. This incredibly painful procedure—wrapping a 5-year-old’s feet so they would not grow—kept the elite women’s feet smaller than their fist. It made it difficult to walk and thus showed that the family was wealthy enough to do without the work of the woman in question. It also pushed these women out of society, where they had a place before, and into their homes’ shadows. Unless planning to sell a daughter to be a concubine, poor girls and women did not experience this torture; husband, wife, and daughters all needed to work the fields together to survive.

Footbinding also had a sexual component. As the foot tried to grow, the bones snapped and left the foot looking a little like a lotus flower, and was considered erotic. A woman with her feet bound up as a youth would use a really small shoe as an adult. Due to acupuncture beliefs, the Chinese looked at the body as having two different body parts “attached” to each other for certain hours of the day, in this case the feet and genitals. In addition, some
men believed that the hobbled walking-style footbound women used made the muscles of her genitalia stronger. Many Chinese men believed that the body would supposedly pass that tight feeling of her feet and her awkward walking to her vagina, increasing the male’s pleasure during sexual intercourse. The foot fetish may give pause to the Western reader, but remember in the United States today women inflate their breasts with bags full of potentially poisonous materials or otherwise alter their appearance through dangerous plastic surgery. Body image in the United States leads teen-aged girls (and others) to risk their health by not eating or purging after a large meal.

Further Reading

**Grand Canal**

The Grand Canal is a system of man-made canals and rivers that connect the area just south of the Yangzi River delta to north China and the Yellow River. The two emperors of the *Sui dynasty* decided to link a few canals together and extend them to allow grain the state received in taxes to come up from the rice-rich south from Hangzhou (south of the mouth of the Yangzi) to the new capital of Loyang in north China for the 6 months the water levels allowed transit. Another segment of the canal went northeast to an area south of Manchuria that served as a staging area for the invasion of Korea. Built with *corvee* labor of supposedly five and one half million peasants, these forced laborers faced death if they fled and the whip if they worked too slowly. Along the canal were an imperial road, post offices, a courier service, and trees planted for shade. Once the Grand Canal was completed, the second emperor, Emperor Yang took his four-story, 270-foot long dragon boat south to the Yangzi River, towed by peasant power. His entourage reached eighty-thousand men and stretched out as many as 60 miles. He had forced labor build forty palaces so he could avoid sleeping on the barge (water was associated by Chinese with yin, negative energy).

During the *Tang dynasty*, China reached its high point politically, economically, and culturally. Emperor Xuanzong repaired and extended the Grand Canal further west to the new capital Changan. The Tang dynasty was also when new boats were designed for the different parts of the canal for safety and increased usage. This allowed over 150,000 tons of grain and other goods to move north to the capital. Late in the Tang dynasty, discontent among the peasantry, coupled with famine in parts of the country and enormous floods along the path of the Grand Canal, led to rebellions that helped to end the dynasty in 907.

After a 53-year period of lack of central control, the Song dynasty rebounded, and with a new invention—a more efficient lock for the canal—built a parallel addition to avoid the Tang-era problems with flooding along the older route of the Grand Canal. The loss of the north led to the Southern Song dynasty, and the northern part of the canal suffered great decay under the Jurchen while the southern, shorter parts functioned beautifully. Once the Mongols took over north China from the Jurchen, all the way to the fall of the Song and start of the *Yuan dynasty*, Mongols—uncharacteristically for nomadic peoples—rebuilt the
northern-most segment of the canal and extended it to their capital Beijing. The Grand Canal was its longest, over 1,100 miles. The later days of the Mongols again led to trouble with the canal. The third emperor of the Ming, after deciding to move his capital from Nanjing in the south to Beijing in the north, would be left with the problem of repairing the canal’s northern-most section, only with newer technology that allowed the canal to function year-round. With a few exceptions, the Grand Canal has continued along this path from this period onward, with much of it widened and used to this day, although no longer human powered through the muscles of canal workers that would haul the ships up or down the system before communism took hold of the government.

Further Reading

Great Wall

The Great Wall of China is in many ways a misnomer. The Great Wall is really a series of walls created throughout history by many different dynasties and even smaller states. And sometimes the wall is not even a wall at all; it might be a ditch, a mountain, or a deep valley. The traditional wall would continue on the other side of the obstruction. And the wall varied in materials based on the year and place of manufacture. In the east, large stones and bricks made up the foundation and top of the wall. In regions to the west, the wall was made of stamped loess soil, and in the desert far to the west, Chinese used sand mixed with reeds and branches.

The wall was started during the Warring States Period for protection from neighbors and northern mounted nomads. The first series of connected Great Walls occurred during the first dynasty. Supposedly the emperor of the Qin dynasty sent three million peasants to connect and extend the wall. It served to keep out the less-determined nomads of the north and mark the boundary between the agricultural region of China and the plains and deserts beyond. It could serve as a defensive barrier when sufficiently manned (although a determined attack would always succeed), a watchful eye on nomads when just a few in towers could light signal fires or explode fireworks, and a base of operations when trying to bring the fight to the nomad homelands. Successive dynasties repaired or built new walls for almost 2,000 years, oftentimes using prison labor. The Han and the Ming dynasties were the biggest builders. If all wall systems in the north were to be measured and added together, they would probably exceed 30,000 miles in length. What we consider the Great Wall today was built or rebuilt during the Ming dynasty, and is called by Chinese “The Ten Thousand Li Long Wall,” where a li is approximately a little less than one third of a mile. Today’s wall (the Ming Great Wall) stretches over 3,000 miles, from Shanhaiquan on the sea near Beijing westward to Jiayuguan in Gansu province, although sometimes the wall doubles back on itself or heads directly south to a dead-end. The wall also varied in size from 10 feet to 35 feet high and from 6 feet to 10 feet wide. It included square walled enclosures with a watchtower and gate-tower on top, with a fortified complex series of inner gates to allow traffic from one side of the wall to the other. Beacon
towers dotted the wall at visual intervals to pass messages by sight, sound, or horsey/running courier.

Two of the great myths surrounding the Great Wall: one, that it is all one wall built at one time, and two, that it is the only human-made object visible from the moon or orbit. Even the Chinese “astronaut” Yang Liwei announced in 2003 upon his return to earth that it was impossible to see the Great Wall from space.

Further Reading

Heian Period (794–1185)

This period of Japanese history started when Japanese Emperor Kammu moved the capital from Nara to Heian (today’s Kyoto). As the Tang dynasty grew weak, Japan created more and more of its own culture. Historians, however, know little about the lives of the peasants up through the Heian Period. The aristocracy took little notice of the commoners. When they did write about the peasants, 90 percent of society, authors would describe them like animals. But because the period was a vibrant one for literature, historians have a good idea how the aristocrats in the capital—again made out of wood—lived. The most important work is *Tale of Genji*, not only the world’s first novel, but the first surviving work in Japanese and a work written by a woman, Lady Murasaki, probably from 1008 to 1021. The story takes place over 75 years, following three generations of the imperial family and five hundred characters in fifty-four chapters originally written in haphazard order most likely to amuse ladies of the court and not for publication. The story became famous first because the beautiful poetry—for a long time considered the only important Japanese language literature—written within the sprawling tale.

In brief, *Tale of Genji* is a story about looking for love where it is forbidden or unlikely to be found. The hero of the tale is popular among Japanese then (and now) because of his capacity to be deeply moved and emotional through poetry, painting, music, and affairs of the heart. Most important, the novel helps to explain the aesthetics of Heian Japan, at least for the 5 percent of elite Japanese living in the capital. But what the Heian Period aristocrats considered beautiful was not necessarily the obvious. Instead of the tune, the smell, or the sight, Heian Japanese elites, in contrast to Chinese, admired the transient nature of life heard in the last few notes of a song fading away, fragrance wafting on the breeze, or shadows present at dusk or dawn. Because marriages were arranged as part of political expedience, men and women in the *Tale of Genji*—and we assume in Heian Japan—had many secret affairs, tales of courtly love. But a man would fall in love with a woman not based on her beauty, because women often hid behind screens when courting, but on her writing style or poetry recited. Genji excelled at dance, poetry, and calligraphy, and could cry in front of people should his love be out of reach. Genji is not a hero by standard Western definition that always puts his feelings out of reach to fight the bad guy.

Buddhism rebounded from the move with new sects—although neither was at first allowed to initiate monks—including the rivals Saicho with his Lotus School.
and Kukai with his Esoteric (or Shingon) Buddhism. The latter sect used pictures to explain Buddhist mysteries and was only open to monks studying with him, a position that led to bitterness between the two leaders. Kukai had visited China and India, and some scholars claim his knowledge of Sanskrit led him to simplify certain Chinese ideograms to represent Japanese sounds, thus making it possible to Lady Murasaki to write in Japanese two centuries later. Saicho built his monastery overlooking the city on Mt. Hiei. Within a few centuries the temple grounds grew to include three thousand buildings. Unfortunately, the Mt. Hiei monks, led by lesser men than Saicho, often times fought in the streets of the capital, demanding titles and land rights. With little military after the end to the conscription system, Heian leaders had to give in many times.

After centuries controlling the imperial family, the Fujiwara needed to keep the size of the imperial family—its relatives—limited in size. To do so it cut off branch families after a certain number of imperial generations. The collateral families had new names and wealth from provincial posts, but many elites would rather live in Heian with its many urban delights made famous by Lady Murasaki and so appointed others to do their jobs and run their estates. Other branch families, most famously Taira and Minamoto, became great warrior families with money for horses and expensive weapons and armor. Fighting soon broke out in the provinces between different groups in the eleventh century. This showed the weakness of the Heian system. Even rule by the emperors changed. Retired or “cloistered emperors” ran the government while the emperor just reigned and performed the Shinto rites. The system finally broke down when in 1156 military force from the provinces was used to control the government starting a cycle of violence across Japan. The eventual victor was the Minamoto family in 1185.

Further Reading

Kamakura Period (1185–1333)

This period of Japanese history started with the victory of the Minamoto family after a series of civil wars. Seven years into their de facto control over Japan, Minamoto left his position and forced the emperor to establish in 1192 a new position for control of the secular (and military) government, the shogun—barbarian quelling generalissimo.

This new era, the Kamakura Period or bakufu (tent government—government by the military) began with the shogun controlling Japan from the Kanto Plain, near where Tokyo is today. The emperor granted the shogun the secular power needed to appoint bureaucrats to staff provincial posts. This made it easier to rule the country. Unfortunately for the Minamoto family, the shogun, Minamoto Yoritomo distrusted his own family and had many members killed. Upon his death his widow and her father started to control from behind the
East Asia

Scenes. Instead of taking the shogunate directly, these Hojo family members decided to rule through the shogun as regents. Within three generations the shogun was from the Fujiwara family, with the Hojo family actually running the country through its role as regent.

The late Heian Period and Kamakura Period (both eras where China was weak, leaving the Japanese to create their own culture) saw the rise of the military class, the bushi or warrior. Not quite the samurai of film and comic book fame, the bushi owned lands like a European knight that enabled him to be able to own the horse, armor, and sword needed for combat. These warriors were rewarded for their victories in the long wars at the end of the Heian Period. They also were subject to the Joei Code in 1232. This code provided rules for the bushi in matters that might well have been solved by violence, such as land tenure, succession, and property rights of widows and divorced women. The shogunate, under the Hojo, would work to solve such disputes in the fairest ways possible. Warriors began to work on an informal code of their own, although not quite the samurai bushido code of the seventeenth century. Kill or be killed was part of the code, and seppuku (ritual disembowelment often called “harakiri”) was for those dishonored on the battlefield. These men were aided by new sects of Buddhism, especially Zen Buddhism for its single mindedness and lack of fear of death. Nichiren Buddhism, with its strong appeal to patriots and simple ways to nirvana, and Pure Land Buddhism (and its splinter group True Pure Land Buddhism) with its nembutsu chanting and optimism about being reborn in a heaven-like Pure Land, also helped bushi, commoners, and elites alike.

There were some brief outbreaks of violence, but the bakufu retained control over Japan quite easily until the coming of the Mongols. In 1274, Khubilai Khan sent an invasion fleet made up of Korean ships, Korean warriors, and Mongol horsemen—a total of thirty-thousand men—to invade Kyushu. Fierce fighting broke out, but an unexpected storm destroyed much of the fleet and led those on the ground to retreat. In 1281, now leading the Yuan dynasty in China, Khubilai Khan sent envoys to urge Japan to surrender. Instead, the Japanese executed the envoys. Luckily for Japan, the Mongols again invaded Kyushu; this time the Japanese had built a wall to make breaching defenses more difficult, even in the face of one-hundred forty thousand enemies. Again a typhoon halted the attack and the Mongols again retreated, this time for good.

Although a military victory, no additional lands or wealth were won in the struggle and divided up among the bushi. As a result, the bushi became less enamored of their leaders. So when Emperor Go-Daigo launched his Kemmu Restoration in 1333, seeking to return the power to rule to the emperor, many disgruntled bushi joined his cause, so ending the Kamakura Period.

Further Reading

Koryo (Korea) 935–1254

A former merchant, Wang Kon, reunified his country in 935 as Koryo, from which we get Korea. Because so many of the aristocrats had died in the wars
for control of Korea, Wang and his successors were able to create a government much closer to the Chinese model, including a civil service examination system in place after 958 based on Confucian ethics and Chinese history. Government schools soon taught these subjects, allowing some of society’s lower-ranking members into important positions, if they could learn to read Chinese!

Koryo soon faced trouble from without, as a formerly nomadic people, the Khitans, settled down in Manchuria and defeated the Koreans, forcing Koryo to become a weak tributary state in 1010. Only 8 years later, Koryo decisively defeated the Khitans, allowing the Koreans to build a wall to prevent a future invasion. Later that century, the Khitans were defeated and replaced by the Jurchen—Koreans put down the Jurchen quickly thereafter.

Although the bone ranks ceased to exist, Korea’s hereditary aristocracy slowly rebuilt itself and divided society into different sectors. At the top were the civil officials and the military officers, together called the yangban (the two orders). Next came a small group, the chungin (middle people), lower-ranking government officials. Below these hereditary aristocrat ranks came the commoners and peasants called the yangmin (good people), whose taxes and corvee labor supported the government and aristocracy, as those on top passed on the tax burden to those below through their growing, tax-free estates. Their poverty was obvious—trade was conducted usually in barter. At the very bottom, making up at least 30 percent of the population, were the chonmin. The “lowborn” were made up of slaves descended matrilineally, government workers in mines and porcelain factories, and workers made outcast because of Buddhism, like the burakumin in Japan: butchers, tanners, leatherworkers, and entertainers.

Koryo’s civilian government was overthrown in 1170 by a military coup. A century of military rule followed, but not peacefully. Military men fought each other for control, and—peasant and slave rebellions brought widespread social turbulence. Only one military strongman was able to bring a semblance of order to Korea: General Choe Chung-hon. He eliminated rivals, put down rebellions, and he and his descendants kept the Mongols out of Korea until assassinated so Koryo could stop the fight with the Mongols to become their tributary state. For the next 100 years or so, Korean kings were forced to marry Mongolian princesses, and self-rule ended.

Further Reading

Late Tang Dynasty (751–907)

Emperor Xuanzong spent the first half of his reign (712–765) as an active emperor. Yet he tired of the position. He withdrew from politics and let his chief minister rule as a virtual dictator. Then came a series of minor catastrophes. First came the abandonment of a militia army for an expensive, paid mercenary force. Frontier generals led nomadic troops in great numbers to
protect China’s new gains, sometimes with little thought of loyalty. Couple that with a defeat with Arab forces in 751 and a deepening social crisis as fewer peasants paid increasing taxes—all due to Buddhism taking away land from the tax rolls and ignoring yet again the equal field system. And unfortunately for peasants not yet born, no dynasty would ever again succeed in implementing land equalization.

The biggest damage to the dynasty started in 755 with the illiterate slave of nomad origin An Lushan. Grotesquely obese but charismatic and cunning, he had gotten into the confidences of Emperor Xuanzong’s favorite consort and thus the emperor by playing the buffoon. He used this trust to send one-hundred fifty thousand troops from north China to Loyang without meeting resistance. He then closed the short gap and attacked the capital Changan, proclaiming himself the new emperor. The real emperor fled south in remorse; his escorts forced him to kill his betrayed consort. Then Xuanzong’s heir apparent fought An’s forces until victory in 763.

The victory proved hollow, as loss of the capital showed the dynasty’s weakness. Quickly between 25 percent and 30 percent of China fell into the hands of autonomous military governors, and parts of the empire to the far west obtained their independence. Throughout the final half of the dynasty, emperors periodically had to fight these generals to keep from independence. In addition, eunuchs rose up at the end of the eighth century. Although originally hired to protect the emperor’s wives, consorts, and concubines, by this late date they took charge of the secret police and became virtual masters of the country. Eunuchs chose eight out of the nine emperors to mount the throne after 800. Conflict between eunuch factions held them back from total control.

Hoping to stop the dynasty’s decline and to increase tax receipts otherwise stolen along their way to the capital by the empire’s own collectors, the Emperor Wuzong—a fervent Daoist—persecuted Buddhists to bring their lands back onto the tax rolls. From 841 to 846, the new emperor through edict destroyed 4,600 temples and monasteries, forty-thousand smaller shrines, and secularized 260,000 monks and nuns. Pure Land Buddhism in China would never recover, nor would Buddhism ever again have as much influence, even as successor emperors repealed Wuzong’s efforts. Instead, Chan Buddhism (Zen Buddhism in Japan) would become the most popular form, even taking over some of the church-like behaviors of the Pure Land sect. Besides, the monetary windfall expected from the elimination of Buddhism turned out to be too little to help save the dynasty. Discontent among the peasantry, coupled with famine in parts of the country and enormous floods along the path of the Grand Canal, led to rebellions. The largest of these became one of the largest in Chinese history—the Huang Chao Rebellion—and its merchant-family leader even declared himself emperor over part of China for 2 years, until the few surviving members of the Tang dynasty, allied with Turkish fighters, defeated him. But at what cost? The Tang dynasty disintegrated in 907 into another disunited period, this time only 53 years in duration.

Further Reading
The idea that China needed laws was anathema to Confucianists. But starting with the Han dynasty, emperors decided that although it would be wonderful if Confucian ideals about morality worked in the Han dynasty, the Period of Disunity, or Tang dynasty, the emperors believed that the Qin dynasty’s Legalism, the idea that people are evil or at least lazy and the government needs laws to control them, needed to work with Confucianism—leading by moral example—to keep China ordered and peaceful. Yet moralism is writ large all over how China enforces its laws. China’s legal system goes back to the celebrated Tang dynasty and Emperor Taizong, its second emperor. He first divided China into first ten (later fifteen) large circuits that resemble modern-day provinces in their boundaries. He then subdivided them into over three-hundred-fifty prefectures and more than fifteen-hundred counties managed by magistrates and other officials, the lowest part of the central bureaucracy that could be appointed by the emperor. The final division, sixteen-thousand districts, were under control of the local elites, as the central government could not control what happened at the local level with the size of the empire and the technology of the time. Most important, Taizong also created laws of two types—primary (meant for all time) and secondary (regulations that would be adjusted over time).

The worst crimes were the Ten Abominations, which covered four different categories of criminal behavior. Most were about the emperor and included plots to eliminate the current emperor, as well as what to feed him and how to treat him if diseased. Laws even covered criticism of the emperor or destruction of his property. The second category of abominations were crimes against the state (helping a foreign ruler or killing a top official), although as the emperor was a stand-in for the state, oftentimes a crime was a first and second abominations. The third category of abominations was crimes against one’s own family—beating or murdering any elders in the family or one’s husband. Of course violence, on the other hand, as long as not fatal, was not a crime. For example, a father could beat his son with impunity. Even making accusations against one’s elders was a crime, as was selling them into slavery. Finally, the final category of abominations were depraved crimes: dismembering or burning a body, implementing poisons to kill, using sorcery, or killing three members of the same household.

The rest of the primary crimes were the ordinary crimes seen in society then and now: murder, robbery, rape, and so on. These crimes would be tried at the local level by local gentry, while at least the top two levels of abominations would be tried by imperial courts by mandarins. It was hard to get a fair trial locally, because at the lowest levels of government a gentry member might be the tax collector, police chief, and judge all in one! In larger districts, all these positions might be held by members of the same household. Guilt was determined by the judge examining the evidence and interrogating the suspect. The judge was supposed to see if the suspect’s statement made logical sense; find if the suspect was blushing or breathing strangely while telling his or her story and thus lying; check to see if the suspect could hear the questions asked; and look into his or her eyes to see if they were clear (to see if not insane or otherwise unfit to stand trial). Key to determining guilt, like Europe at the time, was the confession. As a moral society, the elites expected the criminal to admit guilt.
If the criminal refused, but facts bore out the suspect’s guilt, the judge could demand the suspect be tortured until the court received a guilty confession. But whether at the local level or some higher level with judges appointed by the emperor (or later, in the Song dynasty, appointed through the examination system), judges had little leeway in sentencing the criminal, as the punishments were often printed on the walls of the judge’s office. Five different punishments awaited Chinese criminals: thrashing with the rod up to fifty blows; hitting with a thick stick up to one hundred blows; enslaving by the state for up to 3 years (jails were only to hold suspects temporarily); exiling up to 1,000 miles; and executing by either strangulation (preferred) or decapitation (worse because of the belief that one’s ancestor’s provided one with a body and it was a disgrace to not leave the world as one came into it). The emperor had to review all death sentences and often commuted the sentence to a lesser one. Notice that except for death, all forms of punishment relied on embarrassment; even with laws Chinese Confucianism influenced society in a moralistic fashion.

Another was of controlling subjects at the local level—reinstituted by Emperor Taizu, first emperor of the Ming dynasty—used the li-jia system for local control and allocating corvee service. Every ten families in an area were a jia and ten jia formed a li. All were responsible for each other following the laws and making sure corvee work was done. If anyone broke the law, all in that jia and perhaps in the li (depending on the seriousness of the crime) would face the same sentence as the one who did the crime, unless someone turned in the suspect immediately.

Korea and Japan from 700 to 1400 followed closely Chinese law. Although the exact crimes and penalties would not necessarily be enforced, the Korean and Japanese codes of law worked in similar ways to Tang China’s law codes.

Further Reading

**Legalism**

Legalism is the idea that all a ruler does is right, and that repressive, restrictive, and punishing laws need to be placed on the rest of society. The Qin state, which unified China for the first time, began its conquests with Legalism as its state ideology and kept the philosophy through its short history as a dynastic empire. Through ruthless war, the Qin achieved victory. The Qin dynasty inaugurated imperial China in 221 B.C.E. with the first emperor.

Under Legalism, an individual only existed to serve the state in wartime and harvest time. People needed laws to regulate their behavior because according to Legalism people were evil, or at their best, lazy. Laws needed stiff penalties, including death. A whole family might pay the punishment, under the theory that collective responsibility made rebellion less likely and families should not shield a law breaker. Leaders raised taxes to obscene levels in peacetime to help pay for wars already waged; in some ways the populace
looked forward to war as a period of less repression! Luckily for the Chinese people, the Qin dynasty only lasted until 207 B.C.E., as peasant unrest over repression and taxes helped to eliminate those who sought to continue the Qin. Unfortunately for peaceful Chinese, Legalist ideas would continue in future dynasties like the Han and the Sui, and even in more recent times with the Cultural Revolution under Communist Mao Zedong (1966–1969) or the Tiananmen Square massacre in June 1989 under Deng Xiaoping. Leaders imposed Legalism to create a repressive future.

During the Han dynasty, a Confucian scholar figured out the reason for continuing the Legalist tradition with harsh laws. He realized the Han dynasty was the heir to the Qin, so it needed to continue many of these Legalist practices. Confucianists had claimed that laws were unnecessary and a ruler should lead by example to get the people to do good. Although perhaps true in the time of the Shang, Zhou, or even the Warring States Period, he argued, the world of the Han was much different. It needed the laws of the Legalists in conjunction with the moral example of Confucianists, just like the world needed the dark of the yin with the light of the yang. Legalism stayed as part of the ruling system in China, but never as a popular philosophy. It was also tempered by Confucian benevolence in government.

Further Reading

Lineages

In China and Korea, families kept track of their ancestors for what in the West has been mistakenly called “ancestor worship.” Lineages were families that could trace their ancestors back to the same source, always a male and usually the male who settled the area where the lineage held its ancestral hall. The lineages that could trace back their ancestors the furthest—meaning the lineage would likely be the largest—came from southern China. Nomadic incursions in the north no doubt made this the case, although some lineages cheated by claiming relations far into China’s prehistory. Not all Chinese were in contact with lineages, moving because of war, revolution, or to begin lives with a fresh start. Chinese lineages were often well organized, with the wealthiest members of the lineage in charge of the lineage’s ancestral hall, graves, and ritual land. At the spacious ancestral hall, the lineage’s members would meet usually twice a year to commemorate the ancestors—hence the Western idea that these meetings were ancestor worship—whose names were written on a wooden tablet along with his title and birth and death dates. The lineage hoped that the ancestors would help them, or at the very least not harm them as ghosts. Once a year in the spring, the leaders of the lineage would use their maps of ancestral graves to locate them so that they could be cleaned and maintained before they offered sacrifices of wine and food to the departed. They would use feng shui or geomancy to determine the best plots for future graves. The lineage leaders also made sure the ritual land brought funds to the lineage to help pay for the hall, graves, and sacrifices, and perhaps even a fund to educate the best and brightest students of the whole lineage, as well as provide help to downtrodden members of the lineage like widows and other
poor members. Use of this land was often controversial. Members of the lineage who farmed the land thought they should get preferential rents, whereas the clan leaders argued they needed to maximize income for the good of all. There was also the fear by the poor relations that the lineage leaders siphoned off rents for their private use to the detriment of the entire lineage. If it happened with elites and taxes, it would make sense for rents and the lineage leaders.

The Korean lineages provide a much more confusing mix compared to the Chinese lineage system. Much of it is due to historic Korea’s matrilineal system. By the time of Chinese influence on Korea, Koreans believed that a child’s bones came from the father and the flesh from the mother. Both showed kinship and thus prevented marriage among the kin. But because flesh was soft, the kinship of the female line faded after eight degrees of kinship (a first cousin is four degrees of separation). Marriage between any relations on the father’s direct side, however distant, was prohibited—much like the Chinese taboo on marrying someone with the same family name.

Lineages played a huge role in Korean “ancestor worship” as well. By the time of Yi Korea those of the elite yangbang status often set aside fields to support annual ancestor worship on the father’s side (the Neo-Confucianism of the Yi dynasty had pulled elites away from the old days and commemorated matrilineal ancestors) more distant than the great-great-grandfather. The tenant of this land, the gravekeeper, had to use income from the land to prepare elaborate ancestral sacrifices during the tenth lunar month. Ancestral tombs in Korea were usually scattered all over the hills and mountains surrounding the farmland of the villages. The Korean aristocrats and the correct gravekeeper were thus forced to spend a month or more traveling over mountains and streams from tomb to tomb. They had to carry the sacrificial materials to hold ancestor commemoration ceremonies (“ancestor worship”) starting with the earliest ancestor to arrive in the village and working to the great-great grandfather.

Further Reading


**Mandate of Heaven**

Mandate of heaven is the Chinese idea that the emperor rules China due to a proper relationship with the gods and the nation’s ancestors. Historically minded Chinese like Confucius faced a conundrum. If an imperial family has the right to rule because of the gods, how does one explain the fact that dynasties in ancient times, like the Xia and the Shang, collapsed. The Xia and Shang dynasties lost out in the end because they lost mandate of heaven. The mandate provided good weather and compliant subjects. In return the king engaged in proper rituals and treated his subjects with benevolence. Natural disasters, poor growing weather, or rebellious peasants might mean the leader was losing the mandate, hence his overthrow or even regicide was divinely
inspired and not immoral under Confucianism’s Five Relationships. The fall of dynasties actually followed a pattern before worthy men could then establish new dynasties under the new mandate.

First came the natural disasters, trouble with crops, and gross overtaxation of the peasantry. Soon thereafter angry peasant rebellions began, often led by Daoist or Buddhist secret societies, aiming at the now-disreputable dynasty, rich landlords, or both. Many times nomadic forces would take advantage of the strife or outright civil war within China to take lands on the periphery of the dynasty, and sometimes much more. At this point the government, lacking skilled leaders, often began begging for help from the landlords. These obvious weaknesses showed a clear loss of the mandate of heaven and resulted in one of the following: conquest of half or more of China by outside nomads; a rich landlord crowning himself emperor of a new dynasty after leading a powerful army that defeated the peasant armies and the imperial forces; or, in the rarest outcome, a peasant leader starting a new dynasty after victories against nomads, rich landlords, the state, or all three.

Even though Japan borrowed many Chinese ideas, including Confucianism, there were some differences in how they were interpreted. For example, emperors ruled not with the mandate of heaven, but because they were related to heaven through the imperial clan and the sun goddess. This meant that in Japan people did not take over and become emperor. Instead, anyone trying to take control of the government would rule through the emperor, keeping his lineage intact. Regents and shogun were two ways around the emperor for secular and military power, leaving to the imperial house the religious aspects of reigning rather than ruling.

Further Reading

Ming Dynasty (1368–1644)

Zhu Yuanzhang, a former peasant and one-time monk who led the Red Turbans of the secret Buddhist sect White Lotus, defeated the Mongols and its Yuan dynasty by allying with the Chinese landlords. This proved a winning change of strategy, even though the peasants were oppressed by the gentry class and had started their uprising almost two decades earlier by challenging Mongol and rich Chinese alike. Once Zhu became emperor he changed his reign name to Hongwu but is better known to history as his posthumous title Taizu, founder of the Ming or Brilliant dynasty. As a former peasant who led a peasant uprising, he understood the importance of agriculture and keeping the peasants placid. He warned his officials that peasants were like young trees that should not be shaken. Taizu worked to promote agriculture by giving title to abandoned land cultivated by peasants, even exempting them from 3 years’ taxation and corvee. He also ordered the irrigation systems be fixed and tried to settle garrison troops on reclaimed land for the military to obtain their own grain by farming. Even artisans were better off under the Ming, as they could buy their way out of the corvee by paying higher taxes.
Although shrewd in managing peasants, Taizu was a harsh and autocratic ruler, executing those who spoke out or even made a pun on his name or position. He even denied being a part of the White Lotus and declared the group an illegal organization. He forced his advisers and ministers to kneel in front of him rather than the previous Chinese practice of standing at attention or even sitting. He restored the imperial university and examination system in 1382, but he only trusted his own family members and gave out huge land grants to his many sons and grandsons. He also divided the Ming empire into fifteen provinces, all corresponding with minor differences to present-day ones. Yet he was also a hard worker, supposedly reading over sixteen hundred memorials in only 10 days. Although he restored China to Tang governance with the six ministries, he controlled important parts of the government himself rather than having help by high Confucian bureaucrats in the secretariat or chancellor’s office; in fact, he eliminated the latter. These decisions would prove a mistake in the long run, as emperors and imperial family members later in the Ming dynasty would rely on the help of eunuchs for running the government and maneuvering for succession, disregarding Taizu’s warnings on the matter. By 1400, there would only be a few hundred eunuchs in the capital, but that number would swell to tens of thousands—eunuchs became more and more powerful and helped cause the dynasty to weaken and fall in the seventeenth century. Finally, at the local level, Taizu used the li–jia system for local control and allocating corvee service. Every ten families in an area were a jia and ten jia formed a li. All were responsible for each other following the laws and making sure corvee work was done.

Taizu also went to war with the Mongols, first capturing Beijing before pushing them back over the Great Wall in 1382. He followed up these successes with difficult and expensive expeditions into Mongolia to keep the pressure on the Mongols. In the midst of these inconclusive battles, Japanese pirates began to prey on Ming shipping, a problem not solved in two centuries. But these negatives did not outweigh China’s agricultural growth during Taizu’s reign, especially when taking into account the renewed spread of south Vietnamese strains of rice that allowed three crops a year in the south and two crops a year in the Yangzi delta. China’s population rebounded to 110 million.

Taizu chose his grandson, known later as Huizong (r. 1399–1402), to succeed him, but a civil war broke out over his choice. The winner was Yongle, Taizu’s son, known to later historians as Chengzu (r. 1403–1425). It was he who rebuilt Beijing as the capital of the Ming and continued work on the Great Wall—to keep the Mongols at bay—as well as sending out a huge trading fleet seven times. The Forbidden City, the part of Beijing where the emperor lived and ruled, remains the best example of Ming architecture and aesthetics. After Chengzu’s reign, however, Confucian leaders began a full-scale crackdown on the merchant class, destroying the huge ships over 400 feet in length used in the fleet, including the plans on how to make them. They also destroyed many of the merchant maps of the Southeast Asian and Indian Ocean trading regions. The smaller Chinese ship size meant only short voyages could be contemplated, and Japanese pirates prevented much trade or exploration in these small ships. Mongol rule had led to renewed distrust of merchants and foreigners and made most Confucianists believe—perhaps rightly—that Chinese civilization was the greatest in the world and did not need foreign influence. These factors are important to explain why Europe “discovered” the world instead of China less than a century later.
Money/Coinage

Early in its history the Chinese minted the famous copper cash coins. These little coins with square holes in the center became widespread. These copper coins became very useful. However, the small value of a single cash led to these coins being put on strings to facilitate trade. These strings were supposed to be one-hundred cash coins but were rarely if ever an actual hundred. These coin strings were traded for more expensive items, including the purchasing of markets. Peasants had no need for this currency because they could pay their debts in kind. Due to this fact, the supply of these coins was readily available.

However, during the Southern Song, this changed. More coins were minted to meet increased demand. When this was not enough, the Chinese Empire resorted to trading goods for weighed gold and weighed silver. China did not, in fact, mint their own silver or gold coins during this time period. “Flying money”—essentially a check or promissory note—were developed in the ninth century to compensate for this problem. In 1024 flying money gave way to the invention of paper currency, as the Song dynasty became monetized and peasants had to pay taxes in coin instead of in kind. The Chinese government even created a central bank system and dated the money to be good for only 3 years. At first, this helped facilitate trade as less of the bulky cash coins or ingots of gold or silver were needed. However, the government printed too much paper money, leading to large-scale inflation; its trading value sharply diminished.

Counterfeiting also became a problem in China. Paper money was much easier to counterfeit than metal coins, allowing greater latitude for potential crooks. Like in the West, counterfeiting was punished by death. When the Mongols conquered China, they issued their own paper money, backed by silk, and tried to stop trade in other kinds of currency. These “silk notes” have been found far outside of China and replaced the older paper currency. But they too printed too many and were hurt when inflation hit.

Because Korea and Japan’s economies were so far behind China’s, barter proved the easiest way to trade goods. Eventually, Chinese coins were used in Korea and Japan. These coins were used as local currency, even in the string form. Japan later would mint its own copper coins and used weighed silver and gold once it realized that its minting process led to more gold in the early coins and less gold in the later coins. Once Korea’s economy boomed with the introduction of celadon (fine porcelain), it issued iron and copper coins, with silver shaped like a miniature vase. But even after this introduction in 996, Koreans still often traded in amounts of grain and linen, and Japan used koku, or how much rice an average person ate in a year, to conduct business.

Further Reading
Mongols

The Mongols were a nomadic people living on the steppes to the north of the Chinese Empire. Like other nomadic or herding societies, these various tribes were considered to be barbarians to the peoples of China and Korea. And like other nomadic groups, the Mongols had launched brief raids into China, stealing goods or demanding tribute to stop the attacks. For this reason, the Great Wall was constructed and constantly rebuilt throughout history to put up a border between the civilized, farming world and the nomadic lands of groups like the Mongols. It was hoped the wall could thwart or at least slow down a nomadic raid.

The Mongols did have connections with other societies through trade and conquest along the Silk Road. They learned and followed different faiths, depending on their tribe. By the time Genghis Khan unified the tribes into an unstoppable fighting force there were Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, and even Manicheanist Mongols, all allowed religious freedom.

The Mongols were expert horse riders; their skills honed by centuries of herding animals. The Mongol horses were of the highest quality, making it much easier for the Mongols to carry out their conquests. This mobile lifestyle, as well as a great proficiency in archery with a powerful composite bow and in-battle formation, helped the Mongols become a force to be reckoned with. The Mongols also had a system of fast couriers that could transmit messages up to 200 miles per day! But until they settled down in China, Mongols did not read or write. To keep oral messages from being garbled, the Mongols put the orders into music and rhyme. This allowed the most important ability in war to occur—clear communication which allowed commanders to split an army and have it come back together as one once the battle was joined.

Mongol victories came about due to some important tactics and strategy. When in combat for the first time against a foe, the Mongols would attack directly with only part of their force and retreat like they had been defeated. They might even retreat for days, just a step ahead of the overconfident pursuit teams of their enemy. At the appropriate time—usually when another force got behind their adversaries—the fighting would continue. Using their powerful bows and maneuverable horses, Mongols would usually win. If an enemy decided to hide in fortified cities, the Mongols would warn that they would kill everyone inside if they did not surrender, then called for engineers from conquered peoples to build siege equipment. The Mongols, this time with support of previously captured soldiers, assaulted and then killed the civilian populace. When the Mongols arrived at the next city or state, the threat of terror led many to surrender without a fight.

Genghis Khan united the various Mongol tribes in 1206. This young man, whose birth name was Temujin, created an empire so vast that he earned the name that he is known by today: Genghis Khan means “supreme ruler: in Mongolian. He died in 1227, after many victories in Central Asia and even European Russia, having only just begun to attack the Jurchen, a seminomadic group in control at the time of north China.
His descendants did away with the Jurchens, with only a little help from the Chinese, in 7 years. But the battle for the Southern Song dynasty for complete control took another 45 years; battles on horseback were difficult in the watery, rugged south. While that conquest slowly rolled on, Mongols continued their attacks to the west, including riding into central Europe. In this manner, the Mongol Empire not only became the largest land empire of its time, but also of all history. The Mongols were also able to conquer China’s neighbor Korea, while still fighting for control of the rest of China. Ghengis Khan’s grandson Khubilai Khan then tried his unsuccessful invasions of Japan, using Korean ships and men, in 1274 (and again in 1281), while Chinese landlords finally agreed to stop fighting back in return for leaving them alive and in control of their estates.

Mongol control over Imperial China was known as the Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368). In the meantime, the Mongol empire was cut into four parts, with China the richest quarter by far. The Mongols and their conquests helped the spread of culture and trading. With this massive empire connected by imperial routes, the Mongols were able to stretch from Kiev to Beijing. This helped facilitate trips to Asia and renewed interest from Europe about to enter the Renaissance. Marco Polo himself was in the Mongol court during his famous travels.

After the Mongols lost control of China, squabbles within their ranks prevented a renewed alliance of the tribes. But Mongols remained a raiding threat to the new Ming dynasty who sent several armies into the steppes to contain the Mongols. The Chinese even built their capital in the north and again worked on the Great Wall, all so future generations would remember to have enough military force in the north to prevent any nomadic threat out of Mongolia. Ironically, in the seventeenth century the nomadic threat came from Manchuria, to the northeast of Beijing.

Further Reading

Names
East Asian names follow the family name, given name convention. Most Chinese family names were (and are) one character in length, although a few have two characters. Chinese had a taboo against marrying any one with the same family name. The family names also helped keep track of ancestors for lineages and what has been called ancestor worship. If a family kept track of its lineage—usually meaning if the family was wealthy or had local, middle-class or wealthy relatives nearby—the given names of a generation (all the cousins) often would have the same first character, with the second character different for everyone. These characters would be planned out by the lineage for generations. So usually a Chinese name would be made up of three characters, the family name always first.

Korean names also followed the usual Chinese example, although a much smaller number of family names: one-character family name; two-character
given name, with the first character of the given name generational and the second personal. Only during the Mongol occupation of Korea did this change; many Koreans remade their names in Mongol style.

In Japan, names varied between one and three characters for the family name, and between one and three characters for the given name. But because written Japanese had so many different pronunciations per character, one would have to explain which pronunciation to use for the given name, if the name was to be known—it often was off limits to all but family, close friends, and, perhaps, bosses. But only elites in Japan had family names until the end of the feudal period in 1868, which explains why lineages are not as important until the modern era in Japan for the majority of Japanese.

Further Reading

Nara Period (710–794)

In this brief period, Japan decided to copy China and create a capital city, unusual in Japan because of the lack of urbanization at the time. The new capital, Heijo, known today as Nara, was laid out as a miniature Changan, China’s Tang dynasty capital. The main differences between the capitals was Japan built mostly with wood due to its availability and fear of earthquakes (though using wood increases fear of fire), and the city lacked a protective wall as Japan did not fear invasion. By this time, emperors reigned (and sometimes ruled) from this city not with the mandate of heaven, but because they were related to heaven. This meant anyone trying to take control of the government would rule through the emperor, keeping his lineage intact. In addition, Japanese bureaucracy had continued to borrow from China, with the Taiho Code established in 702 but having a greater effect on the Nara Period. It divided the country into three levels of administration: provinces, districts, and villages. Peasants were organized at the village level to monitor each others’ behavior. And the equal field system was tried again, this time using square rice fields divided into standard sizes and redistributed based on the number of people older than the age of 5. Taxes, as in all East Asia until the Song dynasty, were paid in kind: grain, textiles, the corvee, and military service. Finally, the Taiho Code set up the examination system for Japan. However, it really only worked for minor positions in the aristocracy—Japan would remain controlled by hereditary rule, unlike China, and would soon let the tests fall by the wayside.

The equal field system was weakened from its creation by aristocrats keeping control of their land. The final blows were the periodic smallpox epidemics that led the government in 743 to allow any new rice fields created to be owned forever.

The Nara Period also saw six missions sent to Tang China, each of up to six hundred men. This was in addition to Koreans visiting Japan armed with Chinese ideas. The journeys to China encouraged the Japanese to write their own history, which became Japan’s oldest works, albeit in Chinese for the most part. In these books, Japanese exaggerated how long the imperial family had controlled three of the four main islands of Japan. Supposedly an emperor
Jimmu founded the state in 660 B.C.E., almost a thousand years before the true event in the **Yamato Period**. Japanese learned architecture from their Chinese hosts as well. In fact, the Buddhist temples of Heijo and later Heian (Kyoto) are the best examples of Tang dynasty buildings left in the world.

Buddhism grew very quickly during the Nara Period. The rich donated huge sums of money to the temples. The emperor’s 741 edict required a Buddhist temple and pagoda to be built in every province. Within them would be twenty monks and ten nuns chanting for the good of Japan. The emperor also worked to link **Shinto** gods to the Buddhist canon to keep both coexisting in peace and helping to spread to the common people. In 752 the huge Todaiji temple in Nara was finished, including the 50-great Buddha made out of a million pounds of metal. After its eyes were painted, the emperor presented a feast to ten thousand monks. Finally, one problem with Buddhists did crop up in this period. Empress Shotoku grew close to a Buddhist priest called Dokyo. She even tried to give him the throne but was thwarted. When the empress finally died, Dokyo was banished from the capital in 770. Emperor Kammu, either as part of the rivalry between families over control of the emperor or due to fears that the Buddhist priests had become too powerful, decided to move the capital, successfully achieved in 794 with the move to Heian (today’s Kyoto), and hence the **Heian Period**.

**Further Reading**


**Neo-Confucianism**

Neo-Confucianism is a new interpretation of **Confucianism** that was founded after about 300 years of Buddhist ascendance in China. From 800 to 1200, important scholar-officials had studied Buddhism, before many rejected its philosophy. Using ideas gleaned from Buddhism or even **Daoism**, these scholars created Neo-Confucianism.

The Neo-Confucian movement brought new ideas to Confucianism. Yet the Confucian exams remained unaffected by these changes until a generation after the death of Neo-Confucianism’s most important thinker, Zhu Xi (1130–1200). Zhu used the two terms *qi* and *li* in much the same way as earlier scholars had attached the yin and yang to Confucianism or Daoism. In this case, *li* (a different Chinese character than “ritual”) meant “principle,” and *qi*, like in Daoism, meant “energy,” as in Tai Qi (sometimes still written in the old transliteration as “T’ai Chi”). Just like a house needed a plan (*li*) before beginning building with materials (*qi*), people were on the path of goodness (*li*), but needed to be taught to obtain the *qi*, its outward expression. This was an elegant solution needed to prove Mencius correct in the face of contradictory evidence: if all people are good, why do so many do bad? The answer: not enough training. One must study the Confucian canon but also look within oneself
through meditation and reflection, just like Chan Buddhism. With these Neo-Confucian teachings and rulers leading by example, all people could eventually be good.

Zhu’s Neo-Confucianism became the accepted interpretation of Confucianism for passing the exams and getting the appointment to government positions during the Later Song dynasty and until the twentieth century. This would be one of several problems with Neo-Confucianism. No longer would a degree seeker dare to interpret the Confucian canon himself to show off his brilliance. Students (and those who graded the different levels of the examination system) instead valued memorization not intellectualism, leading eventually to a weakened Chinese intelligencia. In addition, Neo-Confucianism was also behind a backlash against women. Footbinding became popular for the gentry’s daughters during the Song dynasty. This incredibly painful procedure, which kept the girl/woman’s feet the size of a 5-year-old’s, pushed women out of society, where they had a place before, and into their homes’ shadows. Finally, although Confucianists made intelligent government officials, the Confucian importance of family and thus making sure one’s children were well taken care of made some scholar-officials less than honest when it came to remitting tax receipts. This embezzlement by men the government depended on eventually led to financial problems and thus the beginning of the end for many dynasties.

Although Japan did not pay much attention to Neo-Confucianism until the Tokugawa Era (1600–1868), led as it was after 1185 by the warrior elite, Korea, on the other hand, was profoundly influenced by Neo-Confucianism after 1391 and the establishment of the Yi dynasty. In fact some scholars have argued that Korea became perhaps more Neo-Confucian than even China, with the exception of allowing anyone to take part in the examination system to obtain government positions.

Further Reading

**Noh Theater**

Like sumo wrestling, noh plays grew out of Japanese Shinto festivals that prayed for an abundant harvest and to give thanks for the harvest. Villagers put on folk dances and plays during these festivals, which became entertainment for the common people. By the time of the Ashikaga shogunate, the dances and plays had been refined and emerged as a serious dramatic form. Noh theater became an upper-class aesthetic entertainment heavily influenced by Zen Buddhism in its simplicity.

A noh performance was an all-day affair. A theatrical troop would put on five or six plays on a simple stage open on three sides, without a curtain or background scenery except for a painting of an old pine tree on the rear wall. The plays themselves relied on symbolic and abstract properties. Usually the
principal actor wore a mask, or at least kept his face frozen as if it were a mask. The actors would not speak. The movements and gestures performed by he and the rest of the all-male cast were highly stylized and carefully measured. Mime played an important part of the drama. Weeping, for example, was signified by raising the hand to the eyes. The lead actor manipulated his fan to symbolize a variety of other events, such as falling leaves, rippling waves, or a moon. In fact, all actors had folding fans to help tell their stories through mime and were on stage dressed in brilliant, fancy costumes. A chorus that chanted the story in a sing-song voice accompanied the performers on stage, along with four musicians, each playing a different instrument.

The series of plays performed often followed a pattern, although this too could have been tinkered with by the playwright. The first short play might be about a famous Japanese, and the next the story of a particular Shinto kami (spirit or god). Sometimes these two plays were part one and part two, as the human became a kami due to his heroic efforts during his lifetime. The next would demonstrate the life of a famous warrior, then the story of his death as told by his ghost. Finally, the series would end on an energetic note, usually about monsters and demons, all told in a fast-paced, colorful style.

The noh plays were perfected by the father and son dramatists, Kan’ami Ki-yotsugu and Seami Moptokiyō, during the reign of the third Ashikaga shogun. The son, Seami, was profoundly influenced by Zen in his writing, even though he and his father practiced Pure Land Buddhism, which also helps show that Zen did not have a monopoly on religion in this era even if Zen played a large role in affecting the culture. This Zen influence can be seen in his plays that had a sense of mystery, those that emphasized the idea of what lies beneath and the subtle as opposed to the obvious.

Further Reading

Northern Song Dynasty (960–1126)

In 960, General Zhao Kuangyin became Emperor Taizu and worked hard to limit the power of other generals, founding the Song dynasty (normally called the Northern Song dynasty to differentiate from when nomads took over northern China in 1127). His mercenary force, subject to periodic rotation of its commanders, remained loyal to the emperor and proved valuable in the reconquest of China. Like unifiers before him, Taizu applied moderate force to those opposing him and welcomed those to join him when defeated. The Great Wall would serve as the dividing line between China and a seminomadic conqueror, the Liao, for three generations.

The wars that ended the Tang and started the Song left a strange situation among the rich and poor, educated and uneducated. Some longstanding gentry families had lost everything, and new families had become wealthy. Only degree holding allowed the elites to separate from just those who owned land. The Song dynasty instituted an examination system more fair than ever before, used up until the twentieth century (with the exception of the Mongols) and ending hereditary officials (save the emperor). All central government officials would be chosen based on Confucian exams; for five hundred spots over one hundred thousand would compete. The printing press in full use
made Confucian books for study widely available. Of course the usual degree earner came from a wealthy, educated family; it took time to learn classical written Chinese, let alone the Confucian canon. But once in a while, a smart village boy received backing from a village to allow him to study, take the exams, and make the village famous.

The Northern Song dynasty ended up making a terrible mistake based on the traditional Chinese custom of playing barbarian against barbarian. The nomadic Jurchen had recently thrown off the yoke of the Khitans, also called the Liao, so the Chinese decided to ally with the Jurchen against the Khitans and gain lands to the north of the Great Wall. But where the Jurchen succeeded, the Song failed. China was forced to pay the Jurchen the same tribute it had paid the Khitans. The Jurchen decided that was not enough and attacked the Chinese capital and demanded increased tribute: fifty million ounces of silver, five million ounces of gold, and one million rolls of silk. They took half immediately and headed back north. But only a few months later, the Jurchen attacked the Song again, this time taking the capital, the Song emperor, and the treasury. One son of the Song managed to escape to the south to continue the war against the nomadic invasion. Because of its flat geography, the mounted Jurchen conquered northern China after a 14-year war but could not push south of the Huai River (halfway between the Yellow River and the Yangzi River) where terrain starts to become difficult for cavalry. The Huai River would serve as the boundary between the Jurchen state and the Southern Song dynasty, established in 1127, with tribute set at 250,000 ounces of silver/rolls of silk.

Further Reading

**Northern Wei (386–534)**

The Tuoba (sometimes called “Toba”) were a Turkish nomadic group that settled in northern China during the Period of Disunity. The year 400 found the Tuoba nomads winning control of northern China after military victories over the previous herding culture, the Tibetans. The victorious Tuoba proclaimed their lands and dynasty over the Northern Wei. Like the string of nomadic conquerors before it, the Tuobans had an important decision to make. Should they too copy the ways of the Chinese left in north China to govern and collect taxes, or should they drive away or exterminate the ethnic Chinese to turn the north into huge pasture lands? The Tuobans decided to do the former, using leading Chinese landowning families to help administer laws and collect taxes.

The system agreed upon by the Confucian-educated gentry of north China and their Tuoba overseers was “land equalization,” also known as the **equal field system**. The idea behind this system was to maximize the number of landholding peasant families to create an enduring tax base by adding or
subtracting land from a peasant family based on its size. The system worked remarkably well in China for 300 years, guaranteeing the state stable taxation. Yet in addition to predictable taxes, the state also added to the corvee (unpaid labor—usually irrigation or flood-control projects) of the peasants the new task of forming a militia to serve as infantry along side the Tuoba cavalry in battles with their neighbors.

The Tuoba encouraged Buddhism, as it was not Chinese in origin. That positive feeling toward Buddhism diminished rapidly, if only temporarily, in the middle of their reign. In 444 and 445 the Tuoban leader decided to purge Buddhists—killing monks and destroying monasteries—all in an attempt to increase taxable land and trumpet his alliance with Daoists and Confucianists. Buddhism rebounded after his death.

As the Tuoba ruled, they borrowed more and more customs from the Chinese who had stayed in northern China. The governing structure was heavily influenced by the leading Chinese landlord families in the north. Soon the Tuoba required the use of Chinese language as the official language, Chinese family surnames for Tuoba aristocrats, and Chinese social customs at the elite level. They at first encouraged and then supposedly demanded marriage between their leaders and Chinese gentry-class women!

The Tuoba ended up weak militarily as they moved toward civilization, and the Northern Wei was swept away by new nomads; northern China was divided into two new successor states, out of which would arise the Sui dynasty in two generations.

Further Reading

Period of Disunity (220–589)

The Period of Disunity was the period after the fall of the Han dynasty and until the start of the Sui dynasty. During this time China was divided into one
large southern kingdom and one or two northern kingdoms that often claimed to be heirs to imperial China, even though started by different nomadic groups. After the failure of the Three Kingdoms Period (soon after the Han) to bring back imperial China, the country faced northern invasion and constant struggle for control over the Chinese south. A series of pastoral nomadic groups conquered north China for differing periods of time. In the south strong landlords led many short-lived so-called dynasties. More and more ethnic Chinese from the northern half of the country fled south to avoid nomadic rule. The movement of population the south led the economy there to grow as agricultural production increased; soon the Yangzi River delta region became the center of China’s economy, replacing the Yellow River. Besides the normal battles for control and the temporary establishment of these petty southern dynasties, new pressures compounded the problems of the ruling class of the south, mostly due to the population explosion: rich landlords fleeing from the north demanded a share of governance and poor peasants competed with newcomers and the rich for ever-dwindling southern lands. The result was a destructive but failed rebellion known as the Five Bushels. These internal problems continued, keeping the populous south from mounting successful wars to defeat the north and restore ethnic Chinese borders to those of the Han dynasty; the great landholding families had too much power compared to the state.

In the north, a barbarian group called the Tuoba decided to use Chinese elites in the north to help them rule and tax their so-called Northern Wei dynasty. Effective use of the equal field system allowed the Tuoba to rule for almost 150 years, until borrowing too much civilized Chinese ideas weakened the former nomads and allowed their defeat. Northern China was divided into two new states.

At first, Religious Daoism played the role of most popular religion in north and south China, due to its reputed healing and life-extending properties. Although Buddhism may have made its first appearance in China during the Han dynasty, coming as it did by way of the Silk Road, it was in the Period of Disunity that Buddhism began slowly to erode Daoist appeal in both sections of China. Just as Confucianism and Daoism had become important philosophies/religions during the Warring States Period (480–221 B.C.E.), so did many Chinese accept Buddhism in the divided country, as both regions faced almost constant disorder. Yet Buddhism early on faced some opposition among more traditional followers of Confucianism and Daoism, as it demanded of its ardent followers actions considered “un-Chinese,” including shaving one’s head and practicing celibacy. Yet none of these religions demanded the exclusive nature of Western religions, allowing a Chinese the ability to follow all three teachings—Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism—simultaneously or at different phases of one’s life. The Tuoba and their Northern Wei state encouraged Buddhism, as it was not Chinese in origin. Twice in the north that positive feeling toward Buddhism diminished rapidly, if only temporarily. In 444 and 445 the Tuoban leader decided to purge Buddhists—killing monks and destroying monasteries—all in an attempt to increase taxable land and trumpet his alliance with Daoists and Confucianists. Buddhism rebounded after his reign. Yet even the Northern Wei’s successor state in the north—the one that would eventually reunify all China under the Sui dynasty—practiced a Buddhist purge almost 100 years later. But the uncertain, confused times in the south
and north, and the coming of a newer, simpler sect called Pure Land Buddhism—which appealed to commoners as well as monks and nuns—allowed Buddhism, even in its differing doctrines, to spread across China and survive the purges and slanders against it. The Period of Disunity saw Buddhism become China’s third great religious/philosophical tradition.

In 581, a prominent general of mixed Chinese-nomadic origin overthrew the king of the Northern Wei’s successor state, killed the royal family, and assumed the throne. He declared himself the first emperor of the Sui dynasty, Emperor Wen. Quickly he conquered the rest of north China, then headed south across the Yangzi River to unify all of China under his control, an effort accomplished easily by 589.

Further Reading

**Prince Shotoku (d. 621)**

Prince Shotoku was Japanese regent to Empress Suiko and member of the Soga family; he was temporarily victorious in controlling the imperial family through marriage and the regency. The prince became famous for sponsoring Buddhism and Buddhist temples, especially the famous Horyuji temple (today the oldest wooden buildings in the world). However, not enough Japanese understood the complexities of these early Chinese forms of Buddhism—as well as the Chinese in the books about Buddhism—so he brought in Korean monks to run the different temples.

Prince Shotoku also opened up relations with China and sent four missions to the short-lived Sui dynasty. He made a terrible faux pas in sending a note to the emperor of China from “the emperor of the sunrise country,” when the Chinese believed the Japanese were vassals to China, not equals!

Prince Shotoku is most famous for writing the Seventeen Point Constitution in 604. This constitution was heavily influenced by Chinese ideas. It is really a list of advice for rulers and the ruled written in Chinese, the only written language for the Japanese for centuries. Its articles heavily advocated Confucianism and Buddhism, with a sprinkling of Daoism and Shinto’s consensus building thrown in for good measure. But the constitution was really a way to show forcefully that the emperor/regent for the emperor would serve as the head of a more powerful central government, including collecting taxes. No longer would local elites have that opportunity or that resource.

Prince Shotoku Taishi and his sons Yamashiro Oe and Ekuri, (Shotoku Taishi gazo). Color on paper, late 7th century. The Art Archive/Imperial Household Collection Kyoto/Laurie Platt Winfrey.
Further Reading

**Pure Land Buddhism**

Pure Land Buddhism is another of the most popular Mahayana (“Greater Vehicle”) Buddhist sects in East Asia, where even laypeople could obtain enlightenment through worshiping the Amiotabha Buddha.

Pure Land Buddhism came to China during the Northern Wei. It believed the world was in terrible shape at the time of the Tang dynasty (ironic considering most people of the day and historians looking back see the Tang as the high point not only in Chinese civilization, but also in world civilization at the time). Luckily Buddha had foreseen this and explained secretly to a few followers that one specific Bodhisattva (being of wisdom) could help ordinary people achieve enlightenment. By believing in his saving grace and reciting his name (*Amituofo Buddha* in Chinese, *Amita* in Korean, and *Amida* in Japanese) in true devotion, a follower could be reborn in the land of paradise, the Pure Land of the West. Many Chinese did not understand this stay was temporary, assuming the Pure Land was heaven. Theoretically they would come back to earth as Bodhisattvas and help others obtain enlightenment before permanently seeking it themselves. Just at the high point of Pure Land Buddhism in China, Emperor Wuzong defrocked over two-hundred fifty thousand Buddhist monks and nuns (leaving only forty-nine monasteries and eight hundred monks), sold off their lands, destroyed 4,600 temples, and wrecked forty-thousand shrines. His death in 846 saved Buddhism in China, but not Pure Land; instead Chan Buddhism gained adherents to be the most popular form of Buddhism in China.

Korea accepted Buddhism early from China and were the key cultural transmitters to Japan. Silla Korea, as the imitation Tang dynasty, government also controlled the Buddhist orders and temples. It used art, dance, music, and literature to try to bring Pure Land Buddhism to the masses. Only in the fourteenth century did Chan (*Seon* in Korean) overtake Pure Land in popularity in Korea. Pure Land Buddhism came to Japan much later, during the wars to conclude the Heian Period. It pushed its adherents to chant “Namu Amida Butsu,” or *nembutsu* when said quickly. It required ten pure moments to achieve the help from Amida, along with one’s good works. Only a few years later, during the start of the Kamakura Period, a splinter group

![Avalokiteshvara as Guide of Souls, early 10th c.e.](image_url)
called True Pure Land Buddhism also pushed chanting the nembutsu. Its difference lay in priests being able to marry (priests inherited control of the church) and in how only through the hard work of Amida could one achieve rebirth in the Pure Land. A criminal, because of his evil, was closer to being sent to the Pure Land if he only believed because nothing he did in his life would warrant such a reward. Nothing but the nembutsu and the gift granted by Amida would allow entrance into the Pure Land. These two forms together quickly became the most popular sect of Buddhism in Japan.

Further Reading

Religious Daoism

Although Daoism started out as more of a philosophy for the educated to question, Daoism came to the common folk through a more religious outlook. Toward the end of the Han dynasty (which existed 202 B.C.E. to 220 C.E.), a Daoist religious movement known as the Celestial Masters won acceptance with the peasantry in the spiritual and civic realms, actually conquering and governing parts of China. The Celestial Masters helped move Daoism away from its roots to a religion focused on nature, the yin and yang, and healing. It now also tried to cheat death! With the fall of the Han (220 C.E.) and the coming of the Period of Disunity (316–588), Daoism became further entrenched in the north, as the Celestial Masters continued their teaching and healing services (even providing free food to travelers). Soon they added meditation and breathing exercises. Some wealthy patrons began searching for everlasting life from religious Daoists, who emulated later European alchemists in handling exotic ingredients to concoct supposed life-sustaining elixirs. Ironically, mercury and later gunpowder often turned up in these potions, leading to horrible suffering and death instead of everlasting life.

Daoism also faced competition from a new direction, the coming of Buddhism into China. During the Northern Wei dynasty, north China’s Emperor Taiwu persecuted Buddhists from 446 until his death in 452, gaining him ceremonial trappings of Daoism, as well as the support of Confucianists. A second Buddhist purge of north China occurred from 574 to 578; just like the first it was an attack on the wealth and political power of Buddhists by destroying monasteries, not forcing individual religious change. In this case Daoism became the official state religion, but the advent of the Sui dynasty and reunification 10 short years later brought Daoism away from imperial sanction and back into steady competition with Buddhism and Confucianism for adherents. The Celestial Masters faded with a revived strong, central state, and Daoism splintered into different religious groups with retreats founded on beautiful mountains away from cities. Many former Confucianist government officials would retire to mountain areas to spend their days reflecting on the Way and drawing or painting these landscapes. Daoism for the common people, on the other hand, tied itself to folk traditions and local gods.
Samurai Swords

Japanese samurai swords were highly prized, in Japan, the wider sphere of Asia, and today all around the world as they are the best-made swords in world history. Japanese sword makers perfected the art of sword toward the end of the thirteenth century. These swords were made for the warrior class by the most esteemed of sword-making masters. These swords were not only considered as superior weapons, but also as living creatures, which were revered. With these swords have come the Japanese traditions of warfare and honor. They are still revered today as important parts of Japanese past and of the present.

Perhaps it is a mistake to call them samurai swords, as the true samurai of film and comic book fame is really a seventeenth-century creation with the laws of bushido. The warriors of the Kamakura Period and Ashikaga shogunate (1185–1467) were really just bushi or warriors just starting to refine themselves with learning to read and write poetry. The closest thing to bushido, or the warrior’s code of seventeenth century (and beyond) samurai, was the bushi’s vow to kill or be killed. If unsuccessful in combat and not killed outright, the bushi would either ask his enemy to behead him or stab himself in the entrails to die (seppuku or more vulgarly “harakiri” —ritual suicide). In addition, the sword of this period is not the katana of the samurai, but the tachi, a slightly longer weapon, made with similar (or even better) precision.

The samurai sword as perfected in the thirteenth century solves two age-old problems that plagued the profession of sword making. One was that a sword could be sharp but brittle or strong but dull. Bushi who got too close to their Korean or Mongol enemies during the attempted Mongol invasions of 1274 and 1281 often complained that their swords were not tough enough to cut through enemy leather armor. To solve these problems, Japanese sword makers pounded two different parts of iron collected from sandy river bottoms together. Then they would reheat the mixture and keep folding over the layers of the two. By the end of the process, over a million layers created a sword with a sharp outer blade to cut and a softer inner core to take abuse but not break from other swords or armor. Not only was the tachi extremely sharp, but it was also rugged and reliable, with a curve that allowed the user to swing his sword without worrying that it might get stuck in the opponent’s body. Stories passed down claim that master sword makers would take their just-completed sword to a local stream. One sword may cut a floating leaf cleanly in half while another would have the leaf float by it. It would be the latter sword that would be greater valued because it was considered to have spiritual powers (and possible additional sharpness). These powers were believed to help protect a warrior.

These swords became valuable family heirlooms. These swords were passed from generation to generation as symbols of a family’s strength. After 1400 sword makers would cut these tachi down to make them more like the popular katana. These swords were also in demand in China as the best made in the
world, ironic because China used to export iron swords to Japan 1,000 years before. These swords became known around Asia (and later the world) as a testament to Japanese sword-making skills.

Further Reading

Seventeen Point Constitution

The Seventeen Point Constitution was created in Japan in 604, supposedly by Prince Shotoku, regent to Empress Suiko and member of the victorious Soga family. Some historians argue the language used in this document is too sophisticated for the time and thus is a later creation. In any event, this constitution was a list of advice for rulers and the ruled and was written in Chinese, the only written language for the Japanese for centuries. It contains many ideas from China and Korea, as Japan was greatly influenced by China’s Sui dynasty as interpreted by Korea (ideas traveled from China by sea to southern Korea then by sea to Japan).

The constitution begins by advocating Confucian ideas, including provisions for keeping harmony, following orders, leading by example, maintaining honesty, punishing the bad, encouraging the good, understanding one’s place, working hard, avoiding anger or envy, and treating peasants fairly. The second article specifically honors Buddhism, within the rest there is a sprinkling of Daoist thought. Finally, Shinto’s consensus building closes out the last article. Although these words of advice are important, what the constitution really does is make the state more powerful and puts the power of taxation solely in the hands of the emperor (or the emperor’s regent). No longer would local elites have that opportunity. These last points about increased imperial power is important, for even after Prince Shotoku’s death and the loss of control over the imperial house by the Soga’s, the power of the state would continue with the victors in the brief power struggle, the Fujiwara family. The Fujiwara would also leave alone the Buddhist ideas and sects that had come to Japan, even though the family had championed Shintoism in the past.

Further Reading

Shinto

Shinto is Japan’s original animistic, folk religion, which, like Korea’s shamanistic faith, survived the coming of new religious ideas. The Japanese coined Shinto, meaning “way of the gods,” after Buddhism arrived and absorbed a few local gods. But what were gods, called kami, under Shinto? Gods were anything awe inspiring in a beautiful, powerful, or even scary way. Nature often played this role, probably because people in Japan came from Korea; Japan has far more beautiful mountain forests than the Koreans did by this point in history. A giant tree could be a kami, as could a mountain or even an...
interesting boulder. Even a man could be a kami if he had incredible abilities; upon death he might obtain even more fame as stories about his exploits got more and more exaggerated and people’s knowledge of his kamihood spread.

Shinto also provides multiple explanations on how the world, and more importantly, Japan, was created. One family claimed the sun goddess was a direct ancestor and used those stories to gain control of the state and become Japan’s emperor. Shinto, however, does not handle death or a woman’s menstruation well. Anyone who touched a dead body or animal was considered unclean; eventually an outcaste class developed from those who performed such jobs, called “burakumin.” If a woman happened to touch a wrestling ring, Shinto priests would have to help rebuild it before refereeing Sumo wrestling again. Sumo also began as a Shinto sport, albeit with little rules at first. It was a way to appease the kami and work for an abundant harvest. Later rules made the wrestlers unarmed and restricted certain painful attacks. A Shinto priest served as referee, and the goal became to push the opponent out of the ring or make any part of his body touch the ground other than the soles of his bare feet.

Further Reading

Shogun

In Japan, the term shogun is a shortening of sei-i-tai shogun, meaning “barbarian-quelling generalissimo.” Originally shogun was a title given to those commanding troops against the non-Japanese inhabitants of Honshu and Hokkaido,
usually the Ainu. After victories and the “barbarian” retreat to Hokkaido, the term fell into disuse. It was resurrected by the Minamoto family, a branch family of the Fujiwara, who won a series of wars for control of Japan at the beginning of the Kamakura Period. Instead of eliminating the emperor or intermarrying with him to help control Japan, Minamoto Yoritomo took the title shogun and expanded its meaning beyond simple military control to include all facets of secular control from the Kanto Plain (near modern-day Tokyo). The emperor would handle state religious ceremonies and continue to reign and not rule. Yet Minamoto Yoritomo’s paranoia meant he killed many of his relatives, leaving his widow to put in place her family (Hojo) as the true rulers behind the shogun as regents and soon a Fujiwara (an important family that had become distant cousins to the Minamoto family) as the puppet shogun.

The shogun would again take control of Japan’s secular world (civilian and military government), this time from the same city as the emperor, Kyoto, in the Ashikaga shogunate. The Ashikaga family had taken power and the position as shogun in part because many warriors were disappointed over boons not awarded after the “defeat” of the Mongols (their fighting plus the two lucky typhoons that forced the Mongols back to Korea). Yet the Ashikaga shogun had trouble rewarding those loyal as well and ruled Japan from a position of weakness compared to the Hojo or Minamoto families. In fact, the end of the importance of the title shogun for 125 years would occur as a result of the Onin War (1467–1477) due to a civil war over who should inherit the position.

Further Reading

Silk Road

The Silk Road is well known as one of the principal arteries of trade connecting China to central and western Asia, the Near East, and eastern Europe. From these two main routes (northern and southern), some of the most valuable goods that traversed Asia were brought over the course of weeks or months, changing hands many times along the way.

As a route through Central Asia, the Silk Road served not only as a means of trade, but also as a way for cultural diffusion to occur. Along the road traveled the noted Buddhist Pilgrim Xuanzang, who traveled from China through East Turkestan to India. Silk was perhaps the most demanded of all of China’s exotic goods. Along the Silk Road sprang up trading centers along desert oases.

Although the secret of spinning silk was known in China, it took centuries for the West to produce its own fabric. Due to this fact, the Chinese silk was in tremendous demand due to its low availability. Along the Silk Road during the early Tang dynasty lay tributary states to the Chinese emperor, expanding
Chinese influence. Later the Mongols and Yuan dynasty would control those oasis states. The road allowed not only silk to be brought across the vast steppes of Asia but also some porcelain and lots of tea to be traded; central Asian nomads used tea as a foodstuff. These valuable resources helped build China’s reputation in the wider world as a legitimate superpower. Porcelain from China was so well known and in demand it was and still is known as china throughout the Western world.

Although there were sea routes available to transport Chinese goods, the Silk Road became the most well known in Europe. The Chinese merchants would only bring their goods to the eastern edge of what is today Chinese Xinjiang before passing it to the next number of merchants. However, Chinese power and influence spread during the Tang dynasty further west. From this route, along with others, the Chinese Empire was able to amass a large trade surplus with empires and states further west. In addition, the expansion of the Chinese control afforded the empire more defensible borders and a wider amount of latitude over how to treat tributary and vassal states. However, this control was only temporary, despite the fact that China controls these territories today.

One contemporary source wrote that so many caravans were entering the eastern terminus of the Silk Road—the Chinese capital of Changan—during the Tang dynasty that dust rose from all four directions to obscure the sun. West from there, in an oasis called Dunhuang in today’s Gansu province of China, Buddhists traveling on the Silk Route founded the famous Caves of the Thousand Buddhas. These caves are actually 420 temples started in 366, with continued building for around 1,000 years. There sculpture and cave painting explain Buddhism, particularly the type of Buddhism practiced in China, Korea, and Japan, Mahayana Buddhism. It turned out one of the reasons for the caves was that this arid region was perfect for preserving wooden and paper items about Buddhism, many hidden behind a false wall for centuries. Along the route were various Buddhist caves. Along this route traveled Buddhist monks with their teachings, allowing the religion to flourish in Asia starting with the Northern Wei dynasty during the Period of Disunity.

Persian middlemen and Turkish people living in the oases of the Silk Road controlled most of its traffic until the Mongols conquered the entire lengths of the roads. But instead of making money on these now-safer roads, Mongols let the middlemen continue to profit. But in the fourteenth century, the retreat and then internecine war of the Mongols and the Black Death (or simply fear of the Black Death) led to the disuse of the Silk Road in favor of travel by sea across the South China Sea and Indian Ocean. By 1400, the Silk Road was more of a legend than a viable commercial highway.

Further Reading
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Silla Korea (674–892)

Silla Korea served as a tributary state to Tang China, at the elite level borrowing Chinese culture and institutions, while the Silla ruling family received yearly presents at least as valuable, if not more so, than the tribute they
provided China. Silla Korea, like Japan at that time, was remade into a little Tang. The country borrowed the Confucian structure of the government, including all the bureaucracy of Tang China, as well as dividing Korea into prefectures, subprefectures, and smaller units. Most government posts, however, remained in the hands of the hereditary aristocrats in their hierarchical “bone ranks” instead of to anyone capable of passing the Confucian examination system. The government remained more part of the personal household of the royal family.

Buddhism had more direct effect on Silla Korea. Large numbers of Korean Buddhist monks and lay students left by sea for study in China. The optimistic Buddhism coming out of China appealed to the Koreans. It appeared to offer protection to the state. As the state religion, the government sponsored an elite corps of aristocratic youths called “flower squires,” who attended an exclusive military academy devoted to protect Buddhism and the nation. It also promised more rewards to the individual than the Korean folk traditions. But just like Japan, Korea adopted Buddhism without rejecting its previous shamanistic faith. Buddhist art and architecture spread throughout Korea, paid for by the taxes collected by the state and by the rich. The government also controlled the Buddhist orders and temples. It used art, dance, music, and literature to try to bring the deep ideas of Pure Land Buddhism to the masses. In fact, the man who created the first system of writing Korean using Chinese characters, *idu*, was the son of the man charged briefly with bringing Buddhism to the masses. Yet success brought temporary problems—at one point, Buddhist orders owned so much land and wealth that the government had to place restrictions on their holdings.

Religion did not fell Silla Korea, however. Instead, internal squabbling over royal succession after the king was assassinated in 780 became a common occurrence, as did regionalism and even a rebellion by an obscure group calling themselves the Red Trousers. Korea fell apart into its previous three kingdoms toward the end of the ninth century.

**Further Reading**


**Song Dynasty. See Northern Song Dynasty; Southern Song Dynasty**

**Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279)**

The Southern Song dynasty began when the Jurchen took advantage of Chinese military weakness and conquered northern China up to the Huai River (halfway between the Yellow River and the Yangzi River).

Although the Song dynasty had suffered a major blow, the loss of the north had the strange effect of improving China’s economy. For one, more and more peasants fled Jurchen rule to join up with the Southern Song. These newcomers worked and lived on the new strains of rice (taken from southern Vietnam) that allowed for two crops of rice a year from the Yangzi River southward.
The Yangzi delta became the most important region for economic development. Tea growing also expanded, as did cotton growing. Commercialization of agriculture meant that peasants would pay taxes in money and not in kind. The landlord class began to take up residence in luxury, which led to the development of quality artisan goods like silk and porcelain. Even better was to live in the new capital of Hangzhou. The city was a short canal journey from the eastern reaches of the Yangzi River. There all manner of luxury goods could be purchased, from jewelry to books. The elite did not work and showed off this idleness through growing long fingernails. And elite women faced the torture known as footbinding. Footbinding came about because elite women did not need to work and the growing popularity of Neo-Confucianism took elite women out of public life. The poor did not experience either; husband and wife needed to work the fields together to survive.

With these excess commodities, foreign and regional trade expanded so much that there was not enough copper currency to conduct business. China first used weighed amounts of gold and silver before turning to paper money, yet the government’s urge to print paper money led to damaging inflation. The Song then made another costly error, again playing barbarian against barbarian. The Chinese stupidly allied with the Mongols against the Jurchen in 1227, hoping to get back north China in the process. The alliance resulted in the loss in 7 years of the Jurchen buffer state. The Mongols then slowly conquered the Southern Song dynasty over the next 45 years, as most Chinese landlords decided to ally with the Mongols in return for leaving their property intact.

Further Reading

Sui Dynasty (589–617)
In 581, a prominent general of mixed Chinese-nomadic origin overthrew the king of one of two of north China’s states near the end of the Period of Disunity, killed the royal family, and assumed the throne. He declared himself the first emperor of the Sui dynasty, Emperor Wen. Quickly he conquered the rest of north China, then headed south across the Yangzi River to unify all of China under his control, an effort accomplished easily in 589.

Wen (r. 589–604) first sought to create a strong central government, so lacking throughout China during the split. He reorganized the administration and bureaucracy, at first placing mixed Chinese-nomad families from the north in key positions. Quickly southern families married into the newcomer families from the north. The emperor established a limited examination system and a series of rules to prevent corruption by officials: local officials could not appoint subordinates; officials could not serve in their native place; and officials could serve no more than one tour of duty in the same location. To unite symbolically China, the emperor enshrined thirty supposed Buddha relics in buildings called stupas in the thirty regional capitals in 601.
Wen secondly worked to restore the economy by instituting the successful equal field system throughout China. By creating new peasant landowners, he built up the tax base as had been done in the Northern Wei. Wen used corvée labor to build granaries around the capital of Changan, located along a major tributary of the Yellow River. Peasant labor also started a Grand Canal to link the Yangzi and Yellow rivers so grain and taxes could flow to the capital easily for more than half the year. The reforms strengthened the economy for a time. Then Emperor Wen of the Sui dynasty set out on some further wars of conquest. He fought wars to protect and then extend the empire west, north, south, and east. Wen was then murdered, likely by his son, who took the throne in 604, and ended up exceeding the megalomania of his father.

Emperor Yang (r. 604–617) decided to spend his time and China’s money first on elaborate building projects. He decided to build a new capital, Loyang, around 200 miles down the Yellow River from Changan. He employed two million peasants on the project, and thousands died hauling rare timber to the treeless plain. He needed 1.2 million peasants starting in 607 to work on the Great Wall, where at least half perished. And supposedly 5.5 million peasants worked on the various canal projects; most important was finishing and extending the Grand Canal north and south. These forced laborers faced death if they fled and the whip if they worked too slowly. Once the Grand Canal reached the capital, Emperor Yang took his four-story, 270-foot long dragon
boat south to the Yangzi River, towed by peasant power. His entourage reached eighty-thousand men and stretched out as many as 60 miles. He had forty palaces built so he could avoid sleeping on the barge.

Such building projects proved expensive. Emperor Yang coupled this mistreatment of the peasantry and waste of taxes with renewed wars of conquest that turned out to be failures, even with perhaps the largest army in world history before the twentieth century used to fight one of the Korean states. China faced bankruptcy and two large peasant rebel armies when Turkish nomads captured Yang and held him for ransom in 615. In the end, the emperor’s own entourage assassinated Yang in 617, and chaos in China deepened. Key Sui dynasty officials joined the scramble for power. The winner over these pretenders and the peasant armies was another Chinese-nomad military governor of the north who proclaimed power in 618 and spent the better part of 8 years consolidating his hold on China using the same Turks as mercenaries: Tang Gaozu, the first emperor of the Tang dynasty. See also Early Tang Dynasty and Late Tang Dynasty.

Further Reading

Sumo Wrestling

Sumo likely predates the Japanese arrival on the Yamato Plain at the start of the fifth century. Sumo’s governing body today says the sport is at least 1,500 years old. It started as a harvest ritual for Shintoism. The fight between two neighboring peasants would include prayers for a bountiful harvest. There were no real rules at first, so punching and strangling attacks were allowed for centuries before the sport organized under the Tokugawa regime (after 1600). In fact, sometimes the wrestlers would use weapons to kill their opponent.

During the Nara Period sumo was introduced to the imperial court and no doubt took on further characteristics of Shintoism that are still seen today, like having a Shinto priest as referee, tossing salt to purify the arena, and stomping to scare away the evil spirits. The emperor began to hold a yearly wrestling festival the seventh day of the seventh lunar month, including music and dancing for the wrestlers. Slowly rules were added so the fight was no longer about maiming or killing them an adversary. Instead, later rules made the wrestlers unarmed and restricted certain painful attacks. A Shinto priest served as referee, and the goal became to push the opponent out of the ring or make any part of his body touch the ground other than the soles of his bare feet.

In the Kamakura and then Ashikaga Periods, sumo wrestling became something to teach the nascent samurai warrior who might lose his weapon or have his sword broken. Out of sumo came jujitsu, a useful martial art for the bushi.

Further Reading
Tale of Genji

The world’s first novel was Japan’s Tale of Genji by Lady Murasaki (her given name is unknown), written probably from 1008 to 1021. This novel has been translated into modern Japanese (and many other languages) and is still read to this day. It is a source of Japanese cultural pride, although attacked at first due to the sexual conduct in the book. The story takes place over 75 years, following three generations of the imperial family and five hundred characters in fifty-four chapters originally written in haphazard order, most likely to amuse ladies of the court and not for publication. The story became famous because the beautiful poetry—for a long time considered the only important Japanese language literature—written within the sprawling tale. Only later it became an icon as the first book in Japanese.

In brief, Tale of Genji is a story about looking for love where it is forbidden or unlikely to be found. The hero is not one by standard Western definition. His heroism lies in his capacity to be deeply moved and emotional through poetry, painting, music, and affairs of the heart. Most important, the novel helps to explain the aesthetics of Heian Japan, at least for the 5 percent of elite Japanese living in the capital. Elite women have their eyebrows shaved and drawn on higher than before and their teeth blackened. These aristocratic men and women wore white powder on their faces. They wear many layered robes of fine colored silk but can be almost mortally embarrassed if one layer out of twelve does not quite match the subtle colors of the rest. It was more important for food to look beautiful than to taste delicious. The elite liked to dance, recite poetry, and concoct perfumes. But what the Heian Period aristocrats considered beautiful was not necessarily the obvious. Instead of the tune, the smell, or the sight, Heian Japanese elites, in contrast to Chinese, admired the transient nature of life heard in the last few notes of a song fading away, fragrance wafting on the breeze, or shadows present at dusk or dawn. Cherry blossoms were (and are) an excellent example of this aesthetic. The flowers in the cherry tree only last for a few days and thus were (and are) seen as reflecting how briefly humans live on earth or the fickleness of the human heart, both themes of Murasaki’s work.

Because marriages were arranged as part of political expedience, men and women in the Tale of Genji—and we assume in Heian Japan—had many secret affairs. But a man would fall in love with a women not based on her beauty, because women often hid behind screens when courting, but on her writing style or poetry recited. Most important were the “morning after” letters sent by lovers after their night of love; the way it was folded, the perfume put on it, the calligraphy of the note, and the words within all foretold how the other viewed the relationship. Genji excelled at dance, poetry, and these letters and could cry in front of people should his love be out of reach. This sensitivity made him a hero for Heian Japan very different from a Western hero that always put his feelings out of reach to fight the bad guy.

Further Reading
**Tang Dynasty.** See Early Tang Dynasty; Late Tang Dynasty

**Tang Governance**

Emperor Taizong, the second emperor of the celebrated Tang dynasty, helped create a governing, bureaucratic system utilized from this period forward to the twentieth century by Chinese emperors to control their vast empires. It was a pyramid structure, with the emperor at the top. Three departments came at the next level: Department of State, Imperial Secretariat, and the Imperial Chancellery, the last, under the chancellor, was next in command after the emperor and served as a chief advisor. The secretariat helped create policy and write the imperial decrees. The main, essential tasks of government were entrusted to the Department of State, which included six ministries: Officials, Finance, Rites, Army, Justice, and Public Works. The Ministry of Officials appointed, promoted, and demoted the officials that helped run the government, down to the local magistrate level, and thus helped with the *examination system*. The Ministry of Finance gathered census data and the taxes that allowed the state to function. The Ministry of Rites attended to Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist matters, including state ceremonies and rituals. These state rituals became increasingly important over the years as emperors moved away from the public worship of their own imperial ancestors and these public ceremonies became the way to show the emperor was the father of the nation in a very Confucian manner, and thus held the *mandate of heaven*. The Ministries of Army, Justice, and Public Works all functioned as might be expected by their names, with the exception that the Ministry of Army dealt with the organizing the military in times of peace.

Besides this bureaucratic system, Taizong also divided China into first ten (later fifteen) large circuits that resemble modern day provinces in their borders. He subdivided them into over 350 prefectures and more than fifteen hundred counties managed by magistrates and other officials, the lowest part of the central bureaucracy. The final division, sixteen thousand districts, were under control of the local elites, as the central government could not control what happened at the local level with the technology of the time. Taizong also created laws of two types—primary (meant for all time) and secondary (regulations that would be adjusted over time).

The Tang governance system also began to use the examination system to a greater and greater degree as the years progressed, although at the beginning it was an important, but not major method of recruitment. First it was used for filling positions that were newly created or when a position would become vacant due to the official in question lacking an heir. This meant only about one third of all positions. The Tang dynasty restored the Imperial University to teach Confucianism to its hoped-for officials.

It was under Tang’s *Empress Wu*, the only female to rule in her own name, that the exam system became even more important, but still not all positions in government were subject to it. Because she believed her family was descended from Laozi, creator of Daoism, the test in her “husband’s” day also had questions about Daoism to answer. She continued the tradition. After her expulsion from the throne in 705 at the age of 82, Confucianists resumed their monopoly over the questions. As the years progressed, the exams became conservative and subject to rote memorization, serving to hamper intellectual growth by emphasis on Confucian orthodoxy. See also Early Tang Dynasty and Late Tang Dynasty.
Further Reading


Warfare

The Chinese military, once trousers and stirrups came on the scene, used cavalry to harass the enemy and usually militia-quality infantry armed with easy-to-use crossbow as the shock troops. The strategy Chinese used came from the Warring States Period, before the unification of China, in the book *Art of War* by Sun Zi. Sun advocated using diplomacy to win a country’s desires. If that failed, disrupt enemy alliances, harass the enemy supply line to win without fighting, avoid combat except when and where you wanted it and had the advantage, and do not attack an enemy-fortified city. Sometimes the Chinese generals neglected these and other suggestions by the military genius Sun, almost always to China’s disappointment.

Soldiers never obtained much status in China, usually falling even below mercenaries. During the Late Tang dynasty and into the Song, China changed its system by hiring seminomadic horsemen as mercenaries to fight for the empire. Like late Roman reliance on others to guard the frontiers, the Chinese mercenaries often turned on their employer and as a result helped end the dynasty.

By the time the Song dynasty decided to go back to a militia system, poor Chinese troop quality may have led to former allies attacking Chinese forces (first the Jurchen and then the Mongols), but their heavy infantry at least had the best equipment for the times. The Song soldiers also used crossbows (and regular bows) with thick, heavy metal armor (over 60 pounds) to protect themselves. They used a mish-mash of rockets, grenades, firearms, and cannon in attempts to scare their enemy’s horses, as well as to harm them. The Ming dynasty also used militia and different gunpowder-driven weapons in their fights against the Mongols.

The Yuan dynasty used some of the classic Mongol combat tricks, at least through the first half of the dynasty. In the second half, it often used landlord armies to help it put down near-constant peasant rebellions. Mongol troops had already been organized by Chingess (Genghis) Khan: every warrior, with his family and possessions, was permanently assigned to a particular unit; those units were placed together in tens, and tens of tens, and so on, for a simple organizing system. There cavalry had great proficiency in archery with a powerful, long-range composite bow. The Mongols also had a system of fast couriers that could transmit messages up to 200 miles per day! This ability for rapid communication allowed the most important ability in war to occur—being able to split an army and have it come back together as one once the battle was joined. Another important tactics was used when in combat for the first time against a new foe. The Mongols would attack directly with only part of their force and retreat like they had been defeated. They might even retreat for days, just a step ahead of the overconfident pursuit teams of their enemy. At the appropriate time—usually when another force got behind their adversaries—the
fighting would resume. Using their powerful bows and maneuverable horses, Mongols would usually win, until sedentary life ruling China diminished the skills of one fourth of the total Mongol empire.

As neighbors to China during the Sui, Tang, and Northern Song dynasty, Korean military forces fought on the battlefield in ways similar to the Chinese, with large numbers of quality militia soldiers armed with crossbows behind large shields with a small number of cavalry to harass the flanks. The main difference was that soldiers had more status in Korea than China. In terms of strategy and tactics, no Korean matched the war hero Ulchi Mundok of Koguryo in 612. He fought off a Sui dynasty invasion, rumored to be two million strong (likely an exaggeration of the times—it would be difficult to field an army larger than one-hundred thousand in the seventh century) of one of the three Korean states, Koguryo. It was the largest of the three, but still small by Chinese standards. He fought a brilliant campaign of retreat, scorched-earth policy (destroying food and shelter while retreating to deny the enemy comfort), and periodic probing attacks, all designed to keep the Sui army on the attack but unbalanced. Ulchi managed to lure the Sui forces deep within Korean territory; that was fine by the Chinese, for they planned to besiege the Koguryo capital of Pyongyang. Just before that siege could take place, Ulchi surprised the larger army at the Battle of Salsu—one of the most brilliant military victories in Korean history—forcing it to retreat. Throughout the retreat, Korean forces harassed the Chinese. Supposedly fewer than three thousand marched back to China, the rest lost to lack of supplies, disease, or combat.

Japanese warfare went through four phases during the years 400 to 1400. Archeologists call the 400s the century of armor. Japanese foot soldiers were protected by iron cuirass (a breastplate and backplate armor) and a helmet similar to that used simultaneously in southern Korea. Soldiers also had either handheld shields or planted into the ground 5 foot high and 2 feet wide wood and leather tower shields to hide from arrows.

By the sixth century, Japan converted to cavalry and used lighter, more flexible lamellar armor made up of eight hundred small iron slats to use while riding their short horses. They armed themselves with the bow, which took much dedication to fire accurately on the run and to be able to ride while not holding the reins. This style of armor and mounted warfare would be reflective of Japanese armor all the way through the time of the samurai. It was also how the Japanese uji or clans fought with one another for control of the coalescing state.

After leading Japanese learned of Chinese advancements in the Sui and Tang dynasties, they copied the Chinese army and left the cavalry for flanking maneuvers using their swords and to finish off the opponent. The Japanese brought back infantry armed with bows or crossbows behind the giant planted shields. Generals coordinated their different forces through the use of gongs, bells, drums, and banners. Even Shinto priests involved themselves in the military, perhaps explaining the continued Shinto operation of the controversial Yasukuni Shrine for Japan’s Asia-Pacific War dead and the executed war criminals. Japan’s Yamato Period, Nara Period, and beginning of the Heian Period mostly used this military to push their non-Japanese “barbarian” neighbors like the Ainu northeast to northern Honshu and hopefully Hokkaido.

The final phase reverted back to the expensive cavalry, the roots of the samurai, during the late Heian Period. These mounted soldiers soon came to
dominate Japan’s class system. Called at this time bushi (warriors), they borrowed the idea of a curved sword from the defeated “barbarians” and continued their skills with bow and arrow. Japanese battles now devolved into one-on-one fights, with the loser apt to lose his head from the squire-like infantry who moved to mop up after the swordfight had ended. This was because the non-Japanese had been forced away to the northeast and except for the two brief and abortive Mongol invasions of Kyushu, Japanese fought Japanese. Out of these fights and a few centuries would eventually emerge ritual suicide (seppuku, or more vulgarly “harakiri”) and bushido, the way of the samurai warrior.

Further Reading

Women, Role of

Women in traditional East Asia faced many hardships, although during the Heian Period in Japan and for much of Korea’s history elite women had more power and prestige until the twentieth century. Average peasant women faced the normal hardships of being on the edge of poverty, but not as much discrimination as elites due to the poor family needing the equal work by all to survive the difficult farming life.

Throughout East Asian traditional society, the birth of a girl was not as happy a day as the birth of a boy. Male children were needed to continue the family name and take care of the ancestors, including the parents in old age and then death (at least in China and Korea). In difficult times, a daughter might be the victim of infanticide, or be sold into service or concubinage if an elite family could be found to make the sale. The girl would then have to work until adulthood (and perhaps beyond) as a poorly treated maid, or become one of the extra wives or concubines of a rich, old man, the difference being a concubine could be bought and sold.

The first 7 years for a daughter—assuming no infanticide or the regular deaths children faced in the years before modern medicine—were probably the most joyful. East Asian families let children of both sexes—although perhaps allowing even more freedom for boys—play, with a little work thrown in the more poverty a family faced. Seven years did not mean 7 Western years, however; children’s ages were measured one for the birth, one at the first lunar New Year, and another year every lunar New Year, so a child 7 years of age might be only 5 years old in the Western reckoning.

The years of childhood after age 7 meant hard work, in the house if the family had some money, and in the fields and in the home if part of a normal peasant family. And if not sold to a wealthy family or worse a brothel, the girl might expect to marry. A middle-income peasant family (or wealthier) from a neighboring village would employ a matchmaker to find a suitable wife for their son. If wealthy, the tie with another wealthy family would insure the continued
prosperity of both. If normal peasants, an agreeable match would be all that was necessary. If poor peasants, the matchmaker would likely be out of the picture. When the potential groom’s family was satisfied with the match, it would send to the bride’s family a set of traditional, symbolic gifts like lacquer and glue to show the joining of the two in marriage, as well as a small dowry for the loss of a worker in the bride’s home.

The newlywed was usually just a teenaged girl who had no choice over her marriage partner, and this part of life was the most difficult—if she did not commit suicide on the way to her new home. Not only would she be expected to start a family and have sons almost immediately—with all the dangers childbirth entailed—she was also run ragged by her new mother-in-law who had her working almost as hard as a slave. Because three generations—the father and mother, the newlyweds, and their new children—all lived under the same roof, the mother-in-law had the power as the elder and often abused that power. She would complain that the new wife was useless and did not do her chores properly. There were cases of suicide or fleeing back to her parents’ home due to this cruelty, which ironically the mother-in-law no doubt herself endured when she was a newlywed. Conditions would likely improve upon the birth of a son. The birth of a series of daughters might lead her in-laws to send her back to her parents, divorced for not producing an heir!

The woman’s middle years were full of surviving multiple births and experiencing the likely death of some of her children. If a peasant, she kept the home as well as worked the fields. If an elite, she might get some education to pass on to her sons and daughters, and before the Song dynasty might play a role in the family or extended family.

Becoming a mother-in-law as your eldest son married and brought his new wife to live in your home was the high point of many East Asian women’s lives, especially peasant lives. But elite women in China by the time of the Song dynasty faced a new horror, albeit for their girl children, the Neo-Confucian attack on women known as footbinding. This incredibly painful procedure—wrapping a 5-year-old’s feet so they would not grow—kept the elite woman’s feet smaller than their fist. It made it difficult to walk and thus showed that the family was wealthy enough to do without the work of the woman in question. It also pushed these women out of society, where they had a place before, and into their homes’ shadows. Unless there was a plan to sell a daughter to be a concubine, poor girls and women did not experience this torture; husband, wife, and daughters all needed to work the fields together to survive. Footbinding also had a sexual component. As the foot tried to grow, the bones snapped and left the foot looking a little like a lotus flower, which was considered erotic, and was thought to increase sexual pleasure for the woman’s husband.

The life of an East Asian widow could go in two directions. If she had a son, her son and daughter-in-law would be expected to care for her until death. If she did not have a son, and lacked money after her husband’s death, life would turn out full of difficulties. Widows were forbidden to marry, so could not hope to have a second family if their husbands died young.

Chinese society rarely allowed a woman to rule, with Empress Wu the big exception. Korea was a matrilineal society, which remained important in Korean lineages, so a female leader was not out of the question—at least three ruled between 400 and 800—before Confucianism and especially Neo-Confucianism
began to rule the ideas of Koreans. During a similar period, Japan had two
empresses. During the Heian Period, elite women had many rights and were
educated, if only in Japanese and not the Chinese needed for secular rule at
the time. They had relationships with men on their own accord, even if neither
party to the relationship saw the entire body of the other, what with the twelve
layers of silk robes and paper screens. But when the warrior class took over
Japanese society, elite women went back into the shadows, and the poor peas-
ant woman continued to work hard in the fields and in the home.

Further Reading

Yamato Period (c. 400–710)

This period of Japanese history begins with the Japanese pushing into the
Yamato Plain on Honshu. Some scholars date its start from when Korean Bud-
dhism hit the island in 552, but it makes more sense to start in the fifth cen-
tury. It was around this time that the clan who chose the sun goddess to
worship as ancestor used the fact that the sun is so important and gives light to
all Japan to convince the other clans to follow its leadership and become subsidi-
ary elites. It would take a bit of time to work out leadership, but by the next
century this imperial house, drawing its lineage from Amaterasu the sun god-
dess, held loose control over the other clans, a first-among-equals arrange-
ment. Even today there are those that claim that the imperial line flows unblemished
from this early emperor.

In 552, the Korean kingdom of Paekche asked for help in its struggle against
its two Korean neighbors, so it sent a bronze image of the Buddha and some
Buddhist scriptures to the Soga family, triggering renewed interest in Bud-
dhism. Although too weak to offer military help, the Soga family used the
ideas coming from China via Korea as weapons in the battle for control of the
imperial family. Two families besides Soga were the main contestants, which
became a fierce contest: Nakatomi (virtually in charge of Shintoism), Monon-
obe (who controlled the military), and Soga (championing Buddhism even
though intermarried with the imperial clan). Endorsing Buddhism had the
dual function of endorsing Chinese/Korean ways; Japan was to copy laws,
arts, religion, society, and eventually even the idea of a capital city from first
Sui and later Tang China before too much time passed. Even though its ene-
mies declared Buddhism caused an epidemic by irritating Shinto gods (kami),
Soga defeated the Mononobe in a war and convinced Nakatomi to back out of
the struggle, at least temporarily. Soga had the opportunity to eliminate the
emperor and place a full-blooded Soga onto the throne, yet the leaders of Soga
decided simply to intermarry and have a regent control the niece of the family,
Empress Suiko (r. 592–628). This regent was Prince Shotoku.

Prince Shotoku became famous for sponsoring Buddhism and Buddhist
temples, as well as creating the Seventeen Point Constitution in 604. This
constitution was more of a list of advice for rulers and the ruled and was written in Chinese, the only written language for the Japanese for centuries. Its articles heavily advocated Confucianism and Buddhism, with a sprinkling of Daoism and Shinto’s consensus building thrown in for good measure. But the constitution was really a way to show forcefully that the emperor/regent for the emperor would serve as a more powerful central government, including collecting taxes. Prince Shotoku also opened up relations with China and sent four missions to the short-lived Sui dynasty.

After the death of Prince Shotoku in 622, a new round of fighting for control of the emperor broke out. The winner was the Nakatomi family, who changed its name to Fujiwara. The Fujiwara family would control or influence the emperor for centuries to come, first by intermarrying with the emperor and later by becoming regent. This leading Shinto family decided against discarding Buddhism. The Fujiwara instead pushed for more centralization and adopted more Chinese ideas. It continued centralizing of the state, even though the family continued to practice Shintoism. For example, the imperial residence changed with the death of each emperor until 645—Shintoism abhors pollution and believes the dead defiled the previous palace. The Fujiwara then instituted new changes, called the Taika (Great Change) Reforms in 646, and decided to leave the imperial residence as it was too much work to move it so often. These reforms created a new system of provincial administration and a series of roads to link the kingdom together. Private land ownership was ended so Japan could copy the Chinese equal field system and taxation policies of the Tang dynasty. The rice fields would revert to state ownership each generation for redistribution based on the census, but the census was not taken until 670, and the equal field system was always incomplete. After three emperors, the Fujiwara decided to build a city, a permanent capital for Japan on the Tang model in Heijo, also called Nara. Thus ended the Yamato Period and the short Nara Period began in 710.

Further Reading

**Yangzi River**

The Yangzi River is the third longest river in the world at just under 4,000 miles; it is wide and deep enough to allow navigation of ocean-going modern vessels 1,000 miles from the sea to its famous gorges. With many men and ropes, even the gorges were defeated by shallow draft vessels and skilled, determined navigators. The river thus serves as a major transportation corridor into China’s interior, as well as the water to grow rice this far north in traditional China. Chinese traditionally founded their southern capitals on the river (Nanjing for the Ming dynasty) or a short distance away on a tributary (Hangzhou during the Southern Song dynasty). The river winds its way from a glacier on the eastern border of Tibet southeast before turning around a third of its way to the sea back in a general northeastern direction. The river gets wide with over seven hundred tributaries and four of China’s five great freshwater lakes feeding the river. Although floods periodically do occur, putting the countryside for miles
and miles completely under water, the Yangzi does not compare to the **Yellow River** in its historic destructiveness and unpredictability.

The river and its tributaries were home to exotic Chinese animals now on the endangered species list, from the Yangzi River dolphin (called “goddess of the Yangzi”), to the finless porpoise (known as a “river pig”), and even alligators (the only place they exist outside of North America). Although the river does not flow muddy yellowish colors like its neighbor to the north, the Yellow River, as the years of agriculture on its banks increased the water became dangerous to drink—the nightsoil runoff described under agriculture was the main culprit.

The Yangzi River served as the dividing line between north and south China, and the boundary for rice growing for the 400 to 1400 period. Its width in the east and mountainous terrain in the west meant it was difficult to cross. Only a few strong, long, and wide bridges crossed the river, save in major urban centers. By the ninth century, the Yangzi delta and its rice farms had become the most densely populated area in China (and thus the world), and perhaps continues to hold this mark to this day. The center of China’s growing economy was no longer the Yellow River, but instead the Yangzi. Under the Southern Song dynasty, Hangzhou, in the southern delta, was the largest city in the world with over 1.5 million inhabitants. It was also where the **Grand Canal** started its trek northward to the Yellow River and beyond.

**Further Reading**


**Yellow River**

The Yellow River is a long and powerful river in north China; it is where Chinese civilization first developed because of the fine, loess soil the river carved out of the earth in the west and deposited through floods throughout the north China plain. In fact, it is the loess that gives the Yellow River its name: the soil when in the water appears as a yellowish brown color. This soil was rich in nutrients and only required wooden tools to farm. The Chinese grew first millet (in the West today millet is used as birdseed) along its banks and tributaries, then barley and kaoliang (sorghum), before the coming of wheat around 1500 B.C.E. The itself river flows well over 3,000 miles across the mostly-flat north China plain, making it the sixth-longest river in the world, although not a good one for ships and boats because of its quick current and unpredictable nature. As the river deposited silt along its banks, the river itself rose from the plain. It needed constant peasant labor to maintain its banks and earthen dykes to prevent water from spilling down onto the flat farmlands below. When the major floods would finally occur, the river would jump its banks and flow down onto thousands of square miles of farms, leading to devastation of the flood itself and famine due to the destruction of that year’s growing season. This unpredictable nature of the river is why it bears the nickname “China’s Sorrow.” Yet the river also supplies water for irrigation projects and loess soil for farming with even primitive tools.

Peasants near the river historically spent much of their corvee working to keep the Yellow River dykes in order. Unfortunately, many of the nomadic or
Seminomadic conquerors of north China did not spend sufficient resources to maintain the river, leading to disastrous floods, which the local peasants took to mean the rulers had lost the **mandate of heaven**. In 1194, when north China was under the control of the Jurchen, one of the worst of these floods spilled out over the southern portion of the north China plain, ruining the lives of thousands of peasants. The river and flood were so powerful that it changed the river’s course. For the next few centuries, the Yellow River co-opted the Huai River basin, reaching the Yellow Sea over 600 miles south of its original exit to the sea. Under the Mongols — another nomadic group with difficulty understanding the importance of controlling the river — during the **Yuan dynasty** in the 1340s the river once again jumped its banks and flooded peasant lands. In this case the muddy waters fouled the **Grand Canal**. It took the efforts of one-hundred fifty thousand peasants to put the river back into its 1194 channel. Revolutionaries in the secret White Lotus Buddhist sect used the opportunity of thousands of disgruntled corvee workers to proselytize and thus set the stage for peasant rebellions in north China that would eventually fell the dynasty.

**Further Reading**


**Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368)**

The **Southern Song dynasty** made a costly error, just as the **Northern Song dynasty** did with the Jurchen. It again tried to play barbarian against barbarian. The Chinese stupidly allied with the **Mongols** against the Jurchen, hoping to get back north China in the process. The Mongols, disparate tribes living a nomadic existence in the plains that bear their name, became a unified and highly successful fighting force under Genghis Khan (one of many transliterations of his name) starting in 1206. He died in 1227, after many victories in Central Asia and into Russia, having only just begun to attack the Jurchen in northern China. The alliance between his heir, Ogodei, and China resulted in the loss in 7 years of the Jurchen buffer state. Because the Chinese armies again did poorly against nomadic troops, the Mongols decided to push their luck and continue the war, this time against the Chinese. The Mongols slowly conquered the Southern Song dynasty over the next 45 years — fighting proved difficult not due to the quality of Chinese troops, but because south China is not very suitable to cavalry attacks. The Mongols improvised, and had the advantage of most Chinese landlords deciding to ally with the Mongols in return for leaving their property intact.

Khubilai Khan (r. 1260–1294), the grandson of Genghis, moved the Mongol capital to Beijing and became the first ruler of the **Yuan dynasty** (1279–1368). Soon China became a realm within an empire, as China was easily the wealthiest possession of the entire Mongol empire stretching to

Eastern Europe. Khubilai divided the population of China into four groups to help him rule: Mongols at the top of the bureaucracy, Central Asian peoples in less important bureaucratic positions, recent north China defeated peoples in the least important positions, and southern Chinese completely out of government. The Chinese were also not allowed arms and forbidden from meetings. This would be the first time in history that Chinese landlords felt deprived of their official positions. The Mongols would temporarily relent on this point and brought back ever so briefly the examination system. However, the Mongols made the test easier for non-Chinese, so the system did not endear itself to the Chinese gentry exam takers. The one benefit they received as a class was to keep their estates, the original reason they surrendered and then turned to help the Mongols.

Mongol control over Central Asia stimulated trade between China, the rest of the empire, and Europe, but the profits to this trade left Chinese hands for the middlemen involved along the Silk Road. These losses increased rapidly due to a mistaken printing of too much paper currency, Mongol corruption, and unsuccessful invasions of Southeast Asia and Japan (both twice), crippling China’s economy in the long run. In addition, Mongols confiscated land in north China for pasturing horses, Mongol aristocrats, and Buddhist temples. As this land left tax rolls, peasants were forced to make up the difference. Taxes increased rapidly due to these economic problems, and because the Mongols built and extended the Grand Canal to move receipts and grain to this new capital. Although the Mongols expanded the Grand Canal, they did nothing about shoring up the Yellow River dykes or irrigation systems of north China, which both failed, leading to massive famine in some parts of China. In addition, peasants faced 100 percent interest on loans as landlords attempted to recoup the funds they used to take from the government as local or regional bureaucrats.

Peasant unrest led to rebellion against the foreign Mongols and the Chinese oppressive landlords. It started under the leadership of a leader claiming Song heritage, a Buddhist secret society called the White Lotus, and its Red Turban soldiers. Recruiting in the north was easy for this group, especially as one-hundred fifty thousand peasant conscripts were working on repairing the Yellow River there in the 1340s. Open rebellion broke out in 1352, and for 3 years major parts of south and central China were lost to both the Mongols and the Chinese landlords. The Mongols finally ended this rebellion by using Chinese troops led by the gentry against the peasant rebellion.

This victory for the Mongols and their allies would be short-lived. Peasants continued to fight against the dynasty. A former peasant and one-time Buddhist monk named Zhu Yuanzhang rose in rank to become the leader of the southern Red Turban armies. Zhu revised the plan of attack, deciding to ally with Chinese landlords to attack the Mongols, rather than having both as enemies. Even though not all Chinese gentry broke from the Mongols, enough did to allow Zhu to push the nomads out of China in 1368 and forming a new dynasty with its capital on the Yangzi River at Nanjing: the Ming dynasty (1368–1644).

Further Reading
Zen Buddhism

Zen Buddhism is another type of Mahayana (“Greater Vehicle”) Buddhism popular in Japan, especially among warriors and the literati. Everyone has the Buddha nature in them and can be saved, but in Zen your teacher only explains the path, it takes the monk-student to follow the path successfully to achieve enlightenment.

Zen was a translation of Chan Buddhism and shares many qualities with it. Although meditation had long been a practice of Japanese Buddhists, it was not until the twelfth century that Rinzai Zen arrived in Japan from China. It believes meditation and koans (literally “public cases,” but really logic puzzles meant to snap the mind out of its harmful logic) the keys needed for enlightenment. A bit later, in the thirteenth century Soto Zen arrived from China. It focuses on sitting. Warriors became the chief nonmonk practitioners of both types of Zen, needing the clarity of meditation, the elimination of fear of death, and repetitive moves until one can attack without thinking. Zen also had a large impact on Japanese arts and culture, including noh theater.

Further Reading

Zhu Xi (1130–1200)

Zhu Xi was a Southern Song dynasty Neo-Confucian thinker whose ideas in two generations would become the respected interpretation of Confucianism. He mixed ideas of Buddhism and Daoism to find a new interpretation of Confucianism. Zhu thought long and hard about how to cultivate the self. He believed through meditation one could suddenly become aware and achieve full Neo-Confucian enlightenment. These ideas sound suspiciously like Chan Buddhism.

Zhu looked at Confucianism through the lens of his own time. There was an immaterial and immutable principle in all things that gives them their form and essence. Once he grasped this basic idea, it was simple to show that people were inherently good, but

Bodhidharma (Daruma). Momoyama period, Japan, late 16th century. Bodhidharma, known as Daruma in Japanese, was the Indian founder of Zen Buddhism which he brought to China. Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.
needed training and self-cultivation through meditation to show this goodness to the world. This is much the same as a house plan: it only becomes a house once materials are used to build it. One’s qi, the parts of the house, needs li, a plan, to make everything work properly. Zhu’s ideas became the orthodox interpretation of Neo-Confucian thought. So important were his ideas that in the late Southern Song, his was the interpretation needed to pass through the examination system. The downside to Zhu’s work is that it led to stagnation among China’s intellectuals, who needed to memorize the style and even substance of one particular version of Neo-Confucianism from the thirteenth through the nineteenth century rather than coming up with their own ideas and interpretations for a changing world.

Further Reading
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1. Selections from the *Analects* by Confucius (c. sixth century B.C.E.)

The following document comes from nine centuries before 400 but details some simple ideas of Confucius in what most historians agree are his words. Through these statements and answers to questions, Confucius explains such things as the Golden Rule and filial piety (honoring one’s parents). Benevolence to those below and loyalty to those above, the four- or five-part hierarchical class system, and the five relationships are left out, but can be found in the entry on Confucianism or in the essay on “Religion.”

40. Zi Gong asked: “Is there any one word that can serve as a principle for the conduct of life?” Confucius said: “Perhaps the word ‘reciprocity’: Do not do to others what you would not want others to do to you.”

...  

56. Zi You asked about filial piety. Confucius said: “Nowadays a filial son is just a man who keeps his parents in food. But even dogs or horses are given food. If there is no feeling of reverence, wherein lies the difference?”

57. Zi Xia asked about filial piety. Confucius said: “The manner is the really difficult thing. When anything has to be done the young people undertake it; when there is wine and food the elders are served—is this all there is to filial piety?”

...

95. Confucius said: “If a ruler himself is upright, all will go well without orders. But if he is not upright, even though he gives orders, they will not be obeyed.”


2. Selections from the *Dao De Jing* (c. sixth century B.C.E.)

These selections from the *Dao De Jing*, supposedly written millennia before, are probably contemporary with the works of Confucius. Daoism became the chief challenger to Confucianism and like it survived the Warring States Period with practitioners to this day. Daoists often put
their ideas in opposition to Confucianism, especially claiming Daoism allows one to be closer to nature, as Confucianism is too tied up in government and ritual, yet their views rejecting writing laws are actually quite similar. One of Daoism’s key ideas is wu wei, which means completing a task through nonaction. A famous story shows wu wei in action: a butcher never needed to sharpen his carving knife because instead of cutting the meat and dulling the blade, his experience with the meat had him put the knife where there was no resistance.

1

The Dao [Way] that can be told of
Is not the eternal Dao;
The name that can be named
Is not the eternal name.
Nameless, it is the origin of Heaven and earth;
Namable, it is the mother of all things.

3

Refrain from exalting the worthy,
So that the people will not scheme and contend;
Refrain from prizing rare possessions,
So that the people will not steal;
Refrain from displaying objects of desire,
So that the people’s hearts will not be disturbed.

Therefore a sage rules his people thus:
He empties their minds,
And fills their bellies;
He weakens their ambitions,
And strengthens their bones.

He strives always to keep the people innocent of knowledge and desires and to keep the knowing ones from meddling. By doing nothing that interferes with anything (wu-wei), nothing is left unregulated.


3. Alchemy in Religious Daoism (c. fifth century)

Daoism changed with the coming of Buddhism, which borrowed some of Daoism’s ideas and used them in new ways. Daoism therefore became more church-like, which historians dub Religious Daoism. Although the original Daoists professed to want to get close to nature and do what is natural, Religious Daoists were more concerned with avoiding death altogether. Daoists became alchemists, trying to find the secret ingredients in Chinese medicine to live forever, as this document from the Period of Disunity shows. Unfortunately, often the items they mixed, like mercury and gunpowder, proved to have opposite of the desired effect.
The immortals nourish their bodies with drugs and prolong their lives with the application of occult science, so that internal illness shall not arise and external ailment shall not enter. Although they enjoy everlasting existence and do not die, their old bodies do not change. If one knows the way to immortality, it is not to be considered so difficult.

Among the creatures of nature, man is the most intelligent. Therefore those who understand [creation] slightly employ the myriad things and those who get to its depth can enjoy [what is called in the Lao Tzu “long life and everlasting existence”]. As we know that the best medicine can prolong life, let us take it to obtain immortality, and as we know that the tortoise and the crane have longevity, let us imitate their activities to increase our span of life. . . . Those who have obtained Dao are able to lift themselves into the clouds and the heavens above and to dive and swim in the rivers and seas below.


4. Changing Wives in China (sixth century)

The following poem below by Yuan-di (508–554) illustrates the tenuous position of women in sixth-century Chinese society. The poem expresses the loss and sorrow felt by a wife as she returns to her home to discover that she has been replaced by a new wife.

Entering the hall, she meets the new wife:
Leaving the gate, she runs into her former husband.
Words stick: she does not manage to say anything:
She presses her hands together and hesitates.
Agitates moon-like fan—sheds pearl-like tears—
Realizes she loves him just as much as ever:
That her present pain will never come to an end.


5. The Shinto Creation Story (eighth century)

Written down from oral tradition in the early eighth century, the Kojiki, is the oldest text written in Japanese and a core sacred document of Shinto, the indigenous religion of Japan. Comprising mainly folk beliefs and traditional rituals, Shinto is loosely organized and lacking any recognized governing body. This passage from the start of the Kojiki describes the creation of the world. Notice the sexual imagery in the creation of the island of Onogoro (Japan) and the courtship story.

The Beginning of Heaven and Earth
The names of the Deities that were born in the Plain of High Heaven when the Heaven and Earth began were the Deity Master-of-the-August-Centre-of-Heaven, next the High-August-Producing-Wondrous Deity, next the Divine-Producing-Wondrous-Deity. These three Deities were all Deities born alone,
and hid their persons. The names of the Deities that were born next from a thing that sprouted up like unto a reed-shoot when the earth, young and like unto floating oil, drifted about medusa-like, were the Pleasant-Reed-Shoot-Prince-Elder Deity, next the Heavenly-Eternally-Standing-Deity. These two Deities were likewise born alone, and hid their persons.

The five Deities in the above list are separate Heavenly Deities.

**The Seven Divine Generations**

The names of the Deities that were born next were the Earthly-Eternally-Standing-Deity, next the Luxuriant-Integrating-Master-Deity. These two Deities were likewise Deities born alone, and hid their persons. The names of the Deities that were born next were the Deity Mud-Earth-Lord next his younger sister the Deity Mud-Earth-Lady; next the Germ-Integrating-Deity, next his younger sister the Life-Integrating-Deity; next the Deity Elder-of-the-Great-Place, next his younger sister the Deity Elder-Lady-of-the-Great-Place; next the Deity Perfect-Exterior, next his younger sister the Deity Oh-Awful-Lady; next the Deity the Male-Who-Invites, next his younger sister the Deity the Female-Who-Invites. From the Earthly-Eternally-Standing Deity down to the Deity the Female-Who-Invites in the previous list are what are termed the Seven Divine Generations.

**The Island of Onogoro**

Hereupon all the Heavenly Deities commanded the two Deities His Augustness the Male-Who-Invites and Her Augustness the Female-Who-Invites, ordering them to “make, consolidate, and give birth to this drifting land.” Granting to them a heavenly jeweled spear, they [thus] deigned to charge them. So the two Deities, standing upon the Floating Bridge of Heaven, pushed down the jewelled spear and stirred with it, whereupon, when they had stiffed the brine till it went curdle-curdle, and drew [the spear] up, the brine that dripped down from the end of the spear was piled up and became an island. This is the Island of Onogoro.

**Courtship of the Deities the Male-Who-Invites and the Female-Who-Invites**

Having descended from Heaven onto this island, they saw to the erection of a heavenly august pillar, they saw to the erection of a hall of eight fathoms. Then the August Male-Who-Invites asked his younger sister the August Female-Who-Invites, “Who is your body made?” She responded, “My body grew by growing, but there is one part that did not grow fully.” Then the August Male-Who-Invites said, “My body grew by growing, but there is one part that grew too much. Therefore, would it be good for me to insert this part that grew too much into your part that did not grow fully, so that I will generate regions?” “It would be good.” Then the August Male-Who-Invites said, “Since this is so, let us place together our august parts, running around this celestial column.” Having made this agreement, the August Male-Who-Invites said, “Run around from the right, and I’ll run from the left.” When they had run around, the August Female-Who-Invites said, “O pleasant and lovable youth!” and the August Male-Who-Invites said, “O pleasant and lovely maiden!” When they finished, the August Male-Who-Invites said to his sister, “A woman should not speak first.” Nevertheless, they began the work of creation in bed, and they produced a son named Hirudo. This child they placed in a boat of
reeds, and let it float away. Next they gave birth to the Island of Aha. This likewise is not reckoned among their children.


6. A Confucian Denunciation of Buddhism (ninth century)

In the following selection from the Tang dynasty period, the Confucianist writer Han Wengong (768–824), in an attempt to gain imperial favor, urges the emperor to reject Buddhism and favor instead traditional Confucianism.

The Buddhist religion was in fact introduced during the reign of Ming Ti of the Han dynasty; and that Emperor sat on the throne but eighteen years. After him came rebellion upon rebellion with short-lived monarchs.

During the [Period of Disunity] . . . , the Buddhist religion gradually spread. The duration of those [disunity] dynasties was comparatively short, only the Emperor Wu Ti of the Liang dynasty reigning for so long as forty-eight years. Thrice he devoted himself to the service of Buddha; at the sacrifices in his ancestral shrines no living victims were used; he daily took but one single meal, and that composed of fruits and vegetables; yet he was harassed by the rebel Ho Ching and died of hunger at T’ai-ch’eng, soon after which his dynasty came to an end. He sought happiness in the worship but found misfortune instead; from which it must be clear to all that Buddha himself is after all but an incompetent god.

When Kao Tsu obtained the Empire he contemplated the extermination of this religion; but the officials of that day were men of limited capabilities; they did not understand the way of our rulers of old; they did not understand the exigencies of the past and present; they did not understand how to avail themselves of His Majesty’s wisdom, and root out this evil. Therefore, the execution of this design was delayed, to your servant’s infinite sorrow.

Now your present Majesty, endowed with wisdom and courage such as are without parallel in the annals of the past thousand years, prohibited on your accession to the throne the practice of receiving candidates, whether male or female, for priestly orders, prohibiting likewise the erection of temples and monasteries; which caused your servant to believe that the mantle of Kao Tsu had descended on Your Majesty’s shoulders. And even should prohibition be impossible, patronage would still be out of the question. Yet your servant has now heard that instructions have been issued to the priestly community to proceed to Feng-hsiang and receive a bone of Buddha, and that from a high tower in the palace Your Majesty will view its introduction into the Imperial Palace; also that orders have been sent to the various temples, commanding that the relic be received with the proper ceremonies. Now, foolish though your servant may be, he is well aware that your Majesty does not do this in the vain hope of deriving advantages therefrom; but that in the fullness of our present plenty, and in the joy which reigns in the hearts of all, there is a desire to fall in with the wishes of the people in the celebration at the capital of this delusive mummery. For how could the wisdom of Your Majesty stoop in
participation in such ridiculous beliefs? Still the people are slow of perception and easily beguiled; and should they behold Your Majesty thus earnestly worshipping at the feet of Buddha they would cry out, “See! the Son of Heaven, the All-Wise, is a fervent believer; who are we, his people, that we should spare our bodies?” Then would ensue a scourging of heads and burning of fingers; crowds would collect together, and tearing off their clothes and scattering their money, would spend their time from morn to eve in imitation of Your Majesty’s example. The result would be that by and by young and old, seized with the same enthusiasm, would totally neglect the business of their lives; and should Your Majesty not prohibit it, they would be found flocking to the temples, ready to cut off an arm or slice their bodies as an offering to the God. Thus would our traditions and customs be seriously injured, and ourselves become a laughing-stock on the face of the earth; truly, no small matter! For Buddha was a barbarian. His language was not the language of China; his clothes were of an alien cut. He did not utter the maxims of our ancient rulers, nor conform to the customs which they have handed down. He did not appreciate the bond between prince and minister, the tie between father and son. Supposing, indeed, this Buddha had come to our capital in the flesh, under an appointment from his own State, then your Majesty might have received him with a few words of admonition, bestowing on him a banquet and a suit of clothes, previous to sending him out of the country with an escort of soldiers, and thereby have avoided any dangerous influence on the minds of the people. But what are the facts? The bone of a man long since dead and decomposed, is to be admitted, forsooth, within the precincts of the Imperial Palace! Confucius said, “Pay all respect to spiritual beings, but keep them at a distance.” And so, when the princes of old paid visits of condolence to one another, it was customary for them to send on a magician in advance, with a peach wand in his hand, whereby to expel all noxious influences previous to the arrival of his master. Yet now Your Majesty is about to causelessly introduce a disgusting object, personally taking part in the proceedings without the intervention either of the magician or of his peach wand. Of the officials, not one has raised his voice against such an act. Therefore our servant, overwhelmed with shame, implores Your Majesty that this bone may be handed over for destruction by fire or water, whereby the root of this great evil may be exterminated for all time, and the people know how much the wisdom of Your Majesty surpasses that of ordinary men. The glory of such a deed will be beyond all praise. And should the Lord Buddha have power to avenge this insult by the infliction of some misfortune, then let the vials of his wrath be poured out upon the person of your servant who now calls Heaven to witness that he will not repent him of his oath.

In all gratitude and sincerity your Majesty’s servant now humbly resents, with fear and trebling, this Memorial for your Majesty’s benign consideration.


7. Criticism of Chinese Merchants (eleventh century)

Xia Song, a high official during the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127), considered himself a reformer in the Confucian mold. The following excerpt from his writings is a traditional Confucian critique: the growing
power of the merchant class. First, he describes the outrageous wealth of the merchants, no doubt exaggerating, especially about slaves wearing silk. Then he uses the classic Confucian critique of the merchant class: merchants make money by cheating others out of their assets. Ironically, merchants in the Southern Song dynasty had even more wealth and power than during Xia’s time, showing the difficulty the dynasty had in controlling the merchant class. After the Mongol interval ended in the fourteenth century, the Ming dynasty, after a burst of brief official trading by sea, never allowed such commerce to happen again.

Since the unification of the empire [after the fall of the Late Tang dynasty], control over merchants has not yet been well established. They enjoy a luxurious way of life, living on dainty foods, owning handsome houses and many carts, adorning their wives and children with pearls and jades, and dressing their slaves in white silk. In the morning they think about how to make a fortune, and in the evening they devise means of fleecing the poor. Sometimes they ride through the countryside behaving haughtily, and sometimes they inveigle rich profits from the poor. In the assignment of corvee duties they are treated much better by the government than average rural households, and in the taxation of commercial duties they are less rigidly controlled than commoners. Since this relaxed control over merchants is regarded by the people as a common rule, they despise agricultural pursuits and place high value on an idle living by trade.


8. Tang Poetry on Old Age (ninth century)

Bo Juyi (772–846), a prominent poet during the rule of the Chinese Tang dynasty, wrote the following poems describing his feeling on old age and getting old.

On Being Sixty
Between thirty and forty, one is distracted by the Five Lusts;
Between seventy and eighty, one is a prey to a hundred diseases.
But from fifty to sixty one is free from all ills;
Calm and still—the heart enjoys rest.
I have put behind me Love and Greed; I have done with Profit and Fame;
I am still short of illness and decay and far from decrepit age.
Strength of limb I still possess to seek the rivers and hills;
Still my heart has spirit enough to listen to flutes and strings.
At leisure I open new wine and taste several cups;
Drunken I recall old poems and sing a whole volume.
Meng-te has asked for a poem and herewith I exhort him
Not to complain of three-score, “the time of obedient ears.”

Last Poem
They have put my bed beside the unpainted screen;
They have shifted my stove in front of the blue curtain.
I listen to my grandchildren, reading me a book;
I watch the servants, heating up my soup.
With rapid pencil I answer the poems of friends;
I feel in my pockets and pull out medicine-money.
When this superintendence of trifling affairs is done,
I lie back on my pillows and sleep with my face to the South.


Reproduced here are two poems of the mid-ninth century poet Ono no Komachi.

A thing which fades
With no outward sign—
Is the flower
Of the heart of man
In this world!

The flowers withered,
Their color faded away,
While meaninglessly
I spent my days in the world
And the long rains were falling.


The Tale of Genji is a sprawling tale of three generations in and around the imperial household in Japan’s Heian Period, as the characters try to find love in difficult circumstances. Besides being the first novel ever written, the book is also one of the first written in Japanese instead of Chinese, and by a woman. This book, besides being a primer on early Japanese poetry, also gives some idea of the aesthetics of Heian Japan and Japanese today.

The lady, when no answer came from Genji, thought that he changed his mind, and though she would have been very angry if he had persisted in his suit, she was not quite prepared to lose him with so little ado. But this was a good opportunity once and for all to lock up her heart against him. She thought that she had done so successfully, but found to her surprise that he still occupied an uncommonly large share of her thoughts.


11. The Tale of Genji: The Trials of Genji’s Mother (eleventh century)
This second excerpt from the Tale of Genji, the eleventh-century novel of Japanese court life by Lady Murasaki, tells of the many hardships suffered
at court by Genji's mother, a favorite of the emperor. The passage is an engaging description of the Japanese court at the height of the Heian Period in the early eleventh century.

In the reign of a certain Emperor, whose name is unknown to us, there was, among the Niogo and Kôyi [titled ladies] of the Imperial Court, one who, though she was not of high birth, enjoyed the full tide of Royal favor. Hence her superiors, each one of whom had always been thinking—“I shall be the one,” gazed upon her disdainfully with malignant eyes, and her equals and inferiors were more indignant still.

Such being the state of affairs, the anxiety which she had to endure was great and constant, and this was probably the reason why her health was at last so much affected, that she was often compelled to absent herself from Court, and to retire to the residence of her mother.

Her father, who was a Dainagon [court official], was dead; but her mother, being a woman of good sense, gave her every possible guidance in the due performance of Court ceremony, so that in this respect she seemed but little different from those whose fathers and mothers were still alive to bring them before public notice, yet, nevertheless, her friendliness made her oftentimes feel very diffident from the want of any patron of influence.

These circumstances, however, only tended to make the favor shown to her by the Emperor wax warmer and warmer, and it was even shown to such an extent as to become a warning to after-generations. There had been instances in China in which favoritism such as this had caused national disturbance and disaster; and thus the matter became a subject of public animadversion, and it seemed not improbable that people would begin to allude even to the example of Yó-ki-hi [a Chinese woman whose favor with the emperor led to rebellion].

In due course, and in consequence, we may suppose, of the Divine blessing on the sincerity of their affection, a jewel of a little prince was born to her. The first prince who had been born to the Emperor was the child of Koki-den-Niogo, the daughter of the Udaijin (a great officer of State). Not only was he first in point of age, but his influence on his mother’s side was so great that public opinion had almost unanimously fixed upon him as heir-apparent. Of this the Emperor was fully conscious, and he only regarded the new-born child with that affection which one lavishes on a domestic favorite. Nevertheless, the mother of the first prince had, not unnaturally, a foreboding that unless matters were managed adroitly her child might be superseded by the younger one. She, we may observe, had been established at Court before any other lady, and had more children than one. The Emperor, therefore, was obliged to treat her with due respect, and reproaches from her always affected him more keenly than those of any others.

To return to her rival. Her constitution was extremely delicate, as we have seen already, and she was surrounded by those who would fain lay bare, so to say, her hidden scars. Her apartments in the palace were Kiri-Tsubo (the chamber of Kiri); so called from the trees that were planted around. In visiting her there the Emperor had to pass before several other chambers, whose occupants universally chafed when they saw it. And again, when it was her turn to attend upon the Emperor, it often happened that they played off mischievous pranks upon her, at different points in the corridor, which leads to the Imperial quarters. Sometimes they would soil the skirts of her attendants, sometimes
they would shut against her the door of the covered portico, where no other passage existed; and thus, in every possible way, they one and all combined to annoy her.

The Emperor at length became aware of this, and gave her, for her special chamber, another apartment, which was in the Kôrô-Den, and which was quite close to those in which he himself resided. It had been originally occupied by another lady who was now removed, and thus fresh resentment was aroused.

When the young Prince was three years old the Hakamagi took place. It was celebrated with pomp scarcely inferior to that which adorned the investiture of the first Prince. In fact, all available treasures were exhausted on the occasion. And again the public manifested its disapprobation. In the summer of the same year the Kiri-Tsubo-Kôyi became ill, and wished to retire from the palace. The Emperor, however, who was accustomed to see her indisposed, strove to induce her to remain. But her illness increased day by day; and she had drooped and pined away until she was now but a shadow of her former self. She made scarcely any response to the affectionate words and expressions of tenderness which her Royal lover caressingly bestowed upon her. Her eyes were half-closed: she lay like a fading flower in the last stage of exhaustion, and she became so much enfeebled that her mother appeared before the Emperor and entreated with tears that she might be allowed to leave. Distracted by his vain endeavors to devise means to aid her, the Emperor at length ordered a Te-gruma to be in readiness to convey her to her own home, but even then he went to her apartment and cried despairingly: "Did not we vow that we would neither of us be either before or after the other even in traveling the last long journey of life? And can you find it in your heart to leave me now?"

Sadly and tenderly looking up, she thus replied, with almost failing breath:

"Since my departure for this dark journey,
Make you so sad and lonely,
Fain would I stay though weak and weary,
And live for your sake only!"

"Had I but known this before—"

She appeared to have much more to say, but was too weak to continue. Overpowered with grief, the Emperor at one moment would fain accompany her himself, and at another moment would have her remain to the end where she then was.

At the last, her departure was hurried, because the exorcism for the sick had been appointed to take place that evening at her home, and she went. The child Prince, however, had been left in the Palace, as his mother wished, even at that time, to make her withdrawal as privately as possible, so as to avoid any invidious observations on the part of her rivals. To the Emperor the night now became black with gloom. He sent messenger after messenger to make inquiries, and could not await their return with patience. Midnight came, and with it the sound of lamentation. The messenger, who could do nothing else, hurried back with the sad tidings of the truth. From that moment the mind of the Emperor was darkened, and he confined himself to his private apartments.

12. A Chinese Official’s View of the Korean People (twelfth century)

Xu Jing, a Chinese official, traveled through Korea in 1123 (during the Song dynasty) as an observer. He explained the composition of the four classes of Koreans before complaining about them in relation to Confucian behavior. He calls Koreans greedy and complains about Korean women divorcing their husbands for petty reasons. This document therefore shows both the Neo-Confucian antiwoman stand of the Chinese and the Korean tradition of giving women more power than the other two East Asian countries.

Although the Koryo territory is not expansive, there are many people living there. Among the four classes of people, Confucian scholars are considered the highest. In that country it is considered shameful not to be able to read. There are many mountains and forests, but because there is not much flat land, their skill at farming has not developed as much as their craftsmanship. As the products of the countryside are all committed to the state, merchants do not travel widely. Only in the daytime do they go to city markets and exchange what they have for what they do not have. Although the people are prosperous, the favors they extend, however, are few. As they are lascivious, they love freely and value wealth. Men and women take marriage lightly and divorce easily. They do not follow proper ritual, which is deplorable.


13. Corvee Labor in Korea (twelfth century)

Peasants occupied the second place in the Confucian hierarchy throughout East Asia. Yet peasants also faced the corvee, unpaid labor owed in addition to taxes. Corvee laborers built irrigation, flood control, urban centers, and buildings for those related to the royal family. This short document shows the plight of the poor peasant in the twelfth century, forced to work for no pay by the state. This peasant distress spread and led to peasant rebellions even after the military coup of 1170.

Earlier, when building pavilions, each corvee worker brought his own food. One worker was too poor even to do that, so the other workers shared with him a spoonful of their own food. One day his wife came with food and said, “Please ask your friends to come and share it with you.” The worker said, “Our family is poor. How did you prepare food? Did you have intimate relations with another man to get it, or did you steal it?” His wife replied, “My face is too ugly to be intimate with anyone, and I am too stupid to know how to steal. I simply cut my hair and sold it.” Then she showed her head. The worker sobbed and could not eat. Those who heard this story were all deeply moved.

14. The “Jottings” of the Japanese Writer Kamo no Chomei (thirteenth century)

The following excerpt from the Hojoki, a classic work of the Kamakura Period, describes the life of solitude lived by the Buddhist priest Kamo no Chomei at his mountain hermitage. The work is a Japanese zuihitsu, meaning “jottings,” which describe the author’s musings on nature and human life.

The flow of the river is ceaseless and its water is never the same. The bubbles that float in the pools, now vanishing, now forming, are not of long duration: so in the world are man and his dwellings . . .

In the spring I see waves of wisteria like purple clouds, bright in the west. In the summer I hear the cuckoo call, promising to guide me on the road to death. In the autumn the voice of the evening insects fills my ears with a sound of lamentation for this cracked husk of a world. In winter I look with deep emotion on the snow, piling up and melting away like sins and hindrances to salvation.


15. Slavery in Korea (1300)

Korea had an even more rigid hierarchical system than did China or Japan, with slaves at the bottom. Even if slaves bought their freedom, it would be generations before the descendants of that slave could compete for government positions—basically impossible. This memorial was written in 1300 to convince the Mongols not to change how slavery worked in Korea.

In the past, our founding ancestor, setting down instructions to posterity on the question of inheritance, stated: “In general, the offspring of the lowest class . . . are of different stock. Be sure not to allow the people of the lowest class to become emancipated. If they are permitted to become free, later they will certainly get government positions and gradually work into important offices, where they will plot rebellions against the state. If this admonition is ignored, the dynasty will be endangered.”

Accordingly, the law of our country provides that only if there is no evidence of lowborn status for eight generations in one’s official household registration may one receive a position in the government. As a rule, in the lowborn class, if either the father or mother is low, then the offspring is low. Even if the original owner of a lowborn person frees him, allowing him to achieve commoner status, the descendants of that freed individual must return to low status. If the owner has no heirs, the descendants of his freed lowborn belong to his clan. This is because they do not allow lowborns to achieve permanent commoner status.

Appendix: Dynasties of Medieval China, Rulers of Medieval Japan, and Chinese Inventions

The following listing of Chinese dynasties is useful for quickly referencing which dynasties were most powerful during which periods, but it makes medieval Chinese history seem somewhat neater than it actually was. Rarely did one dynasty follow immediately upon the fall of its predecessor. Often a new dynasty was established some time before the final collapse of the old, and existing regimes often continued, at least in some parts of the country, for a number of years after a new dynasty came to power. For long periods, China was divided, with different regions being ruled by different families, and no one family ruling a unified China. Since the rise of the Qin dynasty is usually taken as the beginning of a unified, imperial China, the list starts there, even though the Qin era is somewhat before the medieval period as defined by this volume.

Qin Dynasty (221 B.C.E.–206 B.C.E.)
Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.)
Three Kingdoms Period (220–280)
Jin Dynasty (265–420)
Northern and Southern Dynasties (420–589)
Sui Dynasty (581–618)
Tang Dynasty (618–907)
Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms (907–960)
Song Dynasty (960–1279)
Yuan (Mongol) Dynasty (1271–1368)
Ming Dynasty (1368–1644)

Sui Dynasty Emperors
Wen (589–604)
Yang (605–617)

Tang Emperors
Gaozu (618–626)
Taizong (626–649)
Gaozong (649–683)
Zhongzong (684)
Ruizong (684–690)
Empress Wu (690–705)
Zhongzong (705–710)
Shaodi (710)
Ruizong (710–712)
Xuanzong (712–756)
Suzong (756–762)
Daizong (762–779)
Dezong (779–805)
Shunzong (805)
Xianzong (805–820)
Muzong (820–824)
Jingzong (824–827)
Wenzong (827–840)
Wuzong (840–846)
Xuanzong (846–859)
Yizong (859–873)
Xizong (873–888)
Zhaozong (888–904)
Aidi (904–907)

### Song Emperors

**Northern Song**
- Taizu (960–976)
- Taizong (976–997)
- Zhenzong (997–1022)
- Renzong (1022–1063)
- Yingzong (1063–1067)
- Shenzong (1067–1085)
- Zhezong (1085–1100)
- Huizong (1100–1125)
- Qingzong (1126–1127)

**Southern Song**
- Gaozong (1127–1162)
- Xiaozong (1162–1189)
- Guangzong (1189–1194)
- Ningzong (1194–1224)
- Lizong (1224–1264)
- Duzong (1264–1274)
- Gongzong (1275)
- Duan Zong (1276–1278)
- Xiangzong (1278–1279)

### Yuan Dynasty Emperors
- Kublai Khan (1260–1294)
- Temur Oljeytu Khan (1294–1307)
- Qayshah Guluk Khan (1308–1311)
- Ayurparibhadra (1311–1320)
- Sudhipala Gege’en (1321–1323)
- Yesun-Temur (1323–1328)
- Arigaba (1328)
- Jijaghatu Toq-Temur (1328–1329 and 1329–1332)
- Qoshila Qutuqtu (1329)
- Irinchibal (1332)
- Toghan-Temur (1333–1370)

### Ming Emperors (until 1425)

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“The Ming founder initiated the practice followed by all subsequent emperors of retaining a single era name . . . throughout his reign . . . Ming emperors are often known by their era names rather than by their posthumous temple names.”


### Japanese Secular Leaders from 1185–1400

**Shogun of the Minamoto Clan**
- Yorimoto (1192)
- Yoriye (1202)

**Hojo Regents**
- Tokimasa (1203)
- Yasutoki (1225)
- Tsunetoki (1242)
- Tokiyori (1246)
- Nagatoki (1256)
- Masamura (1264)
- Toimune (1268)
- Sadatoki (1284)
- Morotoki (1300)
- Takatoki (1315)

**Shogun of the Ashikaga Clan**
- Takaui (1336)
- Yoshiakira (1358)
- Yoshimitsu (1367)
- Yoshimachi (1395)

## Periods of East Asian Medieval History

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<td>751–</td>
<td>794–</td>
<td>934–</td>
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<td>907</td>
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<td>Northern Song</td>
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<td>Southern Song</td>
<td>Kamakura Period</td>
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<td>1127–</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yuan</td>
<td>Ashikaga Period</td>
<td>Yi Dynasty</td>
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<td>1644</td>
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Inventions in China: A Comparison with the West

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Invention/Finding</th>
<th>Discovered in China</th>
<th>Discovered in West</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Matches</td>
<td>577</td>
<td>1500s</td>
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<tr>
<td>Urinalysis for diabetes</td>
<td>600s</td>
<td>1600s</td>
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<tr>
<td>Printing press</td>
<td>700s</td>
<td>1400s</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mechanical clock</td>
<td>725</td>
<td>1310</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gunpowder</td>
<td>800s</td>
<td>1100s</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paper money</td>
<td>800s</td>
<td>1700s</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mercator projection</td>
<td>900s</td>
<td>1500s</td>
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<tr>
<td>Phosphorescent paint</td>
<td>900s</td>
<td>1600s</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chain drive (like bicycle)</td>
<td>976</td>
<td>1700s</td>
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<tr>
<td>Flamethrower</td>
<td>900s</td>
<td>1900s</td>
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<td>Canal pound-lock</td>
<td>984</td>
<td>1300s</td>
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<td>Grenades</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>1400s</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rockets</td>
<td>1000s</td>
<td>1300s</td>
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<tr>
<td>Land mines</td>
<td>1277</td>
<td>1403</td>
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<tr>
<td>Guns and cannon</td>
<td>1280</td>
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</table>

OCEANIA

Nancy Sullivan, with the assistance of Robert D. Craig
**Chronology**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000 B.C.E.–700 C.E.</td>
<td>Autronesian migrations to Pacific islands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 300 C.E.</td>
<td>Beginning of early eastern Polynesian culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 500s</td>
<td>Polynesians, originally from Southeast Asia, settle in Hawaiian Islands and Easter Island; Polynesians continue to navigate eastward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 600–1200</td>
<td>Introduction of breadfruit into the islands of Micronesia and eastern Polynesia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 700</td>
<td>Easter Islanders begin to build stone platforms that form part of ceremonial enclosures; first Polynesians settle in the Cook Islands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 900</td>
<td>First settlers from the Cook Islands, ancestors of the Maoris, reach the South Island of New Zealand; establishment of the Tu’i Tonga dynasty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 900–1100</td>
<td>Construction of great megalithic features at Nan Madol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 1000</td>
<td>Māori people settle in New Zealand; Polynesians begin to build stone temples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 1100s</td>
<td>First statues erected on previously constructed platforms in Easter Island; beginnings of organized societies in Hawaiian Islands; earliest settlements by Polynesians in Pitcairn Island</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 1150</td>
<td>Maoris begin to settle in the river mouth areas in the north of the South Island of New Zealand, notably at Wairau Bar</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 1200</td>
<td>Tui Tonga monarchy builds coral platform for ceremonial worship on island of Tonga in South Pacific</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 1250</td>
<td>Beginnings of intensive valley irrigation schemes in Hawaiian Islands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 1300</td>
<td>Hawaiian peoples start to develop class structure as a result of economic growth through agriculture; stone temple complexes, or marae, erected on Rarotonga, Cook Islands, and on Moorea Island in the Society Islands; huge stone statues erected on Easter Island; height of the Saudeleur dynasty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 1350</td>
<td>Maoris flourish in the North Island of New Zealand; first terrace-type fortifications, called pa, built in New Zealand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 1400</td>
<td>Tonga people build major ceremonial centre at Mu’a, on the largest island in the Tongatapu Group; widespread cultivation of wet taro in Hawaiian islands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 1500</td>
<td>A village of oval stone houses is built on Easter Island</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 1511</td>
<td>Portuguese navigators begin to explore the Pacific Ocean</td>
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</table>
1519–1522  Ferdinand Magellan attempts voyage around the world: he navigates the Pacific but later dies; his crew completes the voyage

1525  Diego Ribeiro, official mapmaker for Spain, makes first scientific charts covering the Pacific Ocean; Portuguese probably visit Caroline Islands, northeast of New Guinea, and nearby Palau Islands

1526  Portuguese land on Papua New Guinea

c. 1550s  Maoris on the North and South Islands of New Zealand build fortified enclosures called pa

1567  Alvaro de Menda, a, Spanish sailor, sets sail from Callao in Peru westward across the Pacific; he reaches the Ellice Islands and Solomon Islands, east of New Guinea and returns to Callao in 1569

1595  Alvaro de Menda a visits the Marquesas Islands and then Nderic (Santa Cruz)

c. 1600s  Beginning of building of tupa, stone towers with inner chambers, on Easter Island

c. 1600  In Tonga, dominant political leadership passes from Tu’i Tonga dynasty to Tu’i Konokupolu dynasty
Societies of Oceania

Extent of human settlement, 26,000 BC
Expansion of human settlement
Direction of expansion
Overview and Topical Essays

1. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Great Sea Migrations and Explorations

Oceania, which includes the three large island groups of Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia, was settled from the west, in three big waves. The first crossing of 50,000 years ago was made by the proto-Melanesians, across the Indonesian Archipelago (as it was at that time) to the Sahul, the landmass then combining New Guinea and Australia. Not until 5,000 years ago did the second migration begin, as people now called “lapita” started to move from points in Southeast Asia (probably Taiwan), through the Philippines, Micronesia, and on to the Bismarck Archipelago, the Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu. About 1200 B.C.E., this wave pushed off from Vanuatu to the Lau islands of Fiji and then on to Tonga, Samoa, Futuna, Uvea, and Niutoputapu. These two purposeful migration waves are among human history’s greatest accomplishments, and archaeology’s greatest challenges, because we have so little physical evidence of the lapita people, and even less of the early Melanesians.

Thousands of years later, during the European Middle Ages, the third great Pacific wave of migration gained momentum. The first millennium C.E. is sometimes known as Polynesia’s “dark age” because it represents the end of a long pause the lapita peoples seem to have taken in their migration across the Pacific once they had settled Fiji, Tonga, and Samoa, the islands now considered “ancestral” Polynesia. During this period, the lapita pottery style is abandoned, and it is several centuries yet before the monumental Polynesian architecture will be erected. But this period corresponding to the early Middle Ages in Europe is also a time of cultural elaboration in these islands of West Polynesia, and the beginning of a new age of ocean-going exploration. (See Pulemelei Mound for the location where the people of Western Polynesia made their final migration east.) Indeed, by the close of the Middle Ages in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the entire eastern portion of Oceania will have finally been colonized. Some time around 600 C.E., explorers set off from the easternmost edge of Samoa, where it was more than 200 long, empty miles to the next island, Santa Cruz. By the end of the first millennium C.E., these mariners were moving through the Marquesas, the Society Islands (Tahiti), Hawaii to the north, and, finally, Aotearoa (New Zealand). The earliest evidence of settlement, for example, in southeastern Polynesia (the Cooks, Australs, Mangareva, Pitcairn Island, and Easter Island) dates to 900 to 1000, just after Hawaii, which was settled sometime before 800 (although some evidence
suggests possibly 500 years earlier), and Aotearoa, where the earliest evidence of settlers also dates to 800 (see Voyaging/Ancient Navigation).

Polynesia as a geographic area comprises the island groups of Samoa, Tonga, Cook, Marquesas, Society, Austral, Aotearoa, and Hawaii, as well as the islands of Tuamotu, Tuvalu, and Tokelau. Many archaeologists argue that the dispersal from ancestral Polynesia (Tonga-Fiji-Samoa) to the east was actually a series of movements, all interacting with each other, and beginning as early as 1000 B.C.E. The wave that moved from Samoa in 600 to 800 C.E. to Tuvalu and Tokelau, then westward, looping back to Micronesia and northern Melanesia, became the inhabitants of what we call Polynesian “outlier” islands: Kapingamarangi and Nukuoro, and Sikaiana. Another dispersal moved eastward to the northern Cooks atolls, then the Society Islands and the western Tuamotus.

A third dispersal moved from Samoa down to the southern Cook Islands of Rarotonga and Mangaia, then to the Austral chain and finally to Mangareva. From here, they reached Pitcairn, the Marquesas, the eastern Tuamotus and ultimately sailed up to Hawaii. It is hard to convey how quickly and widely these colonizations occurred, and what kind of navigational feats they were for the time. It is clear, at least, that these were not shipwrecks or drifting fishing expeditions, but voyages of settlement. People arrived with families, animals, seeds, and foodstuffs, ready to find a homeland beyond the vast watery horizon.

Also in the first century C.E., the early Melanesians to the west were making contact at the coast with voyagers from Micronesia and central Polynesia, as the lapita migrations to coastal Melanesia were replaced by more concerted trade and intermarriage networks. People throughout the Massim region of New Guinea and the Bismarck Archipelago of New Guinea were already engaged in trading valuables made from tridacna, conus, pearl, spondylus, bailer, cowrie, and nassa shells, as well as dog and flying fox (bat) teeth, all of which are still in circulation today. (See New Guinea, Fauna of and New Guinea, Flora of for a description of the rich biodiversity of this island.) In the Massim, the complex system of kula was already in existence, and similarly, in New Caledonia, the “jade cycle” would have begun to link the Loyalty Islands to the Grande Terre and the Isle of Pines (one Loyalty island ceremonial jade axe dates to 890–1200). Thus the first millennium C.E. really represents a time when cultural differentiation, and economic specialization, would have begun to knit people together over long distances and across overt cultural differences. It is when the Melanesians really begin to define themselves by their differences, and in so doing create the unity in diversity that still characterizes the area today.

By the second millennium C.E., Melanesia, which includes New Guinea, the Bismarck Archipelago, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and New Caledonia, was also trading with Polynesia, as Polynesians moved westward into New Caledonia and Vanuatu. The burial site of Roymata in Vanuatu is evidence of these migrations, as well as a sign of increasingly hierarchical chiefly systems.

Meanwhile, in the interior highlands of New Guinea horticulture was intensifying, but it would be several hundred years before the sweet potato arrived. Irrigated fields of taro were grown in the valley floors, which gave lowlanders an advantage over their hillside neighbors. Some even postulate that this may
have driven a two-tiered social structure, so that commoners might have labored for elites in the valleys, for example. If this was so, then the introduction of the sweet potato in the seventeenth century allowed everyone to grow food and gain access to surplus wealth, introducing democracy where there had been inherited hierarchy.

In the islands north of Melanesia some of the most sophisticated chiefdoms were also evolving. Micronesia, the area that covers the Marianas, Carolines, Marshalls, Kiribati, Nauru, Palau, Yap, Truk, Ponape, and Kosrae island groups, was settled during the lapita era from different points. The Marianas and Palau were probably reached first by people from the Philippines; the Caroline, Marshall, and Kiribati archipelagoes were settled by people probably from the Solomons or Vanuatu; and Yap, to the western end of Micronesia, may have been settled from the Bismarck Archipelago, although legend suggests the Admiralty Islands.

**Island Empires: The Yap Empire and the Saudeleur Dynasty**

Two great seats of power emerged in the Middle Ages. One in the eastern Caroline Islands of Pohnpei and Kosrae, was the Saudeleur dynasty, and the other, in the western Carolines, became what is called the “Yap empire.” Not coincidentally, this was the period when Carolinean navigational systems were perfected, absorbing such comprehensive databases on everything from astronomy to bird movements to wave patterns. It is said that a true Carolinean navigator would require 30 years of training to be considered an expert.

Yap was settled in the second millennium C.E., and its high island status secured its advantage over neighboring atolls. This height was critical to its rank because islands with mountains, even the smallest of mountains, can boast real security against typhoons, a fairly diverse ecosystem, and, not the least, more water sources than low-lying atolls. Yap also cultivated a reputation for sorcery, which allowed it to become the center of a wide system of “tributes” (or sawei), with surrounding atolls, from Palau to Chuuk, all ranked in accordance to their distance from Yap. Tributes would move from island to island until they reached Ulithi, which acted as intermediary to Yap. More accurately, the center of control rested in one village, Gatchepar, in Yap’s eastern region of Gagil. Gatchepar chiefs used these tributes to hold all the islands from Ulithi to Namonuito in their thrall. But it can also be said that these islands gained at least as much as they gave in terms of insurance, especially when rising tides and bad weather can determine the survival of these precarious atolls.

The name *Yap* comes from one of the first European ships to arrive in the sixteenth century. When the captain pointed to the island asking its name, the villagers responded by telling him the name of the pointer he was using, the canoe paddle itself: “yap.” This story is reminiscent of the story of Vanuatu’s island Ambrym, named not for the people or place, but for the yam villagers extended to Captain James Cook on his arrival there in the eighteenth century.
This insurance becomes all the more important when we realize that the Middle Ages underwent a Little Climatic Optimum, otherwise known as the Medieval Warm Period, from around 800 to 1300. Not only did this climatic event involve rising sea levels, but in Oceania it also meant floods, typhoons, and other weather disturbances associated with the El Niño/La Niña phenomenon, making the significance of high islands, not to mention the importance of having magical powers over the weather, all the more dramatic. From roughly 1300, this warming shifted to cooling, and the globe then experienced a Little Ice Age for about 500 years. Coming at the end of the Middle Ages, this cooling punctuated the era and led the way to more social and environmental changes.

The Yapese traded their high island resources for the navigational skills of etak, enabling them to travel to Palau and quarry their great limestone money. Some say that Yapese commoners themselves, and not Palauans, did most of the arduous carving and transporting of stone money, in a system of indentured labor for the Gatchepar chiefs. This stone money, called rai, came from islands as distant as the Bismarck Archipelago to the south and the Marianas to the north, but most of it is attributed to Palau. Ranging from several inches to several meters in size, the limestone disks were pierced in their centers to be rolled by logs. But the real chore would be towing the multiton “coins” by canoe back to Yap; we might assume that more money was lost en route than ever arrived on shore. The value of these stones was based on exactly these hazards of acquisition. Once on Yap, they lined the walkways to meeting houses as signs of a chief’s political prowess, not to mention monuments to the lives and effort spent producing them.

At the peak of the Yap Empire the central island of Wa’ab probably had a population of fifty thousand or more. Its villages were divided by rank, and at the top of the order were seven elite villages led by the three even more elite, or paramount, villages. The Yapese also had a system of matriclans, which were divided into two groups, one called Banpilung, meaning “side of the chiefs,” and the other Banpagel, or “side of the young men.” Like many other places in Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia, this dualism between older/younger brother, chief/commoner, paramount/lesser groups provided an element of rivalry between ruling bloodlines. That is to say, a system of older and younger sibling chiefs always makes succession more interesting; when a paramount chief dies, either his eldest son or his younger brother (and sometimes daughters and sisters) can lay claim to the title. One of the most compelling explanations for the rapid and successive migrations through Polynesia is this system of primogeniture, that is, inheritance through the elder sibling. If a title goes to one sibling, so too do all the trappings, leaving the other sibling little alternative but to push off to establish a new kingdom on the next island.

Genealogy in Oceania was also often dualistic, which adds another dimension to historical legend. Samoa and Tonga, for example, make distinctions between people who came from Pulotu in the west and those from Papatea in the east. In Hawaii, there are people said to come originally from Hawaiki and those from Kahiki, not to mention other groups. In the Marquesas, people from Vevau are distinguished from those from Hawaiki, marking two “tribes” who travelled from the same place by different routes and at different times. In the Society Islands, the people of Ra from Vavau are distinguished from the people of Ta’aroa from Rotuma. In the Cook Islands, there are the people of
Tangiia from Tahiti and the people of Karika from Manuka. And in New Zealand, Ngapuhi traditions tell us the ancestral pa-builders came from the north, while the fleet-people came from the east.

To the east of Yap, Pohnpei was the seat of the Saudeleur dynasty, and its great stone palace complex was called Nan Madol. This offshore community may have been inhabited by the first or second century C.E., and we know it was under construction by the ninth century. Not until the twelfth century, however, were the distinctive megalithic features erected, including mega-ton blocks of basalt that had to be moved from the far side of the island. It is said locally that a magician was needed to “fly” these massive stones from their quarry. Pohnpeian tradition claims that the builders of the contemporaneous Lelu complex on Kosrae (likewise composed of huge stone buildings) migrated to Pohnpei, where they used their skills and experience to build the even more impressive Nan Madol complex.

The complex includes residences, temples, and mortuary sites, and may have housed as many as one thousand people, both chiefs and commoners. Madol Powe, the mortuary sector, contains fifty-eight islets in the northeastern area. Elsewhere, separate islets were dedicated to activities like food preparation, coconut oil pressing, and canoe construction. The outer islets are accessible by waterways, which made the complex something of a Carolinean island Venice, and it is assumed that the Saudeleurs would sail to regional islands to collect tributes as a form of imperial taxation.

By the second millennium C.E., the Pohnpei and Kosrae dynasties were comparable to the chiefdoms of Polynesia. The Saudeleurs emerged around 1 C.E., constructed Nan Madol from 900 to 1100, and then flourished, peaked, and diminished just prior to European contact in the eighteenth century. By about 1300, the dynasty had a four-tiered hierarchy that rivaled the complexity of the Hawaiian chiefdoms. Kosrae’s Lelu complex was similarly sophisticated, with artificial islets under construction by 1250. Population growth started to rise on Kosrae from 500 until roughly 1200 to 1300, when the megalith construction emerged. By 1600, Lelu had become a thriving community. The question remains whether Nan Madol’s inhabitants moved to Lelu, or vice versa—and why?

**Social Change**

Beginning in 600 and running to about 1200 in the Marquesas, when populations expanded and warfare became more prevalent, breadfruit appears to have played a role in these political and social changes. Archaeologists tell us that the fruit revolutionized the Micronesian and Eastern Polynesian islands when introduced during the Middle Ages. The years between 1000 and 1500 in particular were filled with radical social transformations in these islands for which breadfruit was a clear catalyst. There are two distinct types of breadfruit in Oceania: one grows wild in Micronesia, in places like Palau and the Marianas; the other is found in Eastern Polynesia and points west to New Guinea. Botanists tell us these two types were brought together somewhere in the Eastern Carolines, and that they produced numerous hybrid forms, some of which were saltwater resistant enough for cultivation on atolls. The typical seedless breadfruit, *Artocarpus altilis*, was carried northward by early settlers
into eastern Micronesia, where, at some point in the first millennium C.E., it hybridized with the wild, seeded Marianas A. mariannensis, and spawned the varieties that now thrive throughout Micronesia. Only this hybridized breadfruit grows on Polynesian islands, and even then, only on Tuvalu and Tokelau. But it thrives on Micronesian atolls, largely because of the salt tolerance, and because its roots help retain the island lens of freshwater. But drought, especially on coral atolls, will kill the tree. Otherwise it requires little labor and produces a variety of foodstuffs all year round. The efflorescence of breadfruit in Micronesia coincides with monumental stone architecture, which is significant: greater reliance on fruit appeared to free people up and enable the social complexity and expansion that characterizes the second millennium C.E. in Micronesia and Polynesia.

By the first century C.E., the islands of Fiji, Samoa, and Tonga had also established chiefdoms with some degree of complexity. The burials of chiefs became important, as did the burial mounds themselves. Settlements on Tutuila, Samoa, were established during the transitional period between the Little Climatic Optimum and the Little Ice Age, approximately 660 to 700 years ago, when coastal populations began to make extensive agricultural use of lowland valleys. Gradually, as rainfall increased and temperatures dropped, the sea levels also lowered and the violent environmental upheavals of the imminent Ice Age required people to find alternative land-use strategies. People began to move inland, to cultivate higher ground. Monuments were erected in mountain settlements, possibly as ownership markers for coastal villagers who would then have access to all the best resources. Many nonresidential sites in the mountains and ridge tops of Samoa seem to have functioned as forts or refuges for times of warfare.

During the first millennium C.E., the coastal settlements had been fairly dispersed, but in the second millennium, chiefly burials, small house mounds, and large chief mounds, or malae, begin to emerge. For example, the Samoan complex of Tataga Matau, established sometime after 1400, includes residential areas, basalt quarries, fortifications, and a ceremonial star mound. Samoan mounds were rectangular or star shaped, and some were used as foundations for chiefs’ houses, shrines for ancestral worship, or lookout posts to watch for invading fleets. The most enticing explanation, however, is that star mounds were used in the ancient and important sport of pigeon snaring, which occurred in the company of feasting and hunting games, usually for religious occasions. Only high chiefs were allowed to walk on the platforms, some of which were half the size of a rugby field. Hunters would sit in blinds on the mound and manipulate decoy pigeons in what must have been a bizarre bit of theater. It says a lot about the lack of biodiversity in these Polynesian islands (as compared to the Melanesian islands to the west) that elite individuals would dedicate so much time and effort to snaring what elsewhere would be considered a common, and not too palatable, bird.

The Tu‘i Tonga Empire and Other Dynasties

The Middle Ages were also the height of the Tongan Empire, which included Fiji, Samoa, and Tonga, and by extension Futuma, Rotuma, Tuvalu, and Tokelau. Fiji had its own lesser Tu‘i Pulotu dynasty, just as Samoa had its
Tu’i Manu’a. But around 900, the Tu’i Tonga dynasty was formed from the legendary union of a sun god and a mortal Tongan woman, whose offspring, ‘Aho’eitu, was its first chief.

Under the 10th Tu’i Tonga, Momo, and his son Tu’i-tatui (11th Tu’i Tonga) the empire was expanded to include parts of Fiji, including the distant Lau Islands, and all of Samoa, except for Manu’a island (which the Tongans considered sacred). Due to the success of the imperial navy, the empire continued to expand to include all of western and central Polynesia, and even parts of Melanesia and Micronesia. The largest of the long-haul canoes with square sails used by the imperial navy would be sailed by as many as one hundred men. Tribute networks to Fiji, Samoa, and surrounding island brought wealth back to the royal treasury where the Tu’i Tonga reigned supreme. Mats came from Samoa, while red feathers, mosquito curtains, ndrua canoes, and pottery came from Fiji. In turn, Tonga distributed mulberry bark cloth, weapons, and protection in war.

The glue between these chiefdoms was blood, or more accurately, the exchange of spouses between dynasties. Tongan elites took wives from Samoa, whereas Fiji exported male spouses to high-ranking Tongan women. The Tu’i Tonga’s sister actually held a higher rank than her brother, so her children could outrank her brother’s children were she to marry locally. The solution was to have her marry a Fijian chief and shift the succession issues to the other islands. The elites of Tongatapu also exchanged spouses (and multiple wives) with tributary islands. At its height, the empire covered over 3 million square kilometers of ocean, and those islands not under direct control were still forced to pay tribute. Under the 12th Tu’i Tonga, the capital moved to Mu’a, where it prospered further.

In the reign of the 13th or 14th Tu’i Tonga, the falefa were established as political advisors to the empire. These individuals could help negotiate political pressures but could not, in the end, prevent the assassinations of Havea I, Havea II, and Takalaua, the 19th, 22nd, and 23rd Tu’i Tongas. Takalaua’s son and successor Kau’ulufonua I pursued his father’s murderers to ‘Uvea, where he established a second dynasty, the Tu’i Ha’atakalaua. The Tu’i Tongas were thereafter forced to live as exiles in Samoa for more than a century. When the 28th Tu’i Tonga, Tapu’osi, was allowed to return, his role was nevertheless limited to that of a priest, who only performed religious duties. In this way, the dynasties functioned as co-rulers—until 1610, when, ironically, Ngata, the younger son of Mo’unga-o-Tonga (6th Tu’i Ha’atakalaua), broke away to start his own, a third, dynasty, the Tu’i Kanokupolu.

The high volcanic islands of French Polynesia were the base for the development of Polynesian social structure, art, and customs. Tahiti, in the Society Islands, is considered the typically complex Polynesian chiefdom because it developed three social classes: chiefs, ari’i (ariki or aliki); lesser chiefs, or ra’atira (ringatira), who held titled estates; and manabune (manahune), or commoners, most of whom were landless. Traditions and religious ceremonies in this area show that political aristocracy first arose in the western island of Raiatea, which was formerly called Havaii. Stone structures emerge in the second millennium C.E. in Tahiti, including religious temples or marae. This was also the period for the migrations from Tahiti to the Marquesas, 900 miles northeast, in the tenth century, and those to New Zealand in the thirteenth century. It is speculated that those who pushed off were of the ringatira class,
chafing under their submission to the ariki; they were “second sons” in a metaphorical sense. Although the inhabitants of Polynesia were physically akin to one another and shared a common culture, considerable differences arose in their manner of life in response to the widely different island environments. The high islands of Tahiti and Rarotonga had deep, sheltered, fertile valleys and alluvial plains; water was abundant, and there was a variety of food plants and material resources. On the low islands, the biodiversity and access to water was much more limited. Nevertheless, Eastern Polynesian cultures share a pantheon of anthropomorphic gods, including Tane, Tu, Rongo, and Tangaloa, and the temple or marae is common throughout, a variation on the western Polynesian malae, which is more of an open-air assembly hall (see Gods and Goddesses).

Hawaii, Rapa Nui, and New Zealand

The final points of eastern Polynesian colonization were Hawaii to the north, Rapa Nui (Easter Island) to the east, and Aotearoa (New Zealand) to the south. The valiant Polynesians who settled these distant islands, and all those in between, arrived with food plants like taro, bananas, coconut, breadfruit, and yams, as well as fiber plants like the paper mulberry, to make tapa cloth. They also brought the pig, the dog, the chicken, and the Pacific rat, in different combinations to different islands. People traveled 4,000 kilometers from Tahiti and the Marquesas to reach Hawaii, for example, so they certainly set out with provisions. Once ashore, they became an established chiefdom with already domesticated crops. These voyages between 400 and 1200 ended in windward arrivals, from whence people moved to the leeward sides of the island (see Leeward and Windward). In Hawaii, during this period, there were community chiefs and paramount chiefs. Between 1200 and 1650, the Hawaiian Islands each sustained three major chiefdoms and two to three minor chiefdoms, the total population peaking in 1500 at possibly one million people.

Hawaii is considered the most stratified of Polynesian chiefdoms, such that by the time of European contact in late eighteenth century a society once based on lineages of kinship had become a highly structured and hierarchical kingship. Hawaii was colonized between 300 and 600 C.E. (perhaps later) probably from the Marquesas. A voyaging period followed when Hawaiians traveled frequently between the Marquesas and the Society Islands. This long haul voyaging ceased by 1300, when the Hawaiian Islands became cut off, rather suddenly isolated from the rest of Polynesia. Agricultural development probably started as early as 800, leading to settled communities mainly on the coast. But between 1000 and 1650, the population expanded and people moved inland to different ecological zones. The population really exploded up until at least 1600, doubling in less than a century. With this population growth came agricultural intensification, fishponds, and systems of irrigation. Hawaiian religion emphasized Kane, god of flowing waters, and in the big islands of Maui and Hawai‘i, chiefs were dedicated to the cult of Ku, a god demanding human sacrifice who would alternate with Lono, god of rain and thunder, for whom, it is said, Captain James Cook was mistaken, and ultimately killed (see Agriculture).
Rapa Nui is the most isolated spot on earth. It is the southeastern-most island in the Polynesian triangle and closer to South America than the ancestral Polynesia islands of Tonga, Samoa, and Fiji. Famous for its monumental statues, called *moai*, the island and its people committed a kind of social and environmental suicide to erect them. Where there once were forests of palms, there are now very few trees at all, and it is generally thought that the Rapa Nui people cut them down to transport their great stone statues from one side of the island to the other. Oral tradition (much like that of Pohnpei) says a form of spiritual power, or *mana*, actually “walked” the statues from their quarry. Archaeologists also suggest that the Little Ice Age (about 1650 to 1850) at the end of the Middle Ages would have contributed to the deforestation. Whether cause or effect, the decline of Rapa Nui’s environment coincided with the decline of its sociocultural prosperity, and by the eighteenth century its people were starving, many native plants were extinct, and people may have been forced into cannibalism for survival.

Nevertheless the great *moai* megaliths are a tribute to the Rapa Nui Middle Ages. A total of 887 volcanic tuff statues appear to have been constructed, one fourth of which were successfully erected on the *ahu* platforms, others left in the Rano Raraku quarry and still others now buried in the sand after the architectural project was abandoned. The dates of their construction range from 1000 to 1500 and 1500 to 1700. The *ahu* vary in size and may have been sculpted during or after the *huri mo’ai* or statue-toppling era. Many became ossuaries; others were destroyed by storms.

Eastern Polynesians reached New Zealand in a series of migrations sometime between around 800 and 1300. Legend says the Māori came from Hawaiki, the mythical Polynesian homeland, to settle the North and South Islands, and several smaller islands, including Rakiura (Stewart Island) and the Chatham Islands. Over the next few centuries, these settlers developed a distinctive Māori culture with two competitive *hapū* or subtribes. At some point a group of Māori migrated to the Chatham Islands where they developed a variant Moriori culture.

The Māori chiefs came from multiple lineages, and these hereditary positions were distinct from the competitive and achieved status of elite warriors. New Zealand had its own monumental age from 1000 to 1500 on the northern end of the South Island, where the settlers shifted from horticulture to hunting and gathering.

The sweet potato was especially well suited to the warmer North Island of New Zealand and became the Māori staple food quite quickly because it could be planted on slopes and flat land and stored in cool pits or stilted *pataka*, or storehouses, within the ceremonial *marae*. Patakas symbolized the fecundity of the chief and were a symbol of his great *mana* or prestige. As such they were *tapu*, and almost as important as war canoes in terms of status symbols.

The Māori lived in settlements called *kainga*, which, with the rise of warfare eventually metamorphosed into *pa*, or fortified settlements. *Kainga* were established in sheltered coastal locations, near harbors or estuaries, such as those found at Palliser Bay, in the North Island, dating from the twelfth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries. The most famous *kainga* is at Wairau Bar, in the north of the South Island, and was constructed sometime between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. Eventually, however, and just at the close of the Middle Ages, roughly 1500, these *kainga* transformed into complex defensive settlements, with ditches and palisades and multiple cooking areas. At the end of
the Middle Ages in Oceania, life was much more fraught and defensive. See also Documents 1 and 2.

Further Reading

Nancy Sullivan

2. RELIGION

The religious life of Oceanic peoples has always been integrated with all other aspects of life: with politics, the arts, agriculture, fishing, trade and sea voyaging, not to mention everyday routines. The local religions varied by culture and language group, as these were nonliterate people without the equivalent of a Torah, Qur'an, or Bible. These beliefs were not just demographically localized, they were about localized subjects—like where our people come from, how we arrived here, who made us (and not them), with relatively little reflection on the origin of humanity. Religion is one of the few subjects about which we have no empirical evidence in the archaeological record, too, so whatever is said here would be speculation based on ethnographic reports very near “first contact” with Europeans. There were myths about the cosmos, as the sun, moon, and stars were vitally important to farmers and seafarers. And there were stories of fabulous creatures that lived with or preceded humans on earth, sometimes half-animal half-human or shape-shifting beings that are said to have created natural phenomena like mountains or lakes or coral reefs.

Island people are likely to have legends about the origin of the sea, and some creator god who would have made it. People in southern Vanuatu have a myth in which a woman became angry with her son because he disobeyed her. In her fury she knocked down a wall that surrounded the water of the sea. The water broke free, scattering people and coconuts to other islands. In Dobu Island, New Guinea, it is said that when the sea was first released it swept all the beautiful women to the neighboring Trobriand Islands.

On the Banks Islands of Vanuatu, the first being in the world was Qat, a creator god made all the islands and their flora and fauna, and carved humans from wood and then danced with them, as dolls, to give them life. In the Chambri Lakes of the Sepik River of New Guinea a mythical woman named Kolimanggi was the first clay pot maker, and she fashioned human features on the pots for they could come alive and act as her assistants. But when a handsome man from the neighboring Karawari River caused her to break taboo and sleep with him, these pots hardened and forever after stopped assisting her.
The myths of Melanesia are filled with animal characters. Snakes appear as symbols of fertility and power, sometimes wandering from place to place and distributing magical powers, sometimes actually birthing humans from their being. Virtually everywhere in New Guinea there are beliefs about composite animal creatures, called masalai in Tok Pisin, that live in the water and the bush, guarding their territory. The Arapesh believe that masalai live in rocks and pools and sometimes take the form of snakes or lizards. The Kiwai of Papua New Guinea say that they are descended from Nuga, a half-human, half-crocodile creature created long ago from a piece of wood.

Along the Sepik River, there are distinct historical time frames for masalai and culture heroes. People generally believe that masalai are from an earlier creation period, a deep historical era, which evolved into a time of the first humans, sometimes through a period of half-human creatures. Eventually the origin stories meld with ancestral hero stories and bring the chronologies to the present day.

Culture hero legends are always picaresque. Stories about twin brothers and older–younger sibling sets are common throughout Melanesia. Generally there is a wise brother and a foolish one, as for example, in New Britain, and Vanuatu, where a creator god made twin brothers by sprinkling his own blood on the ground: one became a hero of the people, the other, an evil-doer. Two brothers from the north coast people of New Guinea, Kilibob and Manut, are responsible for local landmasses, rivers, volcanoes, and sacred sites across the eastern top end of the island, in a series of sometimes hilarious, sometimes tragic episodes of their travels.

Then there are the trickster characters. According to the Kiwai people of New Guinea, the trickster Sido could change his skin like a snake. He was killed by a powerful magician and then wandered the world seducing women and children. He had a human wife, but lost her, and then transformed himself into a giant pig, splitting open so that his backbone and sides formed the house of death—the place where all Kiwai go when they die.

In other places, the first beings came from the sea or emerged from underground. Among the Trobriand Islanders, the ancestors of each clan emerged from a particular spot in a grove of trees, or from a piece of coral or a rock. The Keraki of Papua New Guinea believe that the first humans emerged from a tree, while others say that they came from clay or sand, blood, or pieces of wood. According to a myth from Vanuatu, a terrible ogre killed everyone except one woman hiding under a tree. She later gave birth to twin sons who destroyed the ogre and cut it into pieces, which freed the people formerly been eaten by the ogre, and they came to life again. There are unexpected twists and turns to these stories, very much the way stories from the Sanskrit Mahabharata epic mixes the spiritual and profane world events together.

Often these culture heroes introduce magical powers to the world of humans. According to a myth from the Trobriand Islands, a hero named Tudava taught the people various forms of garden magic, for which they have since become renowned. People use magical formulas to manipulate spirits across Melanesia. Learning the ritual incantations, performing the ablutions or abiding by the taboos, all take skills that are coveted by the entire community. Those with the power to control weather are always highly influential people.

A general Melanesian belief in life after death provides a second order of beliefs that coexisted with all these cosmological and ontological theories.
The spirits of ancestors and culture heroes remain present to be appeased and blamed by the living, sometimes eternally, and sometimes before they make their way to a final resting place or offshore “home” of ancestral beings. In some places, a successful journey for the dead will depend upon completing the funeral rites. By contrast, Fijians believe that the path taken by the deceased is dangerous and only the greatest warriors can complete it.

In Melanesia, ancestral spirits are not always good. They are just as likely to punish and trick their living relatives as they are to smooth their way in the world. In Melanesia it is impossible to distinguish between magic and religion, because spirits are not transcendental. They linger and behave in very human ways, sometimes petulantly or arbitrarily. The require ceremonies and obeisance, and in Manus Island, for example, they can punish lack of respect with illness or death. But the after death holds no punishment or reward, it has no ethical implications for the living. There are certainly ethical aspects to indigenous belief systems across Melanesia, in both highlands and lowlands areas, but the general rule is that afterlife is not related to how one led their life, for good or for bad.

But it is sorcery throughout Melanesia that is responsible for social control and punishment. Most illness and death is attributed to these human agents of supernatural power. Melanesians are less concerned with cosmogony than are Polynesians. They have no specialized priesthood (although there are sorcerer positions and hereditary powers). Sorcery is a very important aspect of social control, because it is public and community behavior that sorcerers are monitoring, and not the degree to which one respects ancestral spirits or not. You grow ill or die from something you have done, or a relative has done, in the material world, and the fear of sorcery is as powerful as its effects. People accord with community obligations and taboos to avoid sorcery.

The intentions and desires of ancestral spirits are usually revealed in dreams. People who have dreams, or are said to have summoned ancestor spirits, can sometimes have powerful sway in community matters. Not only do they invest themselves with the supernatural powers of the deceased, but they often claim to be able to influence the supernatural world through rituals and magic. Music is usually part of these rituals, and in the mainland of New Guinea, the flute is an especially meaningful instrument during ritual. A mythic storyline shared by a great deal of northeastern New Guinea people involves the primordial power of women: how the community was once ruled by its women who played magical flutes in a spirit house of their own. At some point, the myth tells us, the women either fell asleep or were duped by men who stole these flutes back and have forever after been the masters of magic and governance in society.

In Hawaii, families still conduct ceremonies to transform the deceased into the body of the family’s totemic animal. Thus these totems or animals become embodied with ancestral powers, and a fisherman, for example, may be guarded by a shark, or lizard descendants may see lizards as particularly good omens. Along the north coast of New Guinea, people had ritual acts and dietary restrictions regarding their totems. The chicken family could not eat chicken, and the descendants of certain fish species could not disembowel these fish to use as bait for bigger fish. In this way, totems and deceased relatives remain living members of the community, governing behavior and providing benign assistance. In Vanuatu people say that humans have two
souls—one goes to an afterlife while the other takes the form of an animal, plant, or object.

Micronesian religion is characterized by a vertical worldview; that is to say, a belief in sky gods responsible for creating the world and the forces of nature. This is related to the Polynesian pantheons of creators, and differs somewhat from Melanesian religions. By contrast, the Australian Aboriginal worldview might be called horizontal. It rests on the concept of the Dreaming, a sacred time before living memory when ancestors (human and animal) wandered the earth, creating everything from their own essence and adventures. Once the site had been made, the ancestor would merge with it as a manifestation of his or her self. Human life or soul derives from these ancestors, as incarnations of and at death, returns to them (a belief also common in island New Guinea). The concepts of *mana* and *tapu*, which are central to Polynesian cultures, are also less significant in Melanesia. *Mana* is a sacred and generative potency, a power of the gods made manifest in the human realm. As a characteristic of persons and objects as well as of spirits, *mana* can be either helpful or harmful. It is a force of growth and vitality, as well as of harm and death, and must be harnessed at all costs. Anything uncommon or out of the ordinary—such as a weapon that has killed many animals or a great hero who defeats many foes—can be said to possess *mana*. The worldly acts of consumption and of sex are especially vulnerable to *mana*, and so, by way of controlling the force, taboos are placed on activities surrounding both. Transformations of life-giving to death-dealing *mana* are the central concern of ritual life, and the object is to balance or rectify the opposing forces into either the ritual state of *tapu*, or the ritual state of *noa*. *Tapu* is the state of contact between human and divine, but *noa* is a state of complete detachment.

Beneath the many variations between Melanesian and Micronesian and Polynesian belief systems lie very important distinctions in social organization. Most salient is the system of chiefly rule in *Polynesia* and *Micronesia*, or a ruling class set against a common or majority class. Chiefdoms also exist throughout island Melanesia, but the continuum of social organizations that ranges from councils of elders or meritocratic societies to inherited government runs from western Melanesia to eastern Polynesia, as from interior New Guinea to its easternmost island communities. Chiefdoms are pervasive in the Admiralty Islands of northwestern Melanesia and are highly developed in the Marshall Islands and Pohnpei, in eastern Micronesia, as they are in Polynesia. Chiefdoms are also found in the Papuan coast of New Guinea, in Manam Island, off its north coast; in the Trobriands Islands, off the eastern coast; in Vanuatu; in New Caledonia; and in the southeast Solomon Islands. In all these chiefdoms, however, the rules of succession are more pliant than European nobility *(see Chiefs)*. One of the ways commoners could move up the system, for example, in Polynesia, was by mastering religious and esoteric supernatural and historical information. In the Murik Lakes of New Guinea, for example, oldest brothers and sisters could compete with each other for the designated title of *Sama*, or chief. In addition, a “loophole” that allowed noble lines to have first “unofficial” marriages before they married for life also allowed children from these earlier unions to compete with “legitimate” heirs when it came time to bequeath the chiefly title.

In this way, even the most tyrannical chiefdoms have always allowed for an element of competition, and competence, to enter the succession of leaders.
The eldest son deemed unfit or disagreeable could be passed over for a favorite. Even in Polynesia, where genealogies were fought over like the Holy Grail, there was also room for maneuvering, and rival claims could be made between different levels of entitlement. The principle of succession has always been primogeniture, or first son/daughter succession, but second and third siblings can also position themselves before their elder sibling’s offspring, and the various cousins and second son lineages are complexly debated. In many of these societies, primogeniture marks a distinction between senior and junior lines of descent. The conical clan system gives all descent lines unique ranks. The ranks derive from elder siblings from younger siblings—elder brothers from younger brothers in patrilineal Polynesia and elder sisters from younger sisters in matrilineal Micronesia—and all of their descendants.

Ancestral Polynesia had hereditary ranks for priests. The paramount chiefs were also the embodiment of deities. In New Caledonia, by comparison, Kanaky chiefs had magical relationships with the ancestors and were embodiments of the lunar calendar, so they initiated the different planting and harvesting seasons. The Pleiades in the sky were important not just for navigation but for determining seasonal time.

Oceanic peoples were (and many still are) entirely dependent upon the weather for their garden food, fishing, housing security and ocean-going trade. Because the Pacific Islands are strung along the Ring of Fire, seismic activity throws up earthquakes, tsunamis, and volcanic eruptions that have always made life in these islands precarious, if not absolutely dangerous. At the eastern end, the Nazca and Cocos Plates are being subducted beneath the South American Plate, and to the west, the Pacific and Juan de Fuca Plates are being subducted beneath the North American Plate (to the west). Pacific island societies have always relied on beliefs that would control the weather by appeasing spirits or gods that might reside in volcanoes, hot springs, and the sea. The fact that high chiefs, priests, and sorcerers across this region have all made hereditary or supernatural claims to controlling the weather comes as no surprise. There are yam planting seasons and tapu seasons for Polynesian gardens, and in the Trobriand Island the pre-European garden magic alone fills two volumes of one of anthropology’s classic tomes, *Coral Gardens and Their Magic*, by Bronislaw Malinowski (1935).

It stands to reason, then, that weather pattern changes during the Middle Ages would have deeply influenced their beliefs about themselves and their world. The entire Pacific Basin underwent radical changes during the Middle Ages because of the transition between the Little Climactic Optimum (c. 950–1310) and the Little Ice Age (c. 1425–1850). The transition peaked between 1310 and 1425, and was characterized by rapid temperature drops and an increase in rainfall. Agricultural impacts would have been severe. This transition era coincides with the end of long distance voyaging in Polynesia (see *Voyaging/Ancient Navigation*). It marks a period of increased social complexity in Samoa, for example. Islanders pulled back from the expansive interisland connections they enjoyed and stopped the pattern of exploration and colonization. Coastal populations grew during the Little Climactic Optimum, archaeologists tell us, and then when things cooled off and violent weather arrived, they started to expand to the interiors and mountain centers of the Polynesian islands. The rise in rainfall, cooler temperatures, lower sea levels, and increasingly violent weather patterns that gradually augured in the Little Ice Age also made alter-
native land-use strategies very important. Agricultural intensification began. Forests were cleared for gardens. No doubt food was a growing problem with violent weather, and the surpluses upon which so many chiefly tribute systems relied—from Micronesia through Polynesia—were drying up (see Agriculture).

In Micronesia, many changes can be attributed to the breadfruit revolution. Early settlers on Kosrae and Pohnpei depended on breadfruit with other things and grew to depend more on breadfruit alone. It probably came from the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu originally, and it became the staple of Micronesia, particularly in the western Carolinean high islands. Myths in the Marshall Islands tell of its introduction sometime between 1200 and 1300. In Chuuk, its introduction also marks a major sociopolitical shift, as the islanders became more dependent on the interisland tribute systems from Pohnpei and Kosrae. Across Micronesia, it is breadfruit—an easy staple to grow—that signals a cultural and social efflorescence during the Middle Ages.

Megaliths, stone money, stone forts, ceremonial platforms, monuments, plinths, burial platforms, and stone gods are all features of Oceania’s Middle Ages and can be found from Micronesia across to Polynesia. Stone faces in Palau, ridge-top forts in the Solomon Islands, stone money disks in Yap, latte stones in the Marianas, limestone backrests in Tonga, burial mounds in Samoa, and marae altars in Tahiti—all date from the era just prior to European contact. They are reflections of the kind of interisland networks created during the early Middle Ages, and the social intensification characteristic of the later Middle Ages. What we call “shrines” or “altars” in Polynesia, however, were as much political as religious sites, where rituals were conducted, kava was drunk and debates, singing, chanting, and occasionally human sacrifice took place. See also Gods and Goddesses.

Further Reading
3. ECONOMY

The economic life of Oceanic peoples during the Middle Ages was largely about subsistence agriculture and fisheries, as well as hunting and gathering. But these societies were also deeply involved in trade, in a full range of systems, from gifts to high chiefs, and reciprocal exchanges of goods (like fish for yams), to extensive cross-cultural trade in shell valuables, like the kula ring in Melanesia’s Massim region. Before European contact, when there was no monetary currency, traditional currencies consisted of consumables such as pigs, tubers, meat, fish, and objects such as stone axes, red feathers, jade, shells, ceramic pots, and so forth. These were important elements of all subsistence economies, and their circulation created extensive interdependencies between different peoples; but their role was by far more important in the construction and maintenance of social relationships. Things are transacted between people, of course, and the transaction itself can speak volumes about the giver and the receiver.

Before the advent of a market economy, driven by supply and demand, there were two general types of transactions in the Pacific Islands. The first, and more prevalent, was a redistributive economy, whereby the public tithed or proferred resources to the leader (or chief or bigman), who then managed its redistribution. This would characterize most of the trade networks throughout Polynesia and Micronesia, and a great many island trade systems in Melanesia during this period.

Reciprocal trade, on the other hand, is what most people think of as quid pro quo or apples-for-oranges exchange. The Western world used to see the vast majority of nonwestern or “primitive” trade as being just this, a functional exchange of what one has for what one needs. In this way, “primitive man” was easily understood as having very basic needs to fulfill, whether material or social, and engaging in trade as a form of self-preservation. At the same time, scholars were confounded by the prevalence of “gifts” in Polynesia (especially) and found it hard to rectify functional motives with gift giving. These reciprocal exchanges were not always functional; they made little sense in terms of a notion of “primitive economics.” Some gifts were returned in kind, others seemed to create social indenture rather than material obligations. In his classic work The Gift (first published in France in 1950), Marcel Mauss argued that gifts are never “free” – he says his subject matter is “the gift, and especially the obligation to return it.” Acknowledging that human history is filled with cases of reciprocal exchange, Mauss wanted to find out what it was about an object that prompts a recipient to return the gesture. Mauss explains that the gift is a “total prestation,” imbued with “spiritual mechanisms,” engaging the honor of giver and receiver (Mauss, 3). The giver is giving a part of himself, Mauss says, so that “the objects are never completely separated from the men who exchange them” (31).
This very simple redefinition of gift giving allowed scholars to finally see the social dimension of exchange in non-Western societies, and particularly in the many forms of reciprocal exchange throughout Oceania. Through this lens, anthropologists and historians could begin to make sense of the long-distance and multicultural interisland trade in shells valuables, as well as the great ritual exchanges of pigs, garden produce, and even women in the hinterland of New Guinea. It had to do with honor, status, mana (in Polynesia), and corporate identity.

In part, Mauss was responding to the provocative findings of Bronislaw Malinowski (1920, 1922) who studied the Trobriand Islanders during the period of the First World War. He wrote about the Kula Ring, a voyaging exchange network that is dominated by Trobriand Islanders but runs in a circle through two language groups and several islands in the Massim of Melanesia. The ring spans eighteen island communities, including the Trobriand Islands, and compels participants to travel hundreds of miles across dangerous waters to exchange two types of valuables: the mother-of-pearl and spondylius disc necklaces (veigun or soulava) that move in a clockwise direction around the ring, and the conus shell armbands (mwali) that circle anticlockwise. Every armshell is exchanged for a necklace, and vice versa.

In this trade system (which would have been operating during the Middle Ages), no one grows wealthy, nor do they gain food or other natural resources in the process. Chiefs, commoners, and perfect strangers all participate (if they wish). Malinowski himself was confounded by the system (1920, 1922), which appeared to strengthen friendship and kinship ties in the most ritualistic ways. There was a more practical barter exchange (gimwali) running parallel to the kula, by which useful items like food, oils, building materials, and other items were exchanged in the process. But though the kula reciprocal trade and the gimwali barter trade were linked, they operated under different logics, and with very different objectives. Kula objects are never owned, never alienated from the ring itself, and do little more for the temporary “recipient” than give him (more rarely her) the right to tell the stories embedded in these shells.

The shells proffer temporary status only, although the entire system builds a hierarchy of players whose reputations survive over time and acts in counterpoint to the matrilineal descent and inheritance that governs these societies. Carefully prescribed customs, magic, and historical legends surround the exchanges, and these knit together men from various islands in lifelong exchange partnerships (called karayta’u, “partners”). The act of giving, as Mauss wrote, is a display of the greatness of the giver, and demands modesty from the recipient. There are proscribed roles for each player that involve acts of hospitality and security, and good players are held in very high esteem.

The Kula ring is a classical example of Mauss’ distinction between a gift and a commodity exchange. Kula players are clear to distinguish between the gift exchange (Kula) and the barter or market exchange (gimwali). The kula involves public and ritualized display and underscores honor and integrity as cultural values. The barter is something else: it rides alongside the kula but involves purely economic values (Malinowski, 1990, 22–23). Kula valuables are inalienable in the sense that they can never be taken from the ring, they can never be individually owned. They pass through the hands of caretakers but are heirlooms on an unstoppable journey through time. Recipients can hold them, and
even pass them on as gifts, but they can never become commodities for sale or barter. *Kula* valuables are never private property.

In a gift economy, the objects that are given are inalienable from the givers; they are always on loan, never sold. The identity of the giver is also necessarily bound up with the object given, and invests the valuable with the power to compel a recipient to reciprocate. In this way, kula objects have what Polynesians call *mana*, that is a power to impel or realize something. The act of giving creates a debt that must be repaid. Gift exchange creates an ongoing interdependence between giver and receiver. According to Mauss, the “free” gift is therefore no more than a myth.

The sociality of exchange in Pacific Island societies has opened up a great field of scholarship, so that more recently it is possible to see virtually all aspects of human interaction in these cultures in terms of reciprocity or gifting. For the Trobriand Islands, the anthropologist Annette Weiner played an important role in opening the public’s eyes to women and their more immutable roles in a gift economy. She looked at the Trobriand system of social organization—through which subclans (*dala*) are reproduced, and pointed out that women reclaimed *dala* valuables that men had loaned their sons and daughters (who are in fact not part of the father’s matrilineage). The children never own their father’s valuables, but they enjoy a form of usufruct rights over them during their lifetime. In this way the presence of a father’s *kula* valuables could become part of the success and status of a woman’s line, in other words, a factor in the reproduction of the matrilineal *dala*. But more than this, Weiner called these gifts to the *dala* “free” gifts, offered of love from father to child, and not expected to be reciprocated. Nevertheless, they play an important role in enhancing a child’s status, to the ultimate benefit of the child’s matrilineage, not the father’s. Such generosity had been overlooked by other scholars, and its acknowledgement helped restore some of the “gifting” quality to a gift economy. But Weiner was really arguing that to call gifts either unreciprocal (free) or reciprocal (commodities) is to overlook another important role they play: building social hierarchy in these island chiefdoms.

A very different example of Oceanic reciprocity in exchange comes from the highlands of New Guinea, in Melanesia, where the *moka* is a form of ceremonial wealth exchange that primarily involves pigs. During the Middle Ages, pigs were well established throughout Melanesia, although the sweet potato (which has become currency for purchasing them) was just being introduced. It is hard to say that *moka*, or neighboring Engan *tee*, ceremonies were as elaborate at that time as they were just prior to European contact in the twentieth century, but it is fair to say that the principles upon which these ceremonies rest were already well entrenched.

*Moka* is from the Western Highlands of New Guinea, and, like *kula*, is a system of building status. Men are the players, although women have been known to perform *moka*, too. But it is really a vehicle by which a self-made or ambitious man can catapult himself to leadership by producing a ceremony in his (and his clan or tribe’s) name. Successful moka players are ipso facto big men, and their influence grows with the number of moka partners they accumulate. He can also conduct small- or large-scale moka exchanges, which become like an entrepreneurial gambling system, each debt taken out to cover a previous obligation. The difference between moka and virtually all other island or coastal exchange system, is that it is profit bearing. The system rests on a principle of
incremental returns. Thus, a gift of two pigs is returned with interest, as a gift of three pigs, and so forth. The complexity of one’s obligations, as they are paid off in part and in total (much like a highly leveraged market venture), means that the truly big moka players are constantly calculating their risks and investments, trying to find the next windfall of pigs to stage a bigger yet moka and create even more staggering obligations from others.

These are bigmen societies, where no one inherits status or power, and where men must work to convince others that they represent everyone’s best interests. Bigmen, in this system, are much like candidates in a democratic race, individuals whose sheer will to lead can charm or terrorize clansmen (in equal measure) into getting behind their ambitions. As a supporter, you throw your pigs into his moka exchange, knowing that his success will guarantee your success, and having his goodwill can also guarantee your future security. At any given time in the process, the moka partners are in unequal relations with each other—as debtors or creditors.

The extraordinary things about these moka (and similar tee) exchanges is that they escalate obligations, as well as rewards. Ambitious players can become extremely powerful, and their supporters (clansmen) benefit economically (with efficiently returned pigs, and a profit). Most important, successful moka networks can guarantee peace across otherwise hostile frontiers, and so the advantage of wealth accumulation and distribution can have very dramatic political consequences. Naturally, just as anthropologists have seized upon the kula as an example of complex economics (that defy previous notions of “primitive economic man”), so too have they seized the moka exchanges as signs of highlanders being “preadapted” to capitalism. See also Document 7.

Further Reading
4. THE ARTS

The arts of Oceania are wide and varied, and nowhere can they be separated from the sociocultural life of their creators (see also Entertainment). One essay cannot do the subject justice. What we can say, however, is that the arts of Oceania are best viewed in terms of their role in the lives of their peoples, rather than the prism of Western aesthetics. In context, they have always been a link between mankind and the spiritual realm. In some cases the act of carving or creating a material object was and still is itself a form of propitiation to the ancestors. Where the plastic arts (sculpture or painting) are part of one’s tribal heritage, they may form a mnemonic device for stories that give a person entitlement to hunting, fishing, or gardening grounds. Or they may be symbols of genealogical information, or maps of where an ancestor roamed. In this way the very concept of authorship for Pacific art should be seen as fundamentally different. Oceanic artists are not auteurs realizing personal impulses, they are islanders performing, voicing, painting, or carving part of a community imperative. What is personal is the unique relationship between the artist and the ancestor, totem, or clan represented in the work, and not the form of its expression. Only since European contact have Pacific Islanders considered art as a form of personal expression, and part of a global (albeit largely Western) discourse on aesthetics.

The different regions of Oceania—Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia—can be distinguished by their different art forms. In general, however, the material art objects include a range of functional objects such as altars, houses, stools, and instruments of war, for examples, along with decorated human skulls, carved stone and wooden figurines, bark paintings, sand paintings, woven mats and bags, decorated tapa cloth, and shell ornaments. Many of these items are also items of trade, acting as currency or valuables in networks of exchange that run from island to island and criss-cross the interior of the major islands (see Shell Valuables).

Melanesian Art

Melanesian art is well known for its elaborate stylizations, especially of the human form, where exaggerated facial and bodily parts come to represent sexuality, fertility, strength, cannibalism, and sometimes comic foibles. In the outer islands of Manus, New Britain, New Ireland, and the Massim these carvings and masks are especially finely wrought and bear the imprint of lapita migrations traveling through from Taiwan and the Philippines roughly 5,000 years ago. The carved canoe prows of stylized warriors in the Solomon Islands were called NguzuNguzu and were powerful reminders of the importance
of warfare. The mortuary masks and carvings from New Ireland, part of a tradition called malanggan, are especially dramatic and colorful, some might say hoary, and can be seen in Oceanic museum collections across Europe. But each region of the Bismark Archipelago is known for its striking ancestor masks and life-sized figures, some of which are made from less permanent materials, like leaves and bark, and discarded after ritual use.

Because many Melanesian carvings and masks have always been made for a ritual or occasional purpose, only the wooden articles have endured for collecting. Few objects that have been fashioned as “permanent” objects for trade, such as the shell valuables, actually remain from the period of 400 to 1400 C.E. One extensive trade network in the eastern islands, or Massim, area off New Guinea, called the kula, conveys old shell armbands and necklaces in a system of exchange and prestige building precisely because the shells contain so much history. But in general, older is not better for Melanesian art, and ancestral masks and carvings were made to be discarded, so that the next generation could learn their stories from the making and remaking of clan and tribal designs.

In the Sepik, to continue the example, it is the men’s house or haus tambaran that is the focus of male ceremonial life. Even today, this is where the initiated men spend their days, where clan sacrals are stored, and where young boys are secluded and instructed by clan elders in preparation for initiation. The design for these houses may be as simple as a structure resembling a house, with an open ground floor, thatch roofing, and split palm floorboards for a second story. For the Iatmul and Blackwater peoples of the Middle Sepik, spirit houses are awe-inspiring structures as much as 164 feet long with soaring gables and saddleback rooflines that slope in the center, all raised above the floodlines on stilts up to 16 feet high. We have no evidence to confirm that this was how they looked 600 years ago, but there are carvings from such structures that have been carbon dated as far back as 650 to 780.

Inside the haus tambaran are the powerful mwai masks and basketwork tumbuan worn during initiation dances, along with cult hooks, food hooks, ancestor masks and figures, war shields, war canoe shields, sacred flutes, water drums, and slit-gong drums. Upstairs there are painted palm bark or carved wooden skull racks for displaying decorated enemy heads taken in war raids. The most striking features of the Middle Sepik haus tambaran are the ornately carved posts and roof beams, each representing clan totems and ancestral figures. But most of all, and most important, there is the tambaran—the spirits of the ancestors.

There is never anything unplanned about a haus tambaran. Most are divided in two by major clans, then subdivided by subclans which have their own seating platforms, carved posts, and entrances at each quarter of the ground floor. The older initiated men sit towards the center post, the younger men toward either end. Thus, when you enter a haus tambaran you would go to the center to speak to the most important men.

In the carvings of the Sepik River, major tribes and languages groups are distinguished by the images they carve and paint. Many of the Lower Sepik Yuat and Keram River peoples carve flying fox clan totems and surround their masks and figures with basketwork frames and a ruff of cassowary feathers. Some of the ancestor figures can be identified by place according to the way their hair is tied on top of their head, others by the shape of their nose or eyes. Each community has its own stylization of ancestral figures, embedded with
human hair; feathers; crocodile, dog, or rats’ teeth; tridachna, nassa and conus shells; and seeds.

North of the river itself, and inland, the Sawos and Abelam people have long made basketwork masks rather than wooden ones, and these are traded down to the Iatmul people at the riverside. In Maprik and the Waskuk areas inland, yam masks were woven to decorate large ceremonial *yams* during yam harvest celebrations so that they resembled humans. We can trace the emergence of these stylizations along the lines of migration in this region, as this floodplains region was just being settled during the late Middle Ages. The founding Iatmul tribe villages, for example were Japandai and Suapmeri, after which came Palembei and Kanganaman, and the styles of their carvings can be seen as variations on an original format. In Korogo, another early Iatmul village, the signature look for their masks is eyes that protrude from the face.

Up the tributaries that feed the Sepik River, such as the Karawari River, there is far less carving and more painting on sago bark. Each painting tells a clan specific story within a fixed iconography. They also carve tall cult hooks called *Kamanggabi* that embody protective spirits and are used for divination. Interestingly, these hooks would be abandoned when the Karawari people moved on to a new site, leaving the object while the spirit moved on.

Different villages have distinctive carving styles, but because trade is so prevalent in the region, there has always been great circulation of form and technique. Ancestral masks, skull racks, ritual paraphernalia, canoe prows, sacred flutes, and lime holders were variously traded across language groups and tribes. Sometimes great sickness, flood, or war casualties would drive a group to trade for a powerful ritual complex of another, with its song cycles, chants, and ritual objects. But the traveling generally vitiated much of the object’s power. The importers would have the right to carve such images, but they might not know all the secrets embedded in them.

Virtually all Sepik masks are ancestor masks, mainly protective. Standing figures and finial or post carvings may depict ancestors or *masalai*—bush spirits. An ancestor figure may have a possum on its head or a crocodile wrapped around its legs, or a bird on its back. But *masalai* figures have part human-part animal features, like a crocodile’s mouth and pig’s nose or bird’s beak, with human body and a snake’s tail. These are variously evil or benevolent creatures who can change form according to their travels but are generally associated with the river, a patch of jungle, or a hill somewhere. Certain *masalai* figures are very powerful, comparable to a *haus tambaran*’s “orator chair,” and so can only be carved by master carvers. As noted above, often a new figure will come to the carver in a dream.

Archaeologists and government officers in the same area of the Sepik, ranging eastward to the Ramu River area of Madang Province, have also found stone figures large and small that look like Polynesian stone carvings, in some cases, and war amulets in others. They even bear resemblance to the standing *tamtams* in Vanuatu with their stylized human features. This marks the overlap of what some might call the two forms of Pacific art: western and eastern. In Melanesia, most of the artistic expression is focused on secular purposes, or on ancestor worship, whereas in Polynesia and Micronesia there is more “idolatry” or god figures worshipped on altars and in public spaces. In eastern Melanesia, which can be called the “cradle” of Polynesian culture as people moved eastward right up through the Middle Ages, we see that combination of gods and ancestor figures, and more altars or places of public worship.
Micronesian and Polynesian Art

Micronesian art is similarly functional and is known for its fine hardwood finish. It often looks manufactured in comparison to Melanesian carving, so elegant and polished is its finish. But the Micronesian islands also place difference emphases on their material objects, and this is the only region that has traditionally woven textiles. In the Caroline Islands traditional navigational skills are reproduced through various string, shell, stone, and sand images that illustrate the wave patterns, stars, fish, bird, underwater iridescence, and other formula taught by specialists to novices over many years.

Polynesian art is known for its wide range of materials, including feathers in Hawaii, bark cloth (tapa) for exchange and ornamentation, finely woven mats, stone sculptures, jade amulets, and carved woodwork, including canoes. Again, it is usually more finely wrought and finished than Melanesian art, with the circular patterns such as you see in the Māori tattoos and public houses. These objects were meant to endure and to contain mana or supernatural powers by their particular stylizations of ancestral gods.

Turning to Polynesia, the most salient form of material art is the marae, or altar, which also functioned as a meetinghouse and the chief’s throne in different locations. It is said that the most plausible origin of marae is in eastern Polynesia, specifically Rapa Nui, or Easter Island. The reddish volcanic rock, tufa, was carved to create enormous ancestral figures weighing as much as 20 tons. The relatively few early radiocarbon ages associated with these ceremonial stone architecture, or marae, of Rapa Nui are associated with earlier dates than those found in Tahiti, the Society Islands. Ahu, in Rapa Nui refers to the entire ceremonial stone structure, including the altar, the courtyard (where present), and the statue, or moai. In the Society Islands, ahu refers only to the altar of the marae. McCall (29–32) described the social structure of pre-Contact Rapa Nui culture as being divided into two confederations, and each of these contained several lineage groups called mata. The moai may, however, personify dead chiefs or some other aspect of religion, or they may represent segments of ancient society, rather than god figures.

The tradition of stone architecture is considered to have moved from east to west across Polynesia, starting from Rapa Nui’s impressive moai. Martinsson-Wallin, for one, developed a comparative study looking at material culture traits of ancient Peru, Rapa Nui, and Polynesia and concluded that there must have been pre-Contact interaction between the people of Rapa Nui and South America.

These large stone monoliths are found in the Marquesas Islands as well, as are smaller objects of shell and stone. But what the Marquesas Islanders perfected was the art of body tattooing, in extraordinary patterns that would cover the entire body. This more mutable and living form of art eventually moved through the Hawaiian Islands and New Zealand during the migrations of the Middle Ages.

Further Reading
5. SOCIETY

Oceania’s social organization during the Middle Ages varied considerably across the subregions of Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia, and everywhere society’s values were transmitted through informal, yet strong education. Although no written evidence exists for this era prior to European contact, the archaeological record is vivid enough. We can also project back from earliest contact reports by Europeans to what might have been the case in the preceding centuries.

Micronesian society would have been the most interesting by far during this period. This is because the region was its glorious height during the period between 400 and 1400 C.E. The Saudeleur dynasty flourished in Pohnpei at the center of the region during the beginning of this period and toward the end the Yap Empire was fully defined at its western end. Archeological evidence is inconclusive about Palau (Belau) during this period, but the remnants of basalt monoliths there suggest that there were meeting houses large enough to contain more than 1,000 people, and terraced hillsides as well.

Micronesian descent was matrilineal, except for Yap, which was patrilineal (although it also had matriclans). Here the small but high island of Yap in the west came to govern an empire of outer atolls stretching eastward that, by their lack of resources and vulnerability to weather and famine, were dependant upon the high island for security. In addition, the Yapese controlled weather magic, which impelled the lower islands to present tributes of fiber, ropes, timber, shells, and other valuables, like tumeric, to Wa’ab islands (Yap). The islands of Wa’ab may have had a population of more than fifty thousand during the Middle Ages. They had great vstone meeting houses (like Belau) and amphitheaters. Family houses were raised on stone platforms with thatched roofs, and connected by networks of stone paths. There were even ceremonial Women’s Houses where young women came of age.

Villages were highly stratified by rank, gender, age and occupation, and ruled by a triumvirate of chiefs. They competed for wealth and status, although
seven elite villages were led by three even higher ranking ones. In addition, Yap’s clans were divided into two groupings, or moieties, which gave even more fluidity to the social organization. Villages staged elaborate and competitive celebrations for other villages, and young men in the Men’s House would make raids to other villages to capture women as concubines. Yapese boats sailed to Palau to quarry the outsized and highly valued stone money.

To the east, the island of Pohnpei was home to the Saudeleur dynasty ruled from around 500 to 1450. The Saudeleurs were the inhabitants of Nan Madol, the great palace complex of islands offshore to the southeast that has come to be known as one of the region’s great wonders, and undoubtedly the most spectacular structure of the Oceanic Middle Ages. Nan Madol consisted of a small medieval town with temples and markets and even burial grounds constructed sometime 900 to 1200. There are more than ninety platforms of coral rubble with basalt retaining walls (some 25 feet high) that were quarried on the opposite end of the island. Permanent settlements appear to date from the first two centuries C.E., but the entire complex, and especially the large basalt megaliths, would have been constructed after the arrival of the San Deleur family (or Saudeleurs) in the twelfth century. Perhaps as many as 1,000 people lived in the complex at its busiest.

The island of Pohnpei was itself divided into various (first three, then later five) principalities, where the chiefly class allowed the noble class to lease land to the commoners, for gardens and residences. The Saudeleur oversaw all of this as a form of paramount landlord who was paid in tributes of food and fish. He was considered sacred, as well, and dealt with the common people through the intermediary of the noble class.

Nearby, Kosrae’s commoners lived on the main island of Ualang, while the chiefly lineages lived in the walled palace of Lelu, ad the nearby islands of Pisin, Tenyen, and Yenasr. Lelu was smaller, but no less sophisticated than Nan Madol, and included coral roads and a canal system for boats. Legend says Kosrae warriors sailed to Pohnpei and overthrew the tyrannical Saudeleur dynasty sometime in the fourteenth century.

Melanesian social organization in the Middle Ages would have been very different from its Micronesian neighbors, especially for the higher islands. Much smaller political and residential units, ranging from less than one hundred to only a few thousand people, would have been scattered across the islands and further divided by linguistic and cultural barriers. For the vast majority of mainland New Guineans, these language groups were described as tribes, or descent units, and further divided into clan and subclan lines. The most common organizing principle for these polities was a sibling set, usually two brothers, from whence the different clans of a single tribe descended. In this way, there is normally a dominant clan for a tribe or, where tribe is not used, a dominant subclan, representing the elder brother’s line.

As with all of Oceania, primogeniture is the dominant form of succession. Land tenure and inheritance were always reckoned first through the older brother, and by extension, the elder brother clan, although the rules are flexible enough to allow variations. In addition, though the majority of Melanesian societies recognize patrilineal over matrilineal entitlements, cognatic descent is always recognized, so that a child can reckon entitlements through both or either parent. This means that if a woman lost her husband, and his family was hostile toward her, she could usually return to her father’s land and make
a garden. The rules would bend according to circumstance, and over time, so that if a descent line is killed in war or dies from malaria, the system can recalibrate itself much more quickly than a rigid hierarchical Polynesian chieftainship.

There are chieftainships in island Melanesia, and these are also not strictly systems of genealogical succession, either. In the Massim, along the north coast of New Guinea, and in the Admiralty Islands there are multiple ranks of descent, much like Polynesia. Certain families are commoners, others are nobility, and still others are chiefly lines, each with their special taboos and deference toward each other. Commonly there are several small chiefs responsible for different communities, and one paramount chief for the entire tribe, language, or cultural unit.

In the lowlands of New Guinea, the riverine cultures of the Sepik River and the Asmat, are classic gerontocracies, where councils of elders rule the community, and one gains more entitlements with age. This structure is often combined with male (and sometimes female) initiation rituals, which formally induct the young into the ruling elite. Whereas the highland societies, ruled by ambitious bigmen who come and go in one lifetime and never cede their power to their sons, can be visualized as horizontal polities, much like Western democracies – where individuals campaign for a wide following – the lowland societies are better visualized as vertical lines of descent. Highland societies value wealth, whereas lowland societies run on knowledge. Highlands bigmen become big from surplus production, but the more marginal subsistence bases of lowland societies means their focus is more on esoteric information, genealogical and historical knowledge, and, most important, control of secret information. In this way the men with the longest and best memories are always prominent, if not more powerful, in the lowlands, and young men spend much of their time currying the favors of their elders who may then impart their information before they lose their memories.

One interesting combination of chiefly and age-graded social organization can be found at the mouth of the Sepik River, in the Murik Lakes. These people have migrated in from the north coast and Bismark Archipelago, mixing with Sepik River peoples, perhaps as recently as 500 years ago. They retain a chieftainship, or a series of small chiefs, called Sana, but with unusually competitive features. Here, as elsewhere, primogeniture is important to succession, so that the eldest child has a prior claim to the father’s title. But there’s a twist: sons and daughters can compete for the title. This is not so unusual, as sisters sometimes step in to hold titles for their brothers in many Pacific societies (like, for example, Fiji). But the twist is more: in the Murik Lakes, children from an earlier premarital union may also be recognized and compete for a title. That is, the society recognizes a “starter marriage” that may have fallen apart before a young person really settled down. Then, for example, it is possible that the eldest daughter of the first union could win the favors of her father and thereby inherit the position of Sana before he dies.

In Polynesia, we know that the early Middle Ages was a period of early settlement for most of the region, especially for the Marquesas, Hawaii, and New Zealand. The comparative anthropology of Polynesia comprises a few core social institutions and cultural patterns that are consistent across the islands. This is based on a common assumption that Polynesian culture all comes from a single source, which anthropologist Marshall Sahlins explains with a
biological metaphor by saying, “the Polynesian cultures derive from a common source; they are members of a single cultural genus that has filled in and adapted to a variety of local habitats” (ix).

These common patterns can be seen in the social organization of these widespread island states. Lineage is defined by the kainanga or kainga, as a descent group or clan, and patrilineal descent that governs land tenure, plus the concepts of mana and tapu, which are based on myths of origin. In addition, hereditary chiefs are present everywhere in Polynesia, in one form or another (commonly called ariki) (see Kirsch, 214).

The concept of primogeniture is also ubiquitous in the region. The concept of mana, for example, as a form of potency, is an inherited potential, transmitted genealogically through first-born children. The gods are incorporated into kinship systems in Polynesian societies, as the ultimate form of reckoning in a highly competitive environment. It is postulated that after initial settlement of the islands, as the restricted amount and range of resources became more valuable, competition intensified along with agricultural production. Chiefly bloodlines became more important and grew deeper as rivals traced their origins back to the gods. In this way the supernatural power of mana, or efficacy, became a defining element of chieftainship as it passed through the oldest son. Of course mana is an ex post facto determination, and those individuals who succeeded in gaining power were necessarily those with mana. At the same time, there was no better way to demonstrate mana than to challenge and defeat a rival of equal or higher status. This created a constantly fluid and competitive dimension to these genealogically formal social structures (Howard and Kirkpatrick, 64). See also Gods and Goddesses; Documents 4, 5, and 12.

Further Reading
Firth, R. We, the Tikopia. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1983 [1936].
The Oceanic peoples were developing technological advances in several areas during the Middle Ages. Micronesia, for example, was engaged in quarrying great limestone and basalt blocks and wheels for the megaliths in Pohnpei and Kosrae, and for stone in Yap. The stones were cut from limestone quarries on Palau (Belau), an island 220 miles to the southwest, and transported to Yap by way of small native canoes. The exact means by which these massive stones were rolled and sailed to their destinations at some distance from their quarries has always been a field of great interest to archaeologists and historians, and certainly constitute great technological achievements of the age.

At the same time, however, Eastern Oceania was enjoying a final burst of maritime exploration as populations continued to push eastward from central Polynesia, in the Society Islands and the Marquesas, to settle the region’s final outposts in Easter Island, New Zealand, Mangareva, Kermadec, and the Sandwich Islands of Hawaii. There is no doubt that all of this could only be accomplished by the advanced navigational systems being developed during this period. Pacific navigation flourished as a science during the Middle Ages, and each region developed its own emphasis on stars, wave patterns, weather, and countless other components to this highly complex field on knowledge. With many types of ocean-going canoes, and their familiarity with the stars and other natural phenomena for navigation, Pacific Islanders were able to move through the sea with relative ease. They adapted to their watery setting with great precision, accumulating vast libraries of unwritten information regarding their surroundings, and even developing various iconographic systems by which to record and transmit this expertise over time. The wind, stars, swells, underwater phosphorescence, clouds, birds, rains, and every feature of these vast expanses between their homes on land became as familiar to them as signboards along a public highway. In the Caroline Islands of Micronesia, for
example, it is still the case that expert navigators require decades of training before they have mastered the science completely (see Voyaging/Ancient Navigation).

In the age before compasses or sextants, Pacific Islanders conducted long-distance voyages by mastering the observation of these natural signs, the most important of which were the stars. The star compass was the basic instrument of traditional navigation. Each star is named by its location and trajectory, and in some places more than two hundred stars are memorized. Their movements anchor the entire system by creating measurable distances and timings for bird flights, wave patterns, cloud formations, and much more. In Micronesia the star compass, and the thirty-two points around the horizon that represent it, was taught by pebble diagrams. In this way, navigators memorized the star course for each possible destination from one starting point by starting with one point (usually rising of Altair) on compass and going round the compass. This creates twenty-eight possible courses from each point. The thirty-two-point compass was based on positions of only fifteen stars or constellations, with Polaris being the only star not used twice (as it marks magnetic North). Most stars are marked by their rising and setting points, although stars do not rise and set at the same time each day. Some are only visible near a rising or setting point at one time in the day, so other stars and their positions at the same time also must also be memorized, to complete the compass at any given moment. This is daunting memorization for anyone, and perhaps only possible for nonliterate peoples who continually exercise mnemonic strategies to remember details.

Gladwin says that on Puluwat Atoll (in the Caroline Islands of Micronesia) there are star courses known to twenty-six places from the island, and for most of the journeys between any pair of the twenty-six destinations. This means a total of 650 journeys and 325 unrelated courses would be memorized. Similarly, the nearby Wolai Islanders knew courses for eighteen island destinations, which, multiplied by twenty-eight compass points, created 504 possible courses. In the Caroline Islands, these systems of dead reckoning were, and still are, known by different names: Hatag on Woliei, and Etak on Puluwat (today the general Micronesian system is referred to as Etak).

The Southern Cross is also very important for all these navigational systems. For example, the two stars in the Southern Cross always point south, so that if you travel south by canoe, these stars appear to travel higher and higher in the sky each night. Should you travel down to the South Pole, they would lie exactly overhead. Conversely, if you were traveling to Hawai‘i, the Southern Cross would move across the sky in a lower and lower arc each night, so that when you hit the latitude of Hawai‘i, the distance from the top star to the bottom star would be the same distance from that bottom star to the horizon. These are the sort of details every traditional navigator would have on file.

But when the stars disappear in daylight, the wind, swells, shape of the waves, and the flight of birds are all the more important means for reckoning location. The mental charts to configure these locations also change, so that you can expand your target landfall positions. For example, if you know about the bird movements and wave swells for a given atoll, you can navigate toward that location with a much wider radius than the atoll itself. If you find yourself 20 kilometers (or just over 12 miles) off target but know the noddies travel that far at any given time of day, it is possible to reset the course. Island
blocks are also much easier to find than single islands; and for longer voyages, two or more canoes would journey out at a given distance from each other, once again to expand the chance of finding landfall. It is thought that the Polynesian navigators may have measured the time it took to sail between islands in “canoe-days” or a similar type of expression.

Sometimes waves would be the only navigational touchstone for travel at night or in bad weather. Carolinean navigators mastered the art of mapping these waves according to wind directions and depth, especially in swell patterns as they move beyond certain points. Winds are seasonal, of course, so this kind of knowledge involved a certain expertise in calendar cycles and freak weather contingencies. But even within a single voyage winds could change and weather could throw a canoe off course. A canoe blown off course in the darkness of bad weather would nevertheless be able to tell an expert navigator something about its direction by how it moved within the swells, and in which manner it need move to correct a course.

Phosphorescence was another critical factor in reading the seas. Here the term has little to do with surface or subsurface phosphorescence, which sailors see all the time. What these navigators would search for was something called “underwater lightning,” meaning long streaks or plaques of light beneath the surface, not unlike vein of ore in a mountainside. Sometimes these were no more than momentary flashes of brilliance, but they nevertheless could indicate directions to a landmass. Such phosphorescence usually radiates away from land, flickering or darting in straight lines. But calculations are complicated by reef systems, which also radiate phosphorescence, but at a slower rate, depending upon their depth. Reefs in general are indications of distance to land by their depth, as the sea changes color—it becomes more green—as you pass over them, even at 20 or more fathoms below. In good weather, short choppy waves will indicate the presence of reef if they are otherwise invisible. The movement of fish (feeding on the reef) will also be an indication.

In the Marshall Islands traditional navigators used stick charts to diagram swells and wave directions, including the breaks in the waves at certain distances off shore. In this way, one could chart a route between two islands by the indications of waves radiating from other islands, reefs, or atolls in between. Indeed, part of the long and arduous task of training to be a navigator in virtually all Pacific islands involved the use of shoreline materials for mapping or diagramming such course—pebbles, sticks, strings, and shells were most commonly used.

In bad weather at night, swells are hidden, and only the most experienced navigators could master a more sophisticated manner of reading the waves beneath their canoe. Sometimes they would lie down in the hull to sense their direction or source.

Color is another important observation. As a sailor moved toward land till below the horizon, he would judge the relative brightness over these “invisible” islands below the horizon. Such brightness can be viewed an average of 15 miles from land. Cumulus clouds provided other clues. Cumulus gathers in tower formations over islands, and heat refraction may even pull it down father to the surface, making an even greater punctuation on the horizon. Clouds also gather over land at different times of day, and different times of year, but whenever they do form, they are relatively impervious to wind or calms. Although normal trade winds are blowing, land clouds may pile up
over atolls, as neighboring clouds move on. Slow-moving clouds may be being
drawn over land, pulled down by it, so that navigators might be able to read
the different speeds of a cloudy sky for the landmasses they respond to below
the horizon.

Other methods for expanding landfall targets would involve reading the
sun’s rays. On a calm and clear day, when the sun is nearly overhead, you
can look into the sea and observe that the sun’s rays (in reflection) have dif-
ferent lengths. Some are short, some are longer. It is the shorter rays that
point toward invisible land. Drift objects could also be read by experienced
navigators. Freshly broken branches after a storm, coconuts, seaweed cut
adrift from a reef, and old driftwood, are all directional markers in one way
or another.

Scholars think that Polynesian voyaging followed the seasonal paths of vari-
ous sea birds. Many islands have oral traditions about bird flight patterns, and
some even include tables for marking flight ranges. There are references to
shoreline marks that point to distant islands in triangulation with these flight
paths, usually involving nodies, terns, boobies, and frigate birds. One theory
is that Pacific navigators may have taken frigate birds with them. Because
these birds cannot land on water (their feathers become water-logged and they
cannot fly), they would be excellent landfall locaters as voyagers grew close to
land. Indeed, they were boomerangs, because where they could not find land,
you would return to the boat.

There is little doubt that the Middle Ages saw a great deal of Pacific explo-
ration, especially throughout the eastern half of Oceania. But scholars posit
different theories about how frequently and how far this voyaging occurred.
For example, there is evidence in Tonga during this period that people trav-
elled annually to Fiji, Samoa, and ‘Uvea, but they may never have reached
Futuna, and even as they did land in New Caledonia, Vanuatu, the Cook Islands,
and Niue, they never established regular round-trip routes.

Furthermore, the fact that Polynesians valued pigs and chickens and dogs,
but that many islands did not have one or another of them, indicates that voy-
aging was not that common in many places. But these theories revolve around
another factor, and that is climate change, beginning in the 1300s. Before the
Little Ice Age was in full swing (from 1400 onward), ocean travel was facili-
tated by warm temperatures and stable weather patterns. Winds and waves
were very predictable from about 1,200 to 650 years ago. This was when most
of Polynesia was settled. Westerly winds were frequent and helped nudge
voyagers toward the sunset.

These vast open seas became increasingly familiar and less foreboding to
Oceanic peoples. Their entire intellectual, technological, and scientific life cen-
tered on the skills required to traverse the ocean, to move from island to island
in trade, migration, and communication. But with the colder weather and
choppier seas, this freedom was suddenly curtailed, and long-distance voyag-
ing very quickly became a thing of the past. Oceania demographics changed
as people moved inland and away from the shore in most of the higher is-
lands. Life changed dramatically and never really returned to the earlier pe-
riod of oceanic exploration. It is possible that many island societies that once
developed elaborate navigational systems actually lost them for lack of prac-
tice in the meantime. The few that have survived are important glimpses into
an era of great intellectual and ecological sophistication.
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Nancy Sullivan

7. GLOBAL TIES

The region called Oceania is a collection of three island groups—*Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia*—ranging from Indonesia to the west and South America to the East. The global ties that integrated Oceania with the rest of the world during the Middle Ages were strongest to the West, where populations were higher and more settled.

Trade

Trade connections at the Melanesian western end of Oceania were established between the island of New Guinea and its East Indies (Indonesian) neighbors with bird of paradise pelts. This commerce boomed between 1 C.E. and roughly 300 C.E. The skins, and the uniquely long, colorful plumes they boast, were traded throughout Asia well before they ever made their way to Europe (where they arrived in the sixteenth century, but became the height of millinery fashion during the nineteenth century). Their movement through Asia led to the treasuries of sultans and kings, and most notably to the headdress of the King of Nepal, which, to this day, still bears multiple arched plumes of the Greater Bird of Paradise. The best account of this trade and its history through to the twentieth century comes from Pamela Swadling’s 1996 *Plumes from Paradise*, which traces the exact trade routes and the commodities that traveled them from New Guinea to the rest of the world.
Swadling tells us that the first cycle of this plume trade between western Melanesia and Asia lasted from roughly 0 to 300 C.E. She maps the extent of this trade along the circulation of other luxury goods of the era, particularly bronze kettledrums that would have come from China, and which would have been exchanged for plumes. These have been found in eastern Indonesia and into New Guinea. Iron was not produced in New Guinea and could only have come from China and Vietnam, through Java and the Sunda chain. These trade networks are distinct from the much earlier *lapita* pottery distribution that accompanied Asian migrations throughout Melanesia from 5,000 to 3,000 years ago.

By the advent of the Middle Ages, however, Timor and the Spice Islands (the Moluccas) had been catapulted to the fore of regional trade dominance for their nutmeg, mace, and cloves. Nutmeg was a highly prized spice in medieval cuisine (and in the sixteenth-century times it was believed to ward off the plague). Trade was conducted by Indian Ocean Arabs, who moved it to the Middle East, where it was traded on to Europe. It became such a coveted commodity that the Portuguese were impelled to Oceania during the fifteenth-century European age of maritime exploration in the pursuit of it. They cornered the trade under the Treaty of Tordesillas with Spain and a separate treaty with the sultan of Ternate. But the authority Ternate held over the nutmeg-growing center of the Moluccan Banda Islands was limited, and so the Portuguese failed to gain a foothold in the islands themselves. This allowed the Dutch to eventually gain an edge in the trade by establishing military control over the Banda Islands (with a massacre and forced expulsion of island inhabitants in 1621). Archeologists found cloves within a ceramic vessel in Syria along with evidence dating the find to within a few years of 1721 B.C.E.

By 1500, Molucca had become the most important trade hub in Southeast Asia. Chinese, Indian, Malay, Javanese and other traders came to exchange goods there. Javanese traders supplied most of the cloves and nutmegs from the Spice Islands, and sandalwood from Timor, traveling through the Sunda Islands to the Moluccas. Chinese traders were active in the Talaud Islands, Sulawesi, and the Spice Islands during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and by the fifteenth century they had reached the coast of New Guinea and were trading from the Bird’s Head area at Onin and possibly with the Waropen people.

**Spices**

As the demand for spices grew, there must have been traders from Southeast Asia who surmised that the conditions for cloves and nutmeg in the Moluccas might also exist along the coastline of New Guinea. Pamela Swadling says some evidence to support this comes from the presence of pedestal pottery bowls compatible with those found in Philippine archaeological sites and dating from 500 C.E. found in the Collingwood Bay area of the eastern coast of New Guinea. Megaliths erected during this period in the Trobriand Islands off the eastern coast of New Guinea were also similar to Southeast Asian megaliths of the period, further suggesting that Asian traders had begun plying the coastlines—searching for spices? But by the end of the Middle Ages these ties had diminished considerably, and Melanesia, at the western end of Oceania,
had become considerably more remote than before. Once part of an extensive trade network leading east, by the fifteenth century western Melanesia was cut off from the Asian markets. Instead, it generated elaborate internal trade networks.

In addition to archaeological records, the oral traditions of New Guinea contain evidence of Medieval Indonesian trade. Although oral histories cannot really be pegged to a linear timeline, there are plenty of stories in the Trans Fly area of New Guinea of Asian traders well before the Europeans arrived in the sixteenth century. Some are attached to sacred sites, or resources that would have been trade items, like the gum-producing damar tree (that locals burn to produce light). There are also stories of trade routes that inscribe the known boundaries of the Sultan of Tidore during this time. In the Morehead area east of the Fly River, however, the early foreigners were said to be Dutch (Wagner)—a very real possibility, considering the Dutch had usurped Portuguese trade with the Sultan of Tidore by the seventeenth century.

Borrowed words and cognates from Malay language are found throughout the Trans Fly area, and they tell their own stories, especially when they refer to natural resources items or of trade. But close readings of Papua myths lead to even more intriguing suggestions. Certain myth structures in the Trans Fly not only resemble Indonesian (East Indies) myths but point to origins as far away as Mesopotamia. These neither Christian nor Islamic storylines may have traveled up the Fly River to the interior of New Guinea, where the Mountain Ok people have a myth cycle that also bears resemblances.

One of the hubs in the long chain of a spice trade was in the southern Philippines. Cloves from the Moluccas traveled through the Philippines to South China, Indochina and south again along the coast to the Strait of Malacca. From there the cloves went to Indian spice markets and points further west. This Philippine–Moluccas route persisted into Muslim times and is chronicled in Arabic writings (allowing it to be recognized as part of world heritage by UNESCO).

The Philippines are the northern neighbors of Micronesia, an archipelago of islands stretching nearly 2,000 miles, whose original inhabitants are said to have come from the Philippines more than 3,000 years ago. In 1521, Magellan made landfall in the Marianas Islands, and in 1565, Spain laid claim to the Marianas group.

The Filipino sailing merchants who made first contact with Spaniards were said to be already engaged in long-range trade with Asia. Filipino island kingdoms ranged as far West as the Maldives on the southwest coast of India and as far north as Japan. But the evidence is inconclusive on whether or not they were trading with the Micronesian islands during the Middle Ages. Western Micronesia is one the only area in Oceania that had rice crops at European contact; the islanders also chewed betel nut and fermented coconut into wine, in the Filipino fashion.

Merchants and ambassadors from surrounding areas came to pay tribute to the Filipino King of Cebu before the Spanish arrived. Magellan’s crew records that while they were paying tribute to the King, a representative from Siam was also there to see him (De Morga). The Spanish conquistador Legazpi wrote how merchants from Luzon and Mindoro had come to Cebu for trade, and that Chinese merchants regularly came to the north for the same purpose (López de Legazpi 1564–1572). Legazpi arrived in the Marianas in 1565 and
conquered the Chamorro people before traveling on to Cebu. Thus, like Western Melanesia, Micronesia’s islands bordered important and highly trafficked trade routes. It would be logical to imagine traders also traveled through Micronesia and Melanesia during this era. But because of a lack of spices, and a lull in the plume trade, these European contacts were impermanent for the time being. And as a result, there are no written records of the commerce that may have taken place.

Polynesian colonists spread quickly over the entirety of Polynesia in the period 1300 B.C.E. to 1100 C.E. They came from Fiji-Samoa-Tonga, at the western end of Polynesia, and farther east, the Marquesas; and they travelled in huge double-hulled canoes with all the requisite supplies for colonization: stone tools, animals (pigs, chickens, and dogs) and the seeds of their food crops. These plants included coconut, yam, taro, banana, breadfruit, and sweet potato. All the domesticated plants and animals were of Southeast Asian origin with one notable exception: the sweet potato, Ipomoea batatas. It is the sweet potato that provides an historical link with the regions eastern neighbors, South America, during the Middle Ages. It is said that the sweet potatoes first arrived in Polynesia from South America somewhere between 300 and 700 C.E.

Sweet potatoes originated in the Andes Mountains of Peru and Colombia. Peruvians call the sweet potato kumar, while Easter Islanders, for example, call it kumara. But it is said that the sweet potato arrived first in the Marquesas, not Easter Island, sometime after the Marquesas were settled around 300 C.E. It may have been possible for Polynesian traders to cross the 4,000 km (2,485 miles) distance to Peru against prevailing head winds, and return home safely. They would need to have carried trade goods to barter for the sweet potato, and to cart this commodity in one direction and sweet potatoes back to the Marquesas. Another possibility would be that Chinese traders moved between the Marquesas and South America during the fifteenth century, transporting sweet potato along with other goods.

Recently the archaeological record has provided an even earlier link between Polynesia and South America. Chicken bones have been excavated in a Chilean site that have been carbon dated to a century before European conquest, somewhere in the fourteenth century. In addition, a DNA test run on the bones revealed that they are not European chickens anyway but have come from a root stock in the Pacific Islands, no doubt traded to Chile through Easter Island.

Domestic chickens are said to derive from wild fowl somewhere on the Indian subcontinent. But it is also assumed that the people who migrated from Asia across the Bering Strait and into the Americas did not bring chickens with them. Yet in 1532 the Spanish conquistador Francisco Pizarro reported on his arrival in Peru that the local Inca were using chickens as part of their religious ceremonies. It had been thought that chickens arrived later, through European shipping routes. But the bones from the archaeological site at El Arenal in the Arauco region of Chile date from between 1321 and 1407, a good century before the Portuguese landed in Brazil. Without a European connection, it must be assumed the chicken came from Asia across the Pacific and finally to South America. Along with the sweet potato and the bottle gourd, the chicken bones now establish a Medieval connection between Polynesia and South America.
Further Reading

Nancy Sullivan
Agriculture

Most Oceanic peoples grew their own food, except the Indigenous Australians, who were primarily food gatherers and not cultivators. Archaeological evidence shows that thousands of years ago the islanders brought their food plants and their horticulture techniques with them as they settled across the Pacific Basin. Some food plants, of course, were native to the islands, but in most cases, they were introduced by human settlement. The various island environments and quality of their soils produced a wide variety of different farming techniques. The scarcity of soil on a small coral atoll, for example, created agriculture problems not usually encountered on the lush, green mountains of the large volcanic islands, and as a result, residents on atolls experienced much more difficulty in farming than their large-island neighbors. Traditionally, all islanders spent most of their days’ activities in tending their gardens—even the highest of chiefs. Their basic food crops, of course, determined the way in which they farmed their lands. Basically, these food plants were certain trees (coconut and sago palms, breadfruit, pandanus, and bananas) and root crops (taro, yams, sweet potatoes, arrowroot, pueraria, and tumeric).

Tree cultivation generally took the least amount of time and energy. Coconut palms were self-propagating and were easily started by placing a fallen nut in a new location, where it would grow, and within 5 to 8 years, it would start producing mature nuts. Palms, of course, produced trunks for timber and wooden objects, and their leaves were used for various woven baskets, roofs, and protective clothing. The actual nuts provided “milk” (clear water inside), shells for bowls and cups, and “meat” for food—either by eating it raw or by squeezing the “cream” out and mixing it with other foods for baking. In some places in Micronesia and New Guinea, the islanders collected sap from coconut blossoms and then drank it fresh or fermented it into a “toddy.” The trunk of the sago palm provided a starchy substance, which could be dried and cooked similar to a pancake, and it had the added advantage of being able to be stored for months. The ever-producing breadfruit (especially in Micronesia and Polynesia) yielded a starchy fruit that was cooked, peeled, and eaten like a potato, or pounded out like Hawaiian poi. The fruit of the pandanus (resembling a pineapple) was less used, but its fruit could be stored and eaten during times of famine. Bananas (the cooking variety) provided a sweet supplement
to any meal. In all cases, once these food-producing trees had been established, they required little or no cultivation. A few coconut trees and a couple breadfruit trees around one’s property could provide food throughout the entire year, supplemented, of course, by protein from fish, pigs, or fowl.

On the other hand, root-crop production took most of the islanders’ time. In some areas, land was cleared either by cutting (with stone adzes) or by fire, and then the soil was tilled to accept the new cuttings of the various root crops. There is no indication that islanders used any form of fertilizer, although some groups in the New Guinea Highlands used composting of grass cuttings in their gardens. Cuttings from the newly harvested root crops provided starts for the new plants. Holes were made in the ground with digging sticks, and the cuttings placed in them at various depths. Sometimes yam cuttings were planted in small mounds, which had been made to aid their drainage. Normally, tall sticks were inserted close by so that the new plants had poles on which to vine. For the next several months, the islanders would tend their crops by weeding and sometimes performing magic spells, which they thought would bring them a fruitful harvest. Irrigation ditches were often constructed for proper water balance, and in Hawai’i, a massive stone aqueduct (24 feet high in some places) was constructed on Kaua’i to bring water from its windward side to the drier side of the island.

Land tenure varied from one island group to another. But in most cases, an extended family lived on a plot of land, collectively owned by its particular social unit, and one that provided for its subsistence needs. Traditional customs also influenced whether a certain crop was cultivated entirely by men (dry taro, for example) or by women (wet taro), whether the sexes ate together or separately, or what foods might be taboo to one or the other. Agricultural terms dominated the calendar, and certain names of the month indicated what particular agricultural task was to be performed that month. Mythologies explained the origin of each food plant and how it was first “captured” from the gods by some remote and marvelous ancestor who brought it to earth for the benefit of humans. See also Gods and Goddesses.

Further Reading

Robert D. Craig

Atolls

Thousands of various sized islands are scattered throughout the Pacific Ocean. Some are large enough to be called “continental islands” (New Zealand, New Caledonia, and New Guinea, for example), whereas others are smaller and tall and are called “volcanic islands” like Hawai‘i and the Marquesas because they were anciently formed from volcanoes that pushed up from the ocean floor.
“Atolls,” on the other hand, are coral remnants of large mountains or volcanoes that slowly sank beneath the surface of the ocean. As the landmass disappeared, coral grew around its edge to form a circular, low-lying reef around a shallow lagoon where the mountain once stood. Although the term atoll has been used in the English language since the seventeenth century, it was Charles Darwin (1809–1882) who popularized the term in 1842 after his 5-year research trip aboard the HMS Beagle. The definition has been modified only slight since then.

Most of the world’s atolls are found in the warm waters of the Pacific, primarily in the Polynesian island groups of the Tuamotu Islands, Tuvalu, Kiribati, and Tokelau (see Polynesia) and in the Micronesian island groups of the Caroline Islands, the Marshall Islands, and the Coral Sea Islands. The largest atoll in the Pacific, however, is Landsdowne Bank, located just west of New Caledonia (Melanesia) and stretches over 811 square miles.

For the ancient Pacific islanders, atoll living created challenges not faced by larger, mountainous island communities. Their landmass was much smaller, and its resources could not support a large population. Often water was unavailable and, for that reason, most of the Pacific atolls were uninhabited. Some may have provided enough water to sustain short visits by voyaging fishermen, who used the island on overnight fishing trips, or by a limited number of people who sustained themselves with a scant growth of vegetables and fruits, despite the fact that the lagoons often were teeming with rich marine life. In ages past, these small atoll societies were faced with overpopulation, and they had to wrestle with the decision to emigrate or to limit population (often through infanticide). They utilized every natural resource available and surprisingly from these created some of the most intricate and visual-stunning arts and crafts.

Limited resources on atolls sometimes pressed the islanders to specialize in the production of one commodity that could be traded throughout the area for others. In Micronesia, for example, this created a limited type of overseas trade and exchange in finely woven mats, shell ornaments, and certain types of dye and the use of a type of money (various sizes of stone discs) not found in other Pacific Island groups. (See also Agriculture.)

Further Reading

Robert D. Craig
Betel

The custom of betel chewing in Oceania spread anciently from south Asia to western Oceania—the Melanesian islands, New Guinea, and the westernmost islands of Micronesia—Yap, Palau, and the Marianas. It was not found among the Polynesians or the Australian aboriginals. Betel chewing consists of mixing a husked betel nut from the Areca catechu palm with a pinch of lime, and then the concoction is wrapped in a betel leaf (Piper betel vine) and placed far back in the mouth, where it releases its chemicals to produce a sense of well-being, good humor, and relaxation, while at the same time appeasing hunger and lessening one’s appetite.

The saliva produced by the betel mixture is a bright, brick red, and chewers normally discharge it frequently rather than swallowing it. If drooled on one’s clothes, the spewed-out saliva produces a nasty stain. Excessive use causes the teeth to be stained permanently red and then to turn black. Betel chewing never attained the formal status that kava drinking did in parts of Melanesia and Polynesia. But it did play, and continues to play, an important social role private and public gatherings throughout Melanesia, where bringing a “hand” or bunch of betel nuts everything from goodwill, like a bottle of wine or a fruitcake to the party, to gravely serious exchange in compensation and reconciliation events. The custom continues in many of the islands.

Further Reading

Nancy Sullivan

Bigman (Melanesia)

“Bigman” in Melanesia is a position of leadership, not a physical description. The classic bigman is a central highlander of New Guinea, a man whose force of personality rather than his birthright has made him a “first among equals” for his clan and/or tribe. The highlanders of New Guinea may have had inherited systems of wealth in the past, but by the Middle Ages, their world had been transformed by the arrival of the sweet potato. Easier to plant than taro, the sweet potato suddenly made everyone wealthy and turned the have-nots into major players as surplus wealth created new systems of exchange.

To become a clan leader one now had to campaign to “produce” a major exchange event by which, at least in the Western Highlands, great public generosity could bring even greater returns. What wealth you gave out would obligate a return with profit. Thus, if you gave three pigs out, you could expect five pigs in return. Those individuals who could persuade clansmen to back them in these public wealth displays were entrepreneurs of sorts, and by their own powers of persuasion could transform themselves into wealthy and influential leaders, despite their circumstances at birth. Thus anthropologists have referred to them as “bigmen,” and in some cases “great men,” rather than chiefs.
Breadfruit

The tall breadfruit tree (Artocarpus incisa or Artocarpus altilis) provided the staff of life for Pacific islanders, especially those living in Polynesia and Micronesia. It was less known in Melanesia and Australia. Breadfruit spread eastward across the Pacific as the early peoples pushed out from Southeast Asia with their various tarts of plant foods to help them get established in their new homes. As a result of this eastward expansion, breadfruit spread throughout the region, but surprisingly not as far as Easter Island. It grew abundantly in the tropical islands and atolls (sparsely in New Zealand, however), and provided a year-round food source for the islanders. Breadfruit trees grow in a wide range of environments, they require very little care, and they begin to bear fruit in 3 to 5 years. They provided a substantial carbohydrate supplement (about 75 percent) to the often meager diets of Pacific islanders. They were also a good source of minerals and vitamins.

A mature tree often reaches 100 feet in height and produces round or cylindrical-sized fruit ranging in diameter from 4 to 12 inches. Islanders would grow several trees around their dwellings to provide not only food for their families but also shade from the tropical sun and wood for implements and clothing. For food, they merely had to cut the ripened fruit off the trees and cook it for their daily meal. In its natural state, it could be roasted over an open fire, peeled with a sharpened instrument like a cowry shell, and then eaten very much like a baked potato. A more popular
method of preparation was roasting it in an underground oven with other plant, animal, or marine foods, after which it could then be eaten or mashed and mixed with other foods or ingredients.

Some islanders enjoyed fermented breadfruit. In this case, the breadfruit (cooked or uncooked) was left in underground pits for days, or even weeks, depending upon the desired taste. In Samoa, for example, there is evidence that “masi” was stored for several years! Other islanders peeled the raw breadfruit, wrapped it in various leaves, and then left it to ferment out in the open, while some placed it on coastal rocks where it could be covered by the salty waters of the ocean during high tide. Others processed the mashed “paste,” rolled it out into thin sheets, dried it, and then wrapped it in pandanus leaves for long-term storage. All in all, it was a valuable source of food.

The fruit gained European fame in the late eighteenth century as a result of the famous story of the mutiny on the *Bounty*. The British government commissioned Lieutenant William Bligh to set sail for Tahiti to obtain starts of the breadfruit tree to be transported to the West Indies where they thought the local slaves would eat it as a staple of life, like it was in the Pacific. After spending months in the islands collecting the starts and then setting sail, Bligh’s men mutinied and threw the starts overboard. Bligh made it back to England, however, where he again (1791) was sent out to gather additional starts. This trip was successful, and breadfruit was introduced to the West Indies. Ironically, however, the slaves there did not like the food and refused to eat it!

Further Reading

Robert D. Craig

Chiefs

Governance of any social group depends a great deal upon custom and culture. The same can be said of Oceanic peoples before the arrival of Westerners in modern times. When European explorers first visited Pacific peoples, they could only describe what they saw in terms of their own Western vocabularies. They often called leaders of significant power “kings” and those governing smaller areas “chiefs,” and very often these designated terms continued into colonial times when Western powers molded Pacific islands into states and nations that fit their particular perceptions.

Prior to modern times, Polynesian rulers belonged to an aristocratic class called the *ali‘i, ali‘ki, ari‘i, ariki, or ‘eiki*. They claimed the right to rule through genealogical descent from an important ancestor or from the gods. A similar allegation was made by Japanese emperors who, during this same period, claimed descent from the powerful sun goddess and were regarded divine by their subjects. Comparisons are also made to European rulers who, in the early modern period, claimed they ruled by “divine right.” But the Japanese and European rulers had forces that restrained their absolute powers. Medieval Japanese
emperors were figureheads whose governments were actually controlled by their shogun rulers and their feudal samurai. European rulers were restrained by their Christian beliefs, parliaments, and other feudal lords. Polynesian ali‘i, however, were undeterred. They held absolute power. The highest ranking Hawaiian ali‘i chiefs intermarried with their sisters to provide an even more sacred legacy. Their children had to be carried about on the shoulders of servants lest all the ground they touched reverted to them. Likewise, in Tahiti, ali‘i names became so sacred, that similar words in the language had to be purged from use while the rulers were alive. In Tonga, lower ranking chiefs and commoners alike stripped down to their waists or prostrated themselves when the Tu‘i Tonga (king of Tonga) approached. There was even a special form of speech that had to be spoken in his presence (see Tongan Empire).

Although descent through the male line was the general rule, sometimes the first-born daughters claimed powers of their own. In New Zealand, for example, the Tapiru (first-born daughter of a high chief) assumed the duties of high priestess, a position not open to other women. No one could even eat in her presence. Sometimes women could rule, like Salsmasina, the 15th century Samoan Queen. A similar tradition continued in Tonga into modern times (eighteenth century), when Princess Sinaitakala outranked her younger brother, and she ruled jointly with him. Even her children by a Fijian chief were considered of higher rank than the Tu‘i Tonga, but they did not rule.

Although genealogical descent was important among most of the Polynesian ruling classes, another power sometimes allowed a junior line to gain ascendency. It was that “spiritual” power called mana—a powerful force normally inherited through descent, but one that could be obtained by accomplishing something outstanding during one’s lifetime. In Hawai‘i, for example, Chief Kamehameha (1758–1819) gained a formidable reputation through his military tactics. When the ruler of the island of Hawai‘i died and his authority passed to his legitimate heir, Kamehameha declared war, usurped his authority, and became the ruling high chief. He continued his conquests for the next 20 years until the whole island chain recognized him as ruler and he was crowned Hawai‘i’s first “king.” But, surprisingly, Kamehameha was outranked by his favorite wife Ka‘ahumanu. It is said that when he entered her hut, he had to crawl on his hands and knees for she outranked even him.

Samoan chiefs, on the other hand, were generally more egalitarian because, in some cases, they had gained their titles (matai) through means other than
inheritance—commoners could on, occasion, gain matai status or a title could be held by two different people at the same time. The village council (fono) also had its individual and self-perpetuating administration (electing their own membership) and they could oppose pressures from an outside, high-ranking ruler.

A different custom arose among some groups in Melanesia. These communities were dominated by what anthropologists have come to call a “bigman.” They rose in power and prestige not by hereditary or genealogical rights of succession but by a series of events that elevated them above all the lesser men in the community. In Bougainville, for example, village elders of the Siuai peoples usually decided most of their important matters. Sometimes, however, these communities were “ruled” by men known as mumi (“bigman”), whose influences (potu) often extended beyond their own villages. They gained this influence not by inheritance or by conquest but by giving lavish feasts one after another until they eventually outstripped the prestige of their rival mumi. A bigman would have started out gradually, spending liberally, impressing friends and family, and then spending more on the entire community. Through this process, he would become the most respected man in the village. A typical bigman would own his own male clubhouse, and after having renovated it (if inherited), would refurbish it with new drums, slit gongs, and protective gods (see Gods and Goddesses). All the while, of course, he offered lavish feasts to all those who worked on its restoration.

Once being recognized the dominant mumi in his village, a bigman could then extend his fame by competing with mumi from other communities. If he chose, he would lavish gifts of pigs and shell valuables to his rival, and the competition would begin. If his rival could not reciprocate with a greater feast, the rival was “defeated.” If the reciprocal feast was of equal value, then a balance was acknowledged, and the two became equals. The whole competition, of course, depended upon the resources and ingenuity of the mumi. He often had to rely upon friends and family for “loans” until the competitive process had ended. The end result, of course, was the attainment of some political authority over those who respected and admired him. But once he had lost to a rival mumi or when he had grown too old, he lost his political influence and returned once more being an equal among his village kinsmen. No enduring political structure or ruling dynasty survived his rule.

Further Reading

Robert D. Craig

Dance

Dance in Oceania during the Middle Ages provided an important emotional and spiritual outlet for performers as they moved their bodies to various types of music during their religious and public celebrations. Most humans feel a need to move their bodies as they hear the beat and sound of musical voices or
musical instruments, and it was the same with the original inhabitants of Australia, Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia. The exact nature of such dancing in Oceania, however, varied from the spectacular display of body art and costumes and less emphasis on precise dance steps as experienced in Melanesia to the exact, complex, and rehearsed drama found among the Polynesians and to a lesser extent the Micronesians.

Australian and Melanesian dances consisted primarily of impersonation—the imitation of animals or spiritual beings rather than relying on the words being chanted or sung by a group or director. The dancers often assumed a nonhuman status by lavishly decorating their bodies and donning elaborate costumes and masks that would impress the spectators (especially in Melanesia). Such heavy decoration made precise movements of the body difficult, and hands and upper body were primarily used to steady the costumes. As a result, dances were less exact, usually individual and personal, and very seldom rehearsed. The legs, feet, and swaying torsos, therefore, were the most important elements of the dance. Performers would move to the accompaniment of objects being beaten on the ground (sticks and bamboo, for example) or to a variety of drums, slit gongs, and flutes. Dance steps and movements had little to do with the musical accompaniment, except to keep in time with the rhythm. During important celebrations such as fertility, head-hunting, or funeral rites, the whole community would often join the dancers, but even then, the purpose was to present a vast moving body that would impress the gods and their human audiences, not to show how well they danced.

Polynesian dancing, on the other hand, was a visual extension of sung poetry (chanting), using complex hands, arms, hips, and leg movements either in a standing or sitting position and performed by men and women. Dances were usually performed by a group in unison and facing an audience. Despite the attempts of early Christian missionaries to eradicate traditional dancing, it did survive, but just barely, and during the last 30 years, there has been a remarkable resurgence in the performance of traditional dancing. This type of dancing was based upon poetry (stories being sung or chanted) and acted out by the dancers’ use of their arms and hands during which their lower bodies kept time and the shoulders and back were unmoving, upright, and straight. All dances were choreographed in advance—there was little or no improvisation (although certain exceptions can be cited).

Costuming was important, but it was negligible and usually secondary to the movements of the dancers. Men usually wore only a loincloth while the women wore a variety of clothing, ranging from very little or nothing to yards of traditional tapa (bark cloth) wound about them. Almost all wore festive feathers, colorful flower leis, and wood ferns around their heads, arms, and legs.

Each island group—Hawai‘i, Tahiti, New Zealand, Samoa, Tonga, for example—had particular characteristics that set one apart from another. Western Polynesian dancing (Samoa and Tonga) was characterized by the rhythmic pulsating of the legs and lower body and hand clapping, whereas Eastern Polynesia (Tahiti and Hawai‘i) was characterized by the swaying of hips and the varied movements of the hands, wrists, and arms.

Searches on the Internet and especially at “Youtube.com” reveal a wide variety of videos of Pacific island dances. Some, of course, are modern interpretations done primarily for the benefit of the tourists who visit the islands. Keywords for traditional dances may include “Hula Kahiko Kane” (male dance, Hawai‘i) and “Kahiko kaahumanu” (female dance, dedicated to Princess
Kaʻahumanu, Hawaiʻi), “Siva Sāmoa traditional” (Samoan dancing), “Tonga traditional dance” (Tongan dancing), “Otea Polynesia” (Tahitian dance, the ‘ōtea), and “Traditional Māori dance” (New Zealand Māori dance). Searches could also be done for Melanesian, Micronesian, or Australian (Aboriginal) dances. See also Gods and Goddesses, Tattoo, and Document 9.

Further Reading

Robert D. Craig

Dress

The warm and humid climate experienced by Oceanic peoples did not encourage their wearing of elaborate everyday clothing. In fact, many of them went totally nude while the rest wore as little as decorum would allow. When Western explorers first visited the Pacific islanders and indigenous Australians, most of them recorded that the people wore little or nothing at all. In the hot climate of northern Australia, for example, men and women worked throughout the day without clothing, but perhaps wearing only a few stringed armlets or necklaces. Explorers who visited the other areas of Oceania—Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia—also recorded on various occasions that men and women were “totally nude.” (What Europeans called nude in the eighteenth century, however, may not be exactly the same meaning as it is in our twenty-first century, but complete nudity in the area was possibly more common than has generally been assumed.)

Not all Oceanic peoples went totally nude, however. It appears that in many island groups at least a simple loincloth for men or perhaps a short skirt for women was the normal practice for everyday use. This type of clothing is

mentioned frequently in the ancient tales and legends that have survived into historic times (nineteenth century). Traditional loincloths were made from **tapa**, which, had been made by beating the inner barks of certain trees (the mulberry, hibiscus, and the **breadfruit**) into lengthy strips. A loincloth, for example, was a rectangular piece of tapa measuring about 1 foot wide by 3 to 4 yards in length. It was wrapped around the waist, down the back, up the front covering the genitals, and then tied-off in front (depending on direction of wrap). Any excess material could be formed so that it hung down in front and back very much like an apron, and the sides were generally open. (The traditional Japanese **fundoshi** is very similar to the loincloths worn in the Pacific.)

Women usually wore some type of pliable, woven mat tied around the waist and extending to various lengths. In the Marshall Islands (Micronesia), for example, women wore square mats woven from strips of the pandanus or coconut trees and decorated with various borders associated with their social rank. In Samoa and Tonga, women wore ti leaf skirts “sewn” together or finely woven mats that extended from the waist down below the knee and tied around the waist with a string or type of girdle. Tongan men as well wore similar types of mats over their loincloths (the working garment) when showing respect or in the presence of members of the upper class. Remnants of this type continue today in the form of the lava-lava worn in many of the Polynesian islands or the **sulu** in Fiji.

In New Zealand and Hawai‘i, where people experienced colder weather, warmer clothing had to be worn. Unlike the other Polynesians, the Māori made their common skirts from flax rather than tapa, and they were worn by both sexes. Hawaiians and Māori also fashioned elaborate cloaks that were worn in colder weather. Some of these were highly decorated and used only for ceremonial occasions. Simple cloaks were made of coarse fibers, tied around the neck, and rainproof. Longer ones were fastened at the shoulder with some sort of pin made of bone or wood. Ceremonial cloaks used by the high chiefs of Hawaiian were made from a woven base upon which intricate and colorful designs were created from various feathers, which had been plucked from native birds.

A unique form of “clothing” worn by several groups in western New Guinea was the male penis sheath (the **koteka** or **horim**). It was the ultimate in minimal clothing, because no other attire was worn. It consisted of a gourd that had been grown and shaped by various means into the form of a man’s genitals. It was dried and hollowed-out and then cords attached to it so that it could cover one’s private parts. It could be worn pointed straight up, out, or at various angles, depending upon the wearer’s preference and customs. The size, color, and decoration (painted or adorned with shells and feathers) could also differ from one cultural group to another.

Although everyday clothing was minimal and plain, the reverse was true of the highly decorated dress worn on ceremonial or special occasions. During those times, everyone would put on their best attire and add whatever colorful ornaments they could. The Hawaiian high **chiefs** and chiefesses would sport their colorful colored cloaks and headdresses. Others would wrap yards and yards of decorative tapa cloth around them, and then add intricately woven gorgets around their necks and heads. Darker-skinned Melanesians and Australians would add colored paints to their bodies to dramatize the particular occasion. They would carry their colorful shields and carved masks,
add enormous necklaces and arm bracelets, and don whatever else that might give enjoyment and dignity to the event. See also Tattoo.

**Further Reading**

Robert D. Craig

**Education**

In traditional societies in the South Pacific everyone in the community learned in formal and informal ways. Transmitting practical skills and their application was an ongoing part of a child’s socialization, along with learning the one or more community languages. Throughout a lifetime, the stories of legend and origin would be learned, along with specialty information imparted by an older relative or expert. Young men and women learned their gender-related roles in subsistence, through gardening, hunting, and fishing with their family. Women who marry into a community must learn the practical skills of homemaking, from basketwork and pottery to food preparation and child care. All children are taught basic first aid, including the leaves, seeds, barks, and flowers that held reduce fever or heal wounds. More serious medicines and sorcery skills would be taught to an exclusive few.

Formal education also predates European schooling in many Pacific Island societies. It is possible to say that ceremony is a version of formal education, however intermittent it may be. Children of all ages can be found participating in the dances and chants of public ceremonies, and where appropriate, the more restricted rituals of a clan or tribe. Perhaps the most organized form of education in the Pacific was male initiation, where men were segregated from female company, oftentimes in a men’s house, and systematically instructed on the genealogical, historical, and esoteric information required for being a full citizen of their community.

**Further Reading**

Nancy Sullivan

**El Niño/La Niña**

*El Niño* refers to the El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO), an ocean-atmosphere phenomenon that causes temperature fluctuations in the surface temperature of
the Pacific Ocean. Like its partner phenomenon, La Niña, which usually follows El Niño, this “little boy” (and “little girl”) in Spanish is named after the Christ child because it is known to arrive around Christmastime. Unlike the Christ child, however, these youngsters wreak havoc on Pacific agriculture, fisheries, and general well-being every two to eight years or so, causing floods, droughts, coral bleaching, fish losses, and the ramifications from these to the island populations. ENSO was first described by Sir Gilbert Thomas Walker in 1923 and must be taken into account by historians looking back at the migrations and production economies of Oceanic peoples during the Middle Ages.

El Niño begins when the tropical trade winds weaken, air pressure rises over the Indian Ocean and Indonesia, and warm surface water begins to travel eastward across the Pacific. This set of conditions dissipates the cooler Humboldt Current and causes air pressure to fall over Tahiti and the central and eastern Pacific islands. Ultimately, warm air rises in the east, near Peru, releasing vital rains to Peru’s deserts. As the warm water moves eastward across the Pacific, it takes the rain with it, leaving drought behind. Cooler water begins to upwell in the western Pacific, and because it fails to evaporate quickly, the rains do not come, causing drought and other weather disturbances throughout the western Pacific.

The La Niña phase of the phenomenon may have been dominant until recently, as winds blew westwards across the Pacific accumulating warm surface waters off the north of Australia, the Torres Straits, and New Guinea. The cold Humboldt or Peru Current then surfaces off the Pacific Coast of South America and feeds nutrients to the all-important local fisheries, called acho-vetta. La Niña often follows El Niño, especially when the El Niño effect has been particularly strong.

Further Reading

Nancy Sullivan

**Entertainment and Recreation**

Entertainment in ancient Oceania consisted of the simplest forms of amusement by children to the complex and intricate performances by their parents of music, dance, storytelling, and even skilled sporting events that often resembled Roman gladiator fights.

Most Pacific peoples treated their children with great affection, and they spent much of their preadolescent lives playing games that increased their particular skills. Boys practiced throwing spears, darts, or even boomerangs, while young girls imitated their mothers in beating tapa or digging out grubs and lizards in the wild with their small digging sticks. They would run, jump, swim, wrestle, roll in the sand, play in the trees, and otherwise pass their early days entertaining themselves.

One fascinating game they played was “string figures” or “cat’s cradles,” a form of entertainment commonly found elsewhere in the world. The game
was played with a closed loop of string, made of plaited hair or coconut fibers, and with their fingers and sometimes their toes and teeth, the children created intricate geometric patterns that resembled something from their environment: stars, constellations, animals, birds, and so forth. Complex patterns required a certain amount of dexterity, especially when two players competed to finish a certain figure. Some figures required two players, while others proceeded from one to another in a long, continuous display of different forms.

In Tonga, young girls juggled small, round gourds or wooden balls in a competition to see which one could manage the greatest number and keep them aloft the longest. (The number often ran from six to ten.) Juggling was often accompanied by singing and dancing, which helped the girls keep time in passing the balls from one hand to another.

Because water played a paramount role in the lives of the islanders, it is not surprising that the ocean provided them with a constant source of pleasure. Body surfing was a sport that required no paraphernalia. Surfers would swim (or more often tread) out to the breaking waves, and when a suitable wave rolled in, they would push off with one hand in front and “ride” the wave as far as they could—often until their stomachs grazed the sandy bottom of the shore. When the waves were just right, a ride could last for many seconds, and when the waves were substantially brisk, a ride could be downright exhilarating. Another water sport was underwater “football.” This took place in water from 4 to 10 feet deep. Two wooden posts were pounded into the sand under water from 140 to 300 feet apart. Midway between them was placed a heavy stone. Two teams were formed, consisting of both of men and women, and the object of the game was for one team to move the stone to their goal line and score a victory. The contestants could either “run” under water or swim with the stone, but of course, when they surfaced to breathe, one of their team members had to dive down and continue their push to the goal line. All the while, members of the opposing team were attempting to get the stone and thwart their rivals.

Surfing the waves with some sort of a wooden board, of course, was another popular water activity. Although practiced anciently in several places of the world, it probably reached its highest fervor in the Pacific islands and especially in Hawai‘i. Although it appealed to all levels of society—including men, women, and children—only members of the chiefly class could surf the “long boards” and ride the best waves. The resurgence of interest in the sport in Hawai‘i during the last 50 years of the twentieth century has lead to its becoming one of world’s most popular sports.

Adult men practiced their spear throwing in several games. In one, a soft piece of wood (or an unhusked coconut) would be affixed to the top of a 6-foot, vertical pole. From a set distance, the teams would take turns throwing spears at the wood. The team that hit the target the most won the competition. Bare-knuckle boxing and wrestling were enjoyed by men and women (competing separately) and were performed before a large audience that sat around in a large circle. The first player knocked to the ground ended the match. But the loser’s place was often taken up by another opponent who rose up from the audience. Wrestling, boxing, and mock-fighting matches as well as foot races routinely took place between villages to the enjoyment of all. (Ancient Hawaiians also had a notorious passion for betting on these types of competitive games.)
Although considered a less vigorous sport, music, and dance, however, often provided more of a physical workout than one might assume. Some men’s fast-paced dance steps, for example, were practiced to help them with their fighting dexterity. Women’s stick dances provided training in protecting themselves, while other dances increased their graceful movements.

Storytelling at night around the fire provided entertainment for all. Because Pacific peoples had no written language, almost every village had a long tradition of storytelling. Usually, designated individuals within the community were trained in this tradition. They learned their stories, mythologies, and genealogies from their predecessor and would then present them at various times during the year. Many of these stories took the form of chants that extolled the virtues of their ancestors, told the stories of the creation of the heavens and earth, and in some cases, the migration of their forefathers from a mystical homeland (called Hawaiki). Some tales, we are told, were so long that it took several evenings to complete. Many of them have survived into the modern period and now provide contemporary scholars and authors with important data to help describe how these ancient peoples lived. See also Musical Instruments.

Further Reading
Maude, H. C., and H. E. Maude. String Figures from the Gilbert Islands. Wellington, New Zealand: Polynesian Society, 1958. (Professor Maude has published numerous monographs on string figures from Oceania.)

Robert D. Craig

Food

Until the arrival of Europeans in modern times, Oceanic peoples lived in highly sophisticated, Neolithic societies and depended upon subsistence food gathering, hunting, and gardening for their nourishment. Their environment determined to a great extent the types and amounts of food that could be obtained. The high volcanic islands of Oceania, for example, provided a much richer soil in which food plants could be cultivated and harvested compared to low-lying atolls. But even then, islanders on atolls turned to garden production to help provide for their daily sustenance. The Australian continent provided far greater possibilities for gardening, but surprisingly, the vast majority of the Indigenous Australians led a nomadic life of hunting and gathering for their food. Islands, of course, limited any type of nomadic existence—on some islands, for example, a person could walk around the entire parameter in a few hours’ time. Geography, therefore, forced islanders to settle down and turn to garden production. Climatic differences also helped to determine what foods were available to both groups, and, therefore, there existed a wide variety of foods that were eaten by Oceanic peoples.
Like many other Pacific peoples, the Indigenous Australians spent most of their energy in seeking their daily food needs, and this work was generally divided between the sexes. Men excelled in hunting and fishing (along the coast), and they provided the meat (or fish) to augment the vegetable foods gathered by the women and children. The vast Australian continent provided such animals as kangaroos, emus, possums, large goannas (Australian monitor lizards), wombats, and snakes. Birds could be caught by throwing clubs (boomerangs, for example) at a flock or by nets. Fish were harpooned or caught in traps. Australian men were highly skilled in tracking and hunting animals, sometimes for long lengths of time before finally making the kill.

Women, on the other hand, stayed near their campsites and were food collectors, usually providing the larger portion of their daily rations. They usually scanned the surrounding areas looking for snakes, lizards, honey ants, small marsupials, witchetty grub larvae, and bird eggs. They dug up various roots and yams and collected grass seeds for making a type of bread. They, too, were the ones who prepared and cooked the food (as opposed to some other Pacific island cultures in which the men did the cooking). The main meal of the day was usually in the evening when the day’s food had been gathered. A small depression in the earth was dug out and a fire built. Seeds were ground between stones, mixed with water, and then formed into a flat, oval cake and cooked over the hot ashes. Once the fire had died down, the various animals and vegetables would be placed in the hole and covered (“sealed”) with leaves and parts of the hot ashes. Sometimes heated stones were added to the underground oven. After a length of time, the oven would be opened, food extracted and divided between family members. Fruit and berries that had been gathered during the day might supplement the evening meal, and any leftovers would provide food the next morning.

Like the Indigenous Australians, Pacific islanders spent most of their days gathering food for their primary meal, usually eaten late afternoon, but in addition to hunting and gathering wild animals and plant foods, islanders also raised domesticated animals and grew crops in and around their home sites. (Time spent in hunting and gathering as versus growing and raising of crops, of course, depended a great deal on the fertility of their lands.) Besides wild animals and plants, islanders’ domesticated animals consisted of chickens, dogs, and pigs (not in Micronesia), and their cultivated food plants consisted of coconuts, bananas, breadfruit, taro, yams, arrowroot, pandanus, sago palm, and rice (found only in the Mariana Islands of Micronesia). Often complex social restrictions (tapu) dominated the cultivation and eating of these foods. In some places, for example, women could only grow wet taro while the men cultivated the dry. In some areas, women could not participate in fishing and hunting or even touch their husband’s implements. Some Polynesian men ate food prepared only by themselves, and in the New Guinea highlands, the men and older boys ate in their separate male-only houses.

Although food pieces could be thrown onto an open fire for cooking, usually food was either broiled (in clay pots where available or in coconut shells into which hot stones were placed) or baked, usually in an underground oven. These “ovens” ranged in size from 1 to 2 feet deep and 5 to 6 feet wide, depending upon the quantity of food being cooked. Once dug, these ovens were used over and over again. Firewood and stones were arranged in the pit and the wood set on fire. The stones were turned frequently to get them evenly
heated. Then leaves (often banana leaves) were placed over the stones and the various foods (wrapped or unwrapped) were placed at strategic spots on top of the leaves. More leaves and sand or soil were added to create a type of giant steam oven, which cooked the food and prevented its moisture from escaping. When finally uncovered, the food was then served on leaves from the banana or ti plants, accompanied with either fresh or seawater (for its salt content). Cooked taro and breadfruit could often be eaten as it was prepared in chunks, or it could further be mashed with a small amount of water into what was called in Hawai‘i “poi” or in Tahiti “po‘e.” Coconut cream provided a rich sauce that could be mixed with pork or fish or cooked with leaves from the taro plant (like a creamed spinach). In some areas of the Pacific kava was drunk with meals. It was made from mashed roots of the *Piper methysticum* plant and mixed with water (as one would make tea). It had a type of stupor effect if drunk in excess. See also Document 8.

**Further Reading**


*Robert D. Craig*

**Gods and Goddesses**

The animistic religions of ancient Oceania gave rise to the worship of a multitude of gods and goddesses. Isolated one from another for centuries, these island peoples developed a wide variety of different deities, very much like their individual, rich cultures. Legends of their gods and goddesses became a dominant part of their lives, and these stories developed into some of the most fascinating and elaborate mythologies in all of world history.

Indigenous Australians developed a widespread belief in a supernatural Rainbow Serpent who was creator and destroyer, associated with water in all forms, and often appeared in the form of a rainbow. It was worshipped under various names, such as Kanmare, Andrenjinyi, Julunggul, Ngalyod, and Yhi (some gods, other goddesses). Originally, they say, it emerged from the dark streaks of the Milky Way and slithered down to earth to roam through the mountains and valleys (which it created) as a benevolent protector and a malevolent punisher of those who broke the law. Another god was Altjira, or Sky-Father of the Alchera (Dreamtime), who created the earth but then returned to the upper limits of the sky where he no longer involves himself in the mundane affairs of humans. A similar god

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Statue of Pele, the Hawaiian fire goddess. Hawaii, 17th–18th century. Wood and hair. Werner Forman/Art Resource, NY.
was Bunjil, a creator god among the Kulin and Wurunjerri peoples, who formed humans and taught them how to live, but then left them to live in the heavens, very much like Altjira. The formidable goddess Eingena, primordial mother and creator of the world, once became pregnant but had no way of allowing her new life to escape from her body. God Barraiya conceived a plan that would help her. He simply slit an opening in the lower part of her body through which her vast creation emerged. Eingena, they say, continues to live in Dreamtime, often awakening and continuing her creation. It is believed she holds a thread attached to all newly born humans, and when she lets go of the thread, they die.

Among the Pacific islanders, Micronesian mythology has been the least researched. These islands were the first to be visited by Western explorers in the early modern era, and their immediate conversion to Christianity (primarily Catholicism) destroyed much of their rich heritage. Their extant stories, however, tell of male and female creators, but the latter is more predominant. Ligoupup, for example, was the great creator goddess among the Caroline Islanders. She created the heavens and earth and then made her home at the bottom of the ocean. As she moved and turned, her movements caused earthquakes aboveground. Her son became the ruler of the underworld. Her daughter married sky-father and the two gave birth to Aluelp, the possessor of all knowledge. Among the Marshallese, the great creator god was Loa (Lowa), and similar to Ligoupup, he lived under the sea. After creating the beautiful reefs and atolls, he created the first man (Walleb) and woman (Limdunanji).

Melanesian peoples were much more interested in rituals than they were with their gods. They believed that all unusual phenomenon resulted from the works of sorcery (magic) or the action of spirits rather than the gods. Certain gods, of course, were associated with specific activities and might have to be petitioned to undo certain spells, but they were generally felt to be too remote to affect human affairs. For that reason, Melanesian deities were less known and developed than elsewhere in the Pacific. One story among several Melanesian tribes tells of two brother gods whose adventures are noteworthy. One brother (To Kabinana) created all that was good and another (To Karvuvu) all that was wrong. In Vanuatu, the god Qat created everything important in the world, including humans, to the displeasure of his eleven brothers. Another widespread cultural hero was Sido (Sosom, Souw, Hido, Iko), whose sexual lust incensed his young female friend so much that in shame he fled to the mountains and in revenge showered everything evil upon the earth. Eventually, he turned himself into a monstrous pig whose body provided the inspiration for building the unique “great houses” in which Melanesian tribes lived.

Pigs (called Marunogere) were widely worshiped as well as snakes (Randalo, Hatuibwari, and Agunua), sharks, dogs, and hawks.

The Polynesians, however, created the most elaborate and homogeneous pantheon of gods of any Oceanic peoples. Surviving chants are measured in thousands of lines, and some take several days to relate. Their creation stories tell of the great god Ta’aroa (Kanaloa, Tagaloa) who arose from his long sleep from a seashell and began the act of creation. From the top of his shell, he created the heavens and from the bottom the earth. He created fellow gods and goddesses who dwelt with him in the darkness until the shells were separated
and the heavens were propped up on pillars. The first man (Ti’i or Kiki) was created followed by his female companion Hina (Sina). Other powerful Polynesian deities include Tū (Kū), a god of creation and of war; Kāne (Tāne), a god of creation and of light; and Rongo (Lono), one of Hawai’i’s three major gods and also the name of an important son of the Māori sky father (Rangi) and earth mother (Papa). Although Hina (Sina, Ina) was the most popular Polynesian goddesses (she lived in the moon and was the goddess of tapa beating), it was the volcano goddess Pele that sparked the most veneration in the Hawaiian Islands. The demigods and heroes of ancient Polynesia were equally as popular. The exploits of Māui are legend and are found throughout Polynesia. Tinirau (Kinilau) became the romantic hero and god of the oceans. Tahaki (Kahai’i) was the perfect chief, and Rata (Laka) was the irreverent vagabond. Details of all of these Pacific deities can be found in the books listed below. See also Melanesia and Micronesia.

Further Reading

Initiation (Melanesia)

Rarely do women in Melanesia undergo any formal initiation. But boys all across Melanesia become men through a period of separation from women and specialized instruction. The ideas behind initiation are simple. Women have the power to create people, but only men can create men. Whereas girls come to adulthood unproblematically, boys must become men through a combination of biological and psychological transformations. Some time in adolescence, boys are taken away from their mothers and sisters to sleep in the men’s house and, eventually, to enter seclusion in the spirit house. They must avoid women’s blood and bodily secretions, as well as their charms, because these nurturing elements can threaten their masculinity. Most initiation practices require the expelling of a mother’s postpartum blood, by skin cutting, cutting the tip of one’s penis, nose bleeding, vomiting blood, or shoving bamboo reeds down one’s throat until it bleeds. Pain and fear are transformational. Usually it is the maternal uncle (in an otherwise tender relationship) who inflicts them. When the mother’s blood is spilled it thus goes back to her line through this uncle.
Before European contact, up through the Middle Ages, a handful of New Guinea societies—along the rivers on the south coast, in the Papuan Plateau and Western Province of Papua New Guinea—would complement the initiatory spilling of mother’s blood with the consumption of paternal semen. Boys would be invested with clan powers through the life-giving substance of semen during what are called “ritual homosexual” practices with clan elders. Rid of women’s fluids, purified by special diets and filled with this masculine essence, the young men would then be ready to fight in battle and to face the more sustained dangers to their being: marriage and marital relations.

Fears of female pollution are even more widespread than ritual initiation practices. In the Southern Highlands of New Guinea, where Huli men marry across enemy lines, they so fear deliberate sabotage by their wives that they take the precaution of cooking their own food. It is thought that women’s secretions will sap men’s power. Moreover, in-married women are thought to gradually shift loyalties to their husband’s clan by repeatedly taking in his semen. By the time she reaches menopause, a woman’s biological danger has been neutralized, and her fidelity is rewarded by the cessation of menstrual blood. Like her son, she has become indebted to her husband’s line for the gift of its semen and its socializing powers.

These ideas about pollution and the “wildness” of women by contrast to the “tameness” of initiated men are part of even more widespread beliefs regarding the origin of reproductive power. In places all over Melanesia (and Oceania generally) people say that it was men who originally gave birth to children and women who socialized them. In the Karawari region of the Sepik River, for example, they say that the women were so exhausted after a long series of rituals that they went home to sleep; that’s when the men snuck into the spirit house and stole the sacred flutes and thereby reclaimed their power of “making” men.

Further Reading

Nancy Sullivan

Island Groups

Although some thirty-thousand islands lie within the bounds of the Pacific Ocean, most of them were unknown to Europeans and Asians until well into
modern times. Some archeologists theorize, however, that Chinese junks may have made their way across the Pacific during medieval times, but there is little evidence to substantiate their claims. Even the Europeans did not know the Pacific Ocean existed until its “discovery” by Balboa in 1513. After that, of course, competition between the Spaniards, Portuguese, Dutch, French, and British gave rise to the whole Pacific being “discovered” and mapped by 1790 (with special thanks to Captain James Cook in the 1770s). They were subsequently categorized into three main island groups that today often make little or no sense, but it is that grouping of Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia that allows scholars a convenient system to study and describe these island peoples.

**Melanesia**

Melanesia consists of New Guinea (the second largest island in the world), the Admiralty Islands, and the Bismarck and Louisiade archipelagoes; the Solomon Islands and Santa Cruz Islands; New Caledonia and the Loyalty Islands; Vanuatu (formerly the New Hebrides); Fiji, and numerous other small islands lying to the north and northeast of Australia. The peoples that inhabit these islands created some of the most diverse and complex cultures in the whole world.

**New Guinea**

New Guinea, with its surrounding islands of Bougainville, the Louisiade Archipelago, and New Britain, was one of the first areas of Oceania to be settled. Papuan peoples first moved into the island over 40,000 years ago and by 10,000 years ago had created one of the first cultures in the world to establish sedentary communities, grow crops, and domesticate animals (especially pigs). Austronesian-speaking peoples arrived about 3,500 years ago, bringing with them additional skills, including pottery making and ocean navigation (see Voyaging/Ancient Navigation). This mixture of different peoples led to the great diversity in languages (over one thousand) and cultures that characterized later Papuan history. House styles varied from small lean-tos to the grand-haus tambaran (worship and meeting houses) of the Sepik peoples with their sweeping front gables and low backs. In some highland communities, village leadership was attained by a bigman who competed with rivals in lavish feast offerings and gift-giving for social advancement, while in other areas, chieftainship was inherited either through one’s mother (matrilineal) or father (patrilineal). Complex trade and ceremonial cycles (kula) characterized the southeastern islands, but in most areas there was little support of anyone outside their own descent groups and villages. The remoteness of some New Guinean villages has allowed a few Melanesian cultures to survive into modern times, and there, in fact, still several uncontacted tribes living in central New Guinea.

**New Caledonia**

The long, thin island of New Caledonia lies directly east of Australia and south of the Solomon Islands. It was first inhabited over 3,000 years ago by Austronesia peoples, who divided their communities into families, clans, and tribes, all of whom claimed descent from a common ancestor. Tribal chiefs were
considered representatives of their ancestors and, therefore, performed duties as chief priest. He lived in a unique conical house that also served as a place for tribal meetings and ceremonies.

**Solomon Islands and Santa Cruz Islands**
The Solomon Islands and Santa Cruz Islands consist of six large, mountainous islands of volcanic origin located directly east of Papua New Guinea. The first inhabitants arrived here about 10,000 years ago, and then about 4,000 years ago, Austronesian peoples arrived bringing their more advanced farming techniques, their food plants, and domesticated chickens, dogs, and pigs. They developed matrilineal and patrilineal descent groups. Villages averaged about one hundred to two hundred people, and their wood carvings, canoe making, and other crafts were highly developed. Large-scale warfare and head hunting took place frequently, and they believed in a world of spirits, ghosts, sorcery, and magic.

**Vanuatu**
Vanuatu, formerly called the New Hebrides, consists of about eighty-two islands lying in a “V” shape configuration northeast of New Caledonia and south of the Santa Cruz Islands. They were populated at least before 3000 B.C.E. by several different Pacific migrations. The various clans lived in small autonomous villages that remained hostile one to another. Chiefs emerged as bigmen, who had outstripped their rivals in competing village feasts. Wives were considered property and could be traded between villages. Cannibal raids by one village upon another prevented anyone from wandering too far from his home village. Their religion was animistic, and magic was used to control the ever-present spirits.

**Fiji Islands**
During the medieval period, the inhabitants of the Fiji Islands developed one of the highest material cultures in the Pacific. Although there are over three hundred islands in the group, the two largest volcanic islands (Viti Levu and Vanua Levu) were more densely populated and provided a wide variety of agriculture and village development. According to Fijian legend, the great chief Lutunasobasoba led his people across the seas to the new land of Fiji, where they mixed with their neighbors, the Polynesians (Tongans and Samoans), to produce a rich and vibrant medieval culture. Their large, ocean-going, double-hulled canoes were one of their legacies passed on to the migrating Polynesians, who passed through their group.

**Micronesia**
Micronesia comprises 2,106 islands, stretching across the northwestern Pacific Ocean, and includes the Caroline Islands (with its five districts of Kosrae, Ponape, Truk, Yap, and Palau), the Marshall Islands, the Mariana Islands (together with Guam), and Kiribati (formerly the Gilbert Islands). The western islands (Palau, Mariana Islands, and Yap) apparently were first settled about 1500 B.C.E. from people coming from Indonesia and the Philippines. The rest of the islands were settled by peoples sailing north from the Gilbert Islands, on to the Marshalls, and then westward across to Palau.
Marshall Islands

The Marshall Islands consist of five isolated islands and twenty-nine atolls, and although they are scattered over 230,000 square miles, the culture of the islanders was very much alike. Like other Micronesians, the Marshallese recognized matrilineal descent groups. Each lineage had its own headman (male or female), and land could be inherited by male and female children. In other areas of the Marshalls, a paramount chief could gain dominance over several atolls by warfare or its threat and exact tribute (mats, sennit, various forms of food, etc.) from their inhabitants. Frequent sailing between the islands led to the Marshallese to become expert canoe builders and seamen. They navigated the area by the use of stick and shell charts that approximated the relation of the islands one to another and showed sea swells that could influence their navigation.

Caroline Islands

The Caroline Islands consist of approximately five hundred coral atolls that stretch just east of the Philippines and north of New Guinea. Navigation was highly developed here as it was in the Marshall Islands, and their ocean-going canoes were built of irregular planks that were caulked and sewn together with coconut-made sennit (rope). Hereditary chiefs were recognized, but in general they were more egalitarian and worked for a living like everyone else. Their primary function was to preside over community meetings. Yap was perhaps an exception with its highly structured caste system that ranked chiefs as well as villages. Chiefs presided over what is often referred to as a Yap Empire, which stretched 700 miles east of the island and demanded tribute from their subordinate islands. Palauans were especially noted for the construction of their elaborate men’s clubhouses, where they spent a good deal of their time.

Mariana Islands

The Mariana Islands (including Guam) stretch 1,565 miles southeast of Japan. The islands are actually the fertile tops of a submerged mountain chain rather than coral atolls found elsewhere in Micronesia. The native peoples are called Chamorros, and they most likely originated from the Philippines or Southeast Asia before 1527 B.C.E. The first settlers brought rice with them, and these islands were the only place in Oceania where it was produced before pre-European contact. Chamorros recognized matrilineal descent but recognized clans and lineages. They lived in nucleated villages, some of which included very impressive, large stone foundation columns (latte). The rapid destruction of their ancient culture by European explorers in early modern times limits our knowledge of their medieval past.

Gilbert Islands

The Gilbert Islands consist of a chain of sixteen atolls and coral islands stretching across the equator at 175 degrees east longitude and today make up part of the Republic of Kiribati (created in 1979). Culturally, the Gilbertese were basically Micronesian, but they were also highly influenced by their Polynesian neighbors to the south, possibly by immigrants from Samoa.

Polynesia

Polynesia comprises the modern states of Tonga, Samoa, French Polynesia (Marquesas Islands, Society Islands, Austral Islands, Tuamotu Archipelago,
and Gambier Islands), Cook Islands, Hawai‘i, New Zealand, Tokelau, Tuvalu, and Easter Island, plus nineteen small “outlier” islands located in the cultural areas of Micronesia and Melanesia.

**Tonga**
Tonga was the first group of the Polynesian Islands to be settled in ancient times, sometime around 1300 B.C.E., by settlers from eastern Melanesia to the west. Tonga’s 172 low islands lie in the tropics between 15 and 23 degrees south latitude and are divided into three main groups: Tongatapu, Vava‘u, and Ha’apai. Early Tongans developed a “classical” Polynesian culture based on chiefs and a paramount ruler called the Tu‘i Tonga (“King” of Tonga). The 11th Tu‘i Tonga, Tuitātui (c. 1200) supposedly built the great stone monument, the Ha‘amonga-a-Māui, near the modern town of Nuku‘olofa. Throughout the Middle Ages, Tonga had intermittent contacts with Samoa and Fiji (a Melanesian island group lying to the southwest).

**Samoa**
Culturally, Samoa consists of the two large islands of Savai‘i and ‘Upolu as well as the six islands that currently make up American Samoa, a U.S. territory: Tutuila, Ta‘ū, Olosega, Ofu, ‘Aunu‘u, and Rose Island. The islands lie in the South Pacific at a latitude of 14 degrees south and longitude 168 to 171 degrees west. These high volcanic islands sustain a wide variety of tropical flora, including taro, coconut palm, and breadfruit along their coasts. The highest mountain peak is mount Matafao, at 2,303 feet. The islands were first settled by Austronesian-speaking peoples (Polynesians) who came from the area of Tonga about 1000 B.C.E., and in ancient times, the islands had occasional contact with Tonga and Fiji.

**French Polynesia**
French Polynesia is a modern political designation that includes the Marquesas Islands, the Society Islands, Austral Islands, Gambier Islands, and the Tuamotu Archipelago, all lying in the southeast Pacific Ocean. These 130 islands range in size from the high volcanic mountains of Tahiti (Mt. ‘Orohena at 7,333 feet high) and the Marquesas to the small, low-lying atolls that make up the Tuamotu Archipelago. According to scholars, the Marquesas were first settled by Samoan explorers about 200 C.E., and from there, these “central Polynesian” peoples pushed out and settled the Society Islands (450 C.E.), Hawai‘i (650 C.E.), Easter Island (700 C.E.), New Zealand (900 C.E.), and their surrounding islands and inhabitable atolls. Rā‘iātea, an island in the Society Group, was anciently regarded as the most sacred in all of eastern Polynesia, and it is said that annual tribute was sent to its priests from islands as far away as New Zealand.

**Cook Islands**
The Cook Islands, consisting of thirteen inhabited and two uninhabited islands, are located between Samoa to the west and French Polynesia to the east. The islands range in height from the high mountains on Rarotonga to the flat surface of the Takutea atoll. Oral traditions maintain that the islands were settled from Samoa by the warrior Karika and from Tahiti by the warrior Tangi‘ia, probably before 950 C.E. The islanders developed a traditional-styled Polynesian culture with each island being independent and separate from one another until modern times.
Hawai‘i
Hawai‘i, a collection of eight major islands and 124 minor islands in the North Pacific Ocean, was apparently settled twice in medieval times—once from the Marquesas Islands about 650 C.E. and then another from Tahiti or its surrounding islands about 1200. Both are over 2,000 miles to the south of Hawai‘i. These early settlers set sail in their double-hulled, ocean-going canoes and brought with them their animals, plants, and eastern Polynesian culture, and during the next 600 years, they established a complex society based upon subsistence agriculture and fishing.

New Zealand
Traditional stories from New Zealand tell the epic history of the first migrations of the Polynesians to these islands from a distant homeland called Hawai‘i (traditionally dated about 925 C.E.). The great chiefs Kupe and Ngāte and their fishing crews followed a great octopus from Hawai‘i to a strange, new land they named Aotearoa (Long-White-Cloud). Returning to Hawai‘i, they informed their friends and family, whereupon, Kupe’s young brother-in-law, Turi, gathered his family and provisions and in his mighty canoe, the Aotea, set sail for the new land. Once there, they settled the islands, and their descendants became known as the Māori of New Zealand. The island group consists of two major islands—North Island and South Island—and numerous smaller islands. South Island’s massive mountain chain has been nicknamed the “Alps of the Pacific,” and its climate is temperate rather than tropical as the other Polynesian islands.

Easter Island
Easter Island, known also by its Polynesian name Rapanui, lies isolated in the southeastern Pacific and is considered the most remote island in the world. Traditions ascribe the first settlers to Hotu Matu’a and his followers, who arrived about 450 C.E., and to another group of immigrants, who arrived sometime after, both of whom became bitter rivals throughout their history. Despite the rivalry, however, the islanders created an advanced Neolithic culture over the years that produce two unique contributions—a type of written script called kōhau rongorongo and the carving of thousands of stone structures (ahu) and monolithic statues (moai)—not equaled by any other Pacific peoples.

Tuvalu and Tokelau
Tuvalu and Tokelau are two groups of small islands and atolls that lie north of Fiji and Tonga. They were originally settled by Samoan immigrants, and Tuvalu also may have been settled by drifting canoes from Micronesia and Tonga.

Further Reading

Robert D. Craig
Kava

Kava (‘awa in Hawaiian) is a nonalcoholic drink consumed throughout most of Polynesia (except Easter Island and New Zealand), Melanesia, New Guinea, and parts of Micronesia (Ponape and Kosrae in the eastern Caroline Islands). Drinking of kava results in a type of euphoria or well-being feeling, and when drunk to excess, it results in immobilization or deep sleep. The drink is prepared by pulverizing (chewing or pounding) the roots of the Piper methysticum (pepper plant), mixing it with water, and then straining it through a sieve, usually made from the inner fibers of the coconut.

In the western Polynesian Islands of Samoa and Tonga and in Fiji (Melanesia), the drink is associated with important ceremonial occasions where chiefs attend and where it becomes an important ritual with its strict rules of preparation and proper serving protocols. In ancient Samoa, for example, preparing ceremonial kava was generally the responsibility of the chief’s daughter, the taupou, and she was accompanied by several other young girls, the ’aumaga, the official kava chewers. After all the important chiefs had been seated, a designated talking chief would begin the ceremony by calling forth kava roots from the community. Several young boys appeared with the best roots they could find, the largest and best, of course, being designated for the highest chief among the assembled body. The speaker then called forth the taupou and her assistants to prepare the ceremonial drink.

The cleaned kava pieces were brought forth, the girls washed their hands, and then masticated the roots by chewing and placing them in a large kava bowl. A young boy added water to the preparation while the taupou mixed, strained, and squeezed the juices out of the kava roots. The process continued until the kava was well prepared. The taupou would then clap her hands and announce that the kava was ready to be served, whereupon the chief called for its distribution. The kava was then served individually (usually in a coconut shell) to the seated chiefs in order of their rank, the presiding high chief, of course, being served first. Often, the orator announced the chief’s name and rank as they were being served. After everyone had been served, then the kava ceremony ended and the official discussion of business began. In other areas of Polynesia, however, the drink carried no particular significance and could be drunk at any time of the day, and in parts of Melanesia, it was used to communicate with the supernatural world of one’s ancestors. See also Betel Chewing and Gods and Goddesses.

Further Reading

Robert D. Craig
Kula

During medieval times, Oceanic people essentially lived in Neolithic societies and had no money economy like what was found in Western Europe and Asia. What little trading was done was essentially bartering in kind, and this was confined largely to Melanesia and parts of Micronesia (see Yap Empire). One particularly unique gift exchange or barter that merits attention, however, was called the Kula, Kula Exchange, or Kula Ring. It existed among the various small islands off the southeast coast of Papua New Guinea (Melanesia), and the custom has continued down into modern times. Anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) first wrote extensively about it in the 1920s.

Essentially, it was a complex system of exchanging two types of kula articles—red shell and bead necklaces (soulava) and white shell arm bracelets (muwali)—not for commodities or goods, but for one another in a traditional trade route. The necklaces were traded only clockwise and the bracelets counterclockwise in a trade route that extended over hundreds of miles in circumference between the numerous islands found in this geographical area. Every act performed in the kula exchange was regulated by traditional rules, customs, and conventions, all of which were often performed with elaborate rituals and ceremonies. Only a limited number of men actually participated in the ceremony, but it tended to link tribes one to another in permanent and lifelong alliances.

Kula articles were “traded” only between established partners, some living on islands as far away as one hundred miles, while others were traded between partners on the same island. The trade was for nothing more than the intrinsic value placed upon the particular kula articles. Their value was determined by their size, age, craftsmanship, history, and prestige rather than by their actual consumable value. Extraordinary kula were highly prized, but ownership might only last a few minutes to a year before tradition maintained that they be “traded” again. Meeting one’s kula exchange partner may take a canoe voyage of one hundred miles or more. In this case, the partner might be accompanied by dozens of other interrelated traders in ocean-going canoes who would transport consumable products to be exchanged among the tribal leaders at the other end. This way, ordinary bartering of commodities between island groups was facilitated, and a brisk trade and often friendly alliances between groups sometimes developed. But these exchanges were regarded as only secondary to the main purpose of the expedition, which was, of course, was the exchange of the kula.

Most men had several kula partners living in various directions, but at least one clockwise of him and the other counterclockwise, and kula articles were traded from one hand to another. Membership to the kula came only through inheritance through a matrilineal succession (from mother’s brother to mother’s son), although evidence shows that on rare occasions an affluent man might be able to “buy” his way in. The whole purpose, of course, was to give pleasure and prestige of ownership (albeit for a while) of a revered kula to a particular partner.

The origin of this unique and complex custom is unknown. It may have emerged, perhaps, in reciprocal gift exchanges and mutual alliances made
after warfare and then developed over the years into this distinctive cultural phenomenon that provided peace, protection, and hospitality between partnered groups. See also Markets/Trade.

Further Reading

Robert D. Craig

Languages

Oceania, and specifically Melanesia, is home to roughly one-fifth of the world’s languages. Fewer than five million people in Papua New Guinea alone speak nearly eight hundred distinct languages in this, the most linguistically diverse region of the world. It is the cultural doppelganger of Melanesia’s vast biodiversity. Although there are large language groups of roughly thirty-thousand speakers, most languages are spoken by fewer than one thousand people, and one-third have fewer than five hundred speakers. Some languages are spoken by barely one hundred speakers, and even then there may be special dialects within it spoken by women or men. Today, when more and more people are leaving the village for town, these local vernaculars are rapidly being lost. When mothers start teaching their children English or Pidgin instead of local languages, it is the beginning of the end for a vernacular. And with it goes local ideas, customs, histories, even taxonomies of local flora and fauna, because all these may be locked in a local language where they simply do not exist in English or Pidgin.

But before Europeans, and before the (relatively recent) invention of Pidgins and Bislama as lingua franca, Melanesia was a hothouse of linguistic diversity. The extent of this actually stumped some of the earliest linguists to the region. It has been thought, for example, that people who traveled and traded with each other for hundreds and even thousands of years would eventually speak a common tongue, their languages bleeding and converging over time. Not so in Melanesia. In the most highly trafficked and traded area of Papua New Guinea, for example, along the Sepik River, there are more languages per capita than anywhere else. On the other hand, it was thought that isolated pockets of people would develop dialectical variations, one language eventually breaking down into several. Again, the opposite is true in Melanesia. In Enga Province (Papua New Guinea), where rugged mountains and warfare kept neighboring villages apart for generations, more people (thirty thousand) speak one language than anywhere else in Papua New Guinea. So it seems interaction does not always lead to language pooling, and isolation doesn’t always lead to linguistic diversity.

People along the Sepik River have held onto their languages through conquest, migration, trade, and even depopulation. Wherever language is valued, wherever the unique information locked in a language is considered a valuable commodity, people will continue speaking it. In the Sepik region, knowledge is wealth, and ritual information, clan esoterica, genealogies, and technical
knowledge are customarily traded along with fish, sago, shells, and pots. People have sustained distinct languages as a way of marking group identity, and hierarchy between and within groups. Some language groups are even subdivided by men’s and women’s dialects, or special oratorical registers for initiated men only.

In Enga Province, and throughout the New Guinea Highlands, it is material wealth that counts. The individual bigman (or woman) gains prominence through coercion and charm and by sponsoring traditional wealth exchanges. What matters is the political ability to convince as many others as possible that their interests are the same as yours. Bigmen pool tribal wealth for their own purposes, and their personal success often reflects upon the entire community. All this is made possible by the use of one common language, rather than the mutual intelligibility of many. See also Markets/Trade.

Further Reading

Lapita

The term lapita essentially refers to a distinctive form of ancient pottery found on beach sites in southwest Oceania—Melanesia and western Polynesia—and to the Austronesian culture that developed it. Ancient lapita potsherds were first found in New Britain (Melanesia) by Father Meyer, a Catholic missionary, in 1909 and by other researchers later in the twentieth century. Lapita pottery is distinguished by its unique decorative motifs, which were stamped or incised into the pot’s soft clay with various types of wood or bamboo instruments. Its wide variety of motifs includes geometric patterns as well as human-type faces. Lapita pottery fragments have been found in the Melanesian islands of New Britain and New Guinea in the west to the Polynesian islands of Tonga and Samoa in the east. The importance of the discovery of these fragments has gained substance in the last half of the twentieth century for they have helped date and trace Pacific people’s migrations eastward.
across Melanesia into Polynesia from about 1500 B.C.E. (see Voyaging/Ancient Navigation).

Recent archeological discoveries indicate that these lapita peoples originally emigrated from Southeast Asia into Melanesia, where they made settlements in islands that had already been populated for thousands of years. Lapita peoples built fairly large villages near the sea coast. They raised various domesticated animals—pigs, dogs, and chickens—and they appear to be the first Pacific island peoples to practice animal husbandry and have an agricultural economy. They had a wide range of working tools such as adzes, knives, and fishhooks made of stone or shell. Their main food sources came from fishing and hunting wild birds and animals and from raising a few root crops. In these Melanesian islands, lapita peoples eventually mixed with the population and became assimilated into that culture. Other lapita peoples, who may have already mixed with the Melanesian population, however, set sail eastward and were the first humans to settle the western fringes of Polynesia.

The oldest lapita site found in Polynesia comes from the island of Nukuleka in the Hapa‘i group of Tonga. The ancient potsherds found there in 1999 reveal decorative motifs that are almost identical to the ones found in the Santa Cruz Islands of Melanesia to the west. Based on these new finds, it is now believed that the first lapita culture settlers (now called Polynesians) entered Tonga by 900 B.C.E. probably from the area of Santa Cruz rather than through Fiji as was once believed. From Tonga, lapita-pottery-making islanders made their way into Samoa, and, for unknown reasons, by 500 B.C.E., lapita pottery was no longer being made in Samoa and Tonga. Consequently, Polynesians who set out from Samoa to settle islands further to the east carried no knowledge of pottery-making with them, and, as a result, no pottery remains have been found in any of the other Polynesian islands.

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Nancy Sullivan

Law

Across Oceania, the social control has long been established by systems of taboos (tapu, kapu). These behavioral restrictions, dietary laws and privileges govern different classes or types of people. It is the fear of supernatural retribution from breaking these taboos that keeps law and order in most traditional Oceanic societies. By far more arbitrary than Western law, the concept
of supernatural justice is oppressive, as the gods may target you in unexpected ways, or victimize relatives instead (see Gods and Goddesses). In many places, it is combined with an equally fearsome threat of human sorcery wielded for everything from jealousy to retribution.

A few key distinctions can be made between southwestern (or Melanesian) concepts of justice and those of the more eastern (Polynesian) and northern (Micronesian) island groups. Melanesian cultures are shaped by concepts of reciprocity, so that everything from supernatural to social relations are seen to be part of an ongoing dialectic between givers and receivers, those who are owed and those who owe. Any antisocial behavior can be viewed in terms of the given quid pro quo, as either a return for a former wrongdoing, or a misstep that requires compensation. The principle of restorative justice, or finding a social peace, is far more important than individual justice, and thus clansmen sometimes take the “punishment” for each other, and perceived injury may call for more compensation than real. In legal proceedings, cases were heard by the local chief (alii) or priest who might order a trial by ordeal for the wrongdoer. For everyday matters, however, Hawaiians use a form of family-based dispute resolution called hooponopono or “setting it right.”

Further Reading

Nancy Sullivan

Leeward and Windward

With its high temperatures and humidity, the climate of almost all of Island Oceania is considered tropical, except, of course, southern New Zealand and a few other remote islands. Variations in rainfall in some island groups extend from almost none at all to over 470 inches a year. Most of this variation has to do with the particular wind patterns that cross the Pacific.

Throughout most of the Pacific (especially the eastern two-thirds), the dominant wind system consists of the trade winds. They are affected, of course, by the earth’s rotation so that they blow from the southeast in the southern hemisphere and from the northeast in the northern. These brisk and ever-continuous winds bring moderate showers occasioned sometimes by heavy downpours and then clear skies. The trades from both hemispheres conjoin along the equator in a low-pressure zone known as the Inter-Tropical Convergence Zone (ITCZ), or more popularly called “The Doldrums.”

The trades are noted for their regularity and strength, especially in Hawai‘i, where they blow continuously for months on end without stopping. As the trades blow across the open ocean, they pick up moisture, and when they hit the high mountain peaks of an island, they deposit rain on what is called the island’s windward side. Rainfall is particular heavy, especially if the mountains lie close to the coast and at right angles to the rain-laden winds. A good example is the island of Kaua‘i in the Hawaiian chain. Mount Wai‘ale‘ale averages 486
inches or more a year and is considered one of the rainiest spots in the world. Once across the mountains, the winds lose most of their moisture, and as a result, the leeward sides of the islands are much dryer. Kaua‘i’s leeward beaches, for example, receive a scant 5 inches a year! Frequently, the windward sides of the islands may experience a downpour, while the leeward sides bask in clear, blue skies. Other Pacific island groups experience this same phenomena, the most prominent being Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and Guadalcanal.

The seasonal movements of the ITCZ bring drastic climatic changes to the normal wind and rain patterns. Trades winds stop almost entirely and become variable, while moisture builds up more often, and then storm clouds drop their rain more widely over the islands, often days and weeks on end. This is generally referred to as the “wet season” of the year, and in the northern hemisphere, it occurs between December and March (winter months). During the same time in the western Pacific, monsoon winds from Asia bring rain to the Caroline Islands in Micronesia and to New Guinea and the Solomon Islands in Melanesia. See also El Niño/La Niña.

Further Reading

Robert D. Craig

Mana

Mana is the power of the gods in human agency. Polynesian genealogies attribute divine origins to some of their greatest chiefs, and the line between human and divine is somewhat blurred in Polynesia cosmology. Thus mana is divine power that can be manifest and experienced in human form. But such power is never arbitrary, it must be inherited along very specific bloodlines, and as such, it legitimizes the succession of chiefs. Mana is not to be associated with some democratically available source of power. It is a form of life-giving fertility, of procreation and agricultural fecundity, and of political efficacy. Not least, it is a source of danger that must be channeled properly. These features are common throughout Polynesian cultures, although with regional variations. Mana is a force of nature that is irrational and destructive in its uncontrolled state, but beneficial when constrained by systems of tapu and noa. Tapu refers to the sacred and noa the profane—or the chiefly and the common, the pure and impure, and so forth.

Interestingly, in central and eastern Polynesia (Hawaii, Marquesas, New Zealand, Easter Island, Society Islands) the concept of mana tends to devalue the female, or feminine, whereas in western Polynesia (Samoa, Tonga, Tokelau, Tuvalu, Tikopia and Pukapuka) mana appears to exalt the feminine. In the east, women are considered common and polluting and dangerous; they must be rigidly controlled by systems of tapu. But it is apparent that the reproductive power of women is a prime source of mana, and not to be taken for granted. Where it is feared and deprecated as impure, it is also tacitly revered for its
fecundity and force. So the east–west gender variation to *mana* is more of a continuum than an inversion of concepts. *See also Gods and Goddesses.*

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**Marae**

In most Pacific cultures, community and/or religious ceremonies were conducted in open, public areas that could be associated with the modern terminology “the village green.” In the western Polynesian islands of Samoa and Tonga it was called the *mala‘e*, and in New Zealand (eastern Polynesian culture) it was called the *marae*. In other parts of eastern *Polynesia*, however, the term *marae* was used to identify certain megalithic, platformed structures that were used specifically for religious purposes, similar to “temples” or “churches” in other cultures. These monuments were dotted throughout eastern Polynesia—the Society Islands (Tahiti), the Marquesas, Cook Islands, the Tuamotu Islands, and Hawai‘i (where they were called *heiau*).

Essentially, *marae* (*ma‘ae* or *heiau*) were large raised stone platforms (*ahu*) upon which the islanders built structures for religious purposes. They often contained priests houses, altars, houses for the gods, and various stone slabs that were dedicated to one purpose or another, all of which were usually erected around a central, open platform area (the traditional “village green”). The largest of the stone *marae* are found in Taipivai Valley on the island of Nuku Hiva in the Marquesas. In the nineteenth century, Herman Melville described one “amazing” platform (*ma‘ae* or *tohua*) that was subsequently measured at 550 feet long and 82 feet wide with a wall of enormous stones reaching a height of 10 feet. A massive *marae* at Mahaiaatea on Tahiti consisted of a rectangular *ahu* upon which was built a type of step pyramid. It no longer survives in its original state, but fortunately, English missionary James Wilson made a drawing of it during his visit there in the 1760s. It measured 71 by 263
feet upon which were eleven successive smaller steps were placed, raising it to a height of approximately 50 feet.

In Hawaiʻi, numerous heiau of various sizes were built throughout the islands. On the island of Oʻahu, the largest was the Puʻu-o-Mahuka ("Hill of Escape") heiau, built on a cliff overlooking beautiful Waimea Bay on Oʻahu’s north shore. On the Big Island of Hawaiʻi, three heiau were enclosed in the City of Refuge at Hōnaunau (Puʻuhonua-o-Hōnaunau). The site is currently being restored and maintained by the U.S. Park Service. The complex at Hōnaunau contains a massive 13-foot-high wall enclosure that houses the three heiau, two of which have recently been reconstructed by using extant drawings made by Christian missionar-ies in the early nineteenth century.

Apparently, sizes of marae did not entirely indicate their relative importance. The relatively small marae of Taputapuatea, located on the southeast coast of the island of Rāʻiatea (Society Islands), for example, is reputed to have been the most sacred of all marae in Polynesia. Sources tell us that the various Polynesian island chiefs (even as far away as New Zealand) would send yearly sacrifices to Taputapuatea. Its simple, stone-slabbed ahu is only 130 by 23 feet, and it is surrounded by numerous upright stone slabs, some measuring 13 feet, which ancienly served for backrests for the officiating priests or high chiefs. (For more details regarding the various religious ceremonies conducted in Pacific cultures, refer to the "Religion" essay, above.) Folklore and legends
tell us that Rā’iatea was the “homeland” of many of the Polynesians who set sail to establish new homes across the seas.

Although Tongans did not erect stone marae like the eastern Polynesians, they did construct sacred stone structures (langi) to mark important burial grounds, especially those surrounding the Tui Tonga (“King” of Tonga) ceremonial center located at Mu’a on the island of Tongatapu (see Tongan Empire). Likewise, the Ponapeans in Micronesia suggest that their monumental ruins at Nan Madol may have included a religious center. The Melanesians and Australians, unfortunately, produced nothing similar to what their neighbors to the east constructed. See also Gods and Goddesses.

Further Reading

Robert D. Craig

Melanesia

Melanesia is a group of Oceanic islands ranging from the big island of New Guinea, to the west, and Fiji to the east. The term was coined by Jules Dumont D’Urville in 1832 as a reference to the black-skinned inhabitants of these islands, which is perhaps the only thing that these diverse cultures hold in common. The term is useful politically to describe treaties that unite the states of Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Fiji and sometimes New Caledonia, although these neither exhaust the Melanesian states nor indicate any political cohesion.

As a geographic term, Melanesia is easier to map, and the most pronounced characteristic of the region is its extraordinary cultural and linguistic diversity. New Guinea, the Bismark Archipelago, the Admiralty Islands, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Norfolk Island, Fiji Torres Straits Islands, New Caledonia, Manus, Aru Island and the offshore islands of West New Guinea, have all been included in the term. In addition, the peoples of Flores, Nauru, Sumba, Timor-Leste, and Rotuma are sometimes included for their mixed Melanesian heritage.

Interestingly, though the Indonesian islands of the Banda Sea are not included in the term Melanesia, reference is sometimes made to the Andaman Sea islands of Andaman and Nicobar, politically part of India, and geographically at the western edge of Indonesia and Malaysia. This is because the inhabitants of these islands are “Papuans,” ethnologically the same as the Melanesians of the interior of New Guinea (who share the Papuan language phylum).

Melanesia is truly a jangle of terms. Where cultural definitions exclude certain islands, geographic ones may include them. Most of the region speaks languages from the Austronesian phylum, although Melanesian peoples are often lumped together as “Papuans.” The south coast of Eastern New Guinea was once called “Papua” by its British colonizers, as distinguished from German “New Guinea,” but currently the term New Guinea refers to the entire
large island as a whole, while Papua is reserved for the Indonesian half of the island.

The enormous biological and cultural diversity of this region tends to thin out as the map moves eastward to Polynesia, northward to Micronesia, and southward through Australia. To talk about the region’s flora and fauna we therefore do our best to focus on the largest island, New Guinea, whose flora is one of the richest in the world, particularly within rainforests. The larger islands of Melanesia are from 50 to 100 miles in length with their mountains ranging from 1,000 to 10,000 feet in height.

The island of New Guinea, which includes Papua New Guinea in the east and Indonesia’s Irian Jaya Province (now West Papua) to the west, is the second largest island in the world, after Greenland. It is about 1,300 miles by 700 miles and is the world’s highest island, with the ice-capped Cartensz Massif in West Papua rising to over 16,000 feet, and 60 percent of the land rising above 900 feet.

About 75 percent of New Guinea is covered by rainforest—some of the most extensive and unspoilt rainforests in the world. Rainforests have greater plant life than any other habitats, which in New Guinea include mangrove forests, swamps and lakes, flood plains, grasslands, savannahs, scrubland, woodlands, and cultivated areas.

In New Guinea there are actually five types of rainforest: lowland alluvial and lowland hill; and then lower, middle, or upper montane or highland rainforest. Lowland rainforests support the most plant species (up to twelve hundred) with gingers, palms, strangler figs, climbing palms, woody lianas and orchids, most notably.

In the rainforest plants and animals are adapted to three strata: the forest floor, the understory, and the canopy. The entire system depends on a lot of rainfall, and the humidity within it may reach saturation. Inside the canopy this moisture may be absorbed directly by tree bark or plant roots, or it may evaporate; the excess rains off and down into mountain gullies and creeks which eventually cascade over waterfalls and flow into lowland rivers to the sea.

It is impossible to give the exact number of species found in New Guinea, as many of them, particularly invertebrates, remain undescribed and/or undiscovered. There are about 190 species of mammals in New Guinea, representing all three types. Monotreme mammals lay eggs and, after they hatch, nurse the young on milk. The two species of New Guinea monotremes are spiny anteaters, or echidnas. The marsupial mammals include about seventy species: bandicoots, certain rats, wallabies, tree kangaroos, gliders, possums, and cuscuses, all have pouches for their newly born young to develop further. Placental mammals, such as ourselves, stay in the womb longer where they get nourishment through the placenta. These include bats (seventy species), such as flying foxes, blossom bats, and insect-eating bats; and rodents (about fifty-five species), such as tree mice, melomys, and rats.

All around the coasts and out on the beautiful coral reefs, New Guinea teems with marine life. Divers say there are more fish per cubic meter than any other place in the world. Yet there are relatively few native freshwater species, and most edible ones like carp and tilapia are introduced.

There are at least twenty-five thousand species of beetles, and six thousand moths and butterflies in New Guinea. There are also grasshoppers, earwings, termites, bees, wasps, ants dragonflies, damselflies, lacewings, mayflies, cicadas,
aphids, flies, and (the ubiquitous) mosquitoes. Of the frogs alone there are about 160 species.

New Guinea has two species of crocodile. The estuarine or saltwater crocodile is widespread throughout the Indo-Pacific, including tropical Australia. It lives in marine habitats and coastal river systems. The New Guinea crocodile is found in freshwater rivers, lakes, marshes, and swamplands. The two actually exist together in rivers throughout New Guinea.

New Guinea has a rich lizard fauna with about 170 species, including geckoes, legless lizards, dragon lizards, monitor lizards or goanna; and one hundred species of skinks. Approximately 110 species of snakes can be found, including sea snakes, tree snakes, pythons, and (more rarely) poisonous front-fanged snakes such as death adders and taipans.

During the Middle Ages the Melanesian islands were thoroughly settled and engaged in extensive networks of exchange and interaction, bellicose and peaceful. Toward the east of the region in the islands of New Caledonia, Vanuatu, and Fiji, social organization was chiefly, and trade networks involved tributes to the local chiefs that included shell valuables, implements, and other valuable objects. To the western side of the region, the interior of New Guinea was dotted with small communities living in defensive suspicion of their neighbors, raising sweet potato and taro gardens that became the basis of their more egalitarian, democratic systems of governance, otherwise known as “bigman” societies. See also New Guinea, Fauna of and New Guinea, Flora of.

Further Reading
Micronesia

The term Micronesia comes from two Greek words—mikros, small and nesos, island—and is used to designate one of the three major geographical areas of the Pacific Basin. The term was first used by the French scholar Jules Dumont d’Urville in 1831 to distinguish these small Pacific islands north of the equator from those of Polynesia lying to their south and east. The third geographical area is Melanesia, a large group of Pacific islands lying directly south of Micronesia and the equator. Although scholars may disagree with d’Urville’s classification (because of the great diversity in each group), the designation is still a convenient way to divide the area for general discussion.

Geographically, Micronesia consists of approximately 2,106 small islands and atolls in the north Pacific tropics lying between 13 and 20 degrees north latitude and stretching in a slight arc from 130 to 180 degrees east longitude. The main groups include Guam and the Marianas (with Palau and Yap), the Carolines, Marshalls, Kiribati (formerly the Gilbert Islands), and Nauru.

Archeological and linguistic evidence suggests that the high islands of western Micronesia were first settled from the Philippines possibly between 2000 and 1500 B.C.E. and then the eastern Micronesian islands were settled 2,000 years later by voyagers coming from eastern Melanesia (probably near Vanuatu). Although some eight cultural groups are recognized, ancient Micronesians were alike in many ways. They were subsistence farmers living in small villages or in single out-lying farmsteads, and they augmented their simple diet of plant foods primarily with fish caught in the lagoons or out in the deeper depths of the Pacific. Their main plant foods consisted of breadfruit, taro, coconuts, and pandanus kernels, but often these could not grow sufficiently on the low atolls to allow people to survive. The islanders in the Marianas also raised rice, a food unknown to the rest of Oceania.

Linguistically, the Micronesians spoke a multitude of languages, distinct and often unintelligible one from another, although they are recognized as being Austronesian in origin. Without a written language, the Micronesians depended upon oral tradition to pass down their knowledge from one generation to another. Oratory and storytelling were highly respected “professions” within their culture.

The lack of local resources often forced the Micronesians to turn to trade with their island neighbors. Using outrigger canoes and sailing by observing the stars and the wind and water currents, they became extremely competent navigators, often traveling vast distances within Micronesia (and perhaps beyond). Island “fleets” from Yap and Truk frequently sailed to Guam and other parts of Micronesia to trade food stuffs, shell ornaments, fine mats, special dyes, or even large stone discs that the Yapese used for money. These expert navigators even developed a type of navigational map—called “stick charts,” made of wooden sticks and shells—to aid them in sailing between the islands.
Status in Micronesian society depended primarily upon birth, however, there were instances where one could gain ascendancy through some special ability, but this was not the norm. Unlike the Polynesians who developed highly structured patriarchal societies, the Micronesians (except for Yap and the Gilberts) developed unique matrilineal societies. (Matriliney should never be considered a system that somehow empowers women—and should not be confused with matriarchy.) Chiefly authority varied from one group to another. Chiefs on Palau, for example, exercise little authority while those in the Marshalls held absolute authority over lands and persons. Living in such close proximity to one another, the Micronesians developed techniques of adjustment and reconciliation that created societies that were less aggressive and more reconciliatory than often found in other parts of the Pacific.

Most Micronesians lived in some form of extended-family group. Members usually did not marry within the same lineage—some newlywed couples would live with the husband’s family while others with the wife’s. Monogamy was the general rule, but sometimes a more affluent Micronesian had more than one wife or concubine. In this case, the principal wife exercised strong authority over family affairs. Commoners generally lived in lean-to huts that have not survived the ages, however, some large stone house foundation columns (latte) still survive on Guam and on the Mariana Islands. Approximately ninety-two stone platforms on the island of Ponape suggest the remains of a small “royal” town, including a religious center. Large and often elaborate meeting houses or men’s club houses were commonly found in villages that served for gathering places for communal affairs.

Back-strap loom weaving by women was practiced throughout the Caroline Islands (except Palau) and was found only again in the northern Melanesian islands. (Loom weaving was unknown in Polynesia.) Richly colored Micronesian threads of black, brown, and red were woven into colorful loincloths, sashes, skirts, and burial shrouds. Other art forms consisted of shell ornaments and artifacts, decorative mats, tattooing, and woodcarvings. See also Voyaging/Ancient Navigation.

Further Reading

Robert D. Craig

**Moai (Easter Island)**

One of the greatest artistic achievements ever fashioned by any civilization was the creation of the six-hundred megalithic statues that still stand on Easter Island. They were carved by a Polynesian, stone-age people, who immigrated
to the small island around 500 C.E. and who spent the next 1,000 years forming these unique structures. Exactly why and how they formed the statues have intrigued modern scholars since the island was first “discovered” on Easter day, 1722, by the famed Dutch explorer Jacob Roggeveen. This enigma is often referred to as the “mystery of Easter Island.”

Modern scholars in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as Katherine Routledge, Alfred Métraux, Henri Lavachery, Thor Heyerdahl, and William Mulloy, have provided theses that illuminate much of Easter Island’s distant past as well as the “mystery of Easter Island.” Although Heyerdahl suggested that drifting rafts from South America may have brought the first inhabitants to the island, most other authorities, using archeology and linguistic sources, agree that they immigrated most likely from the Marquesas islands in eastern Polynesia. (Others have argued that they came from a lost continent called Mu or even from outer space!)

Easter Island history is divided into three major periods—Early (500–1000 C.E.), Middle (1000–1600), and Late (1600–). In the Late Period, continual civil war broke out between the island clans that brought an end to their moai carving and the decline in their population and culture. Many of the unfinished statues (about 150) were left in the quarry sites or partly moved to their final resting places, and an examination of these reveals the exact way in which they were formed. Using only their primitive stone mauls, carvers in the stone quarry cut trenches around the statue as the rest of it was being carved out of the limestone. The statue was kept intact during its construction by an uncut spine running down its back until completion. The workers would then string rope around the statue in strategic places, and when the spine was severed, the statue was then raised upright. After these huge statues were finished, they were then hauled several miles to their final resting places. Considering that some of the statues attained a height of 37 feet and weighed almost 100 tons, it is remarkable that this could be done without modern equipment.

Ahu Nau nau in Anakena beach. According to local tradition, the first Polynesian settlers arrived on this shore in the 6th century, led by their chief Hotu matua. All Anakena statues have red tuff topknots. 10th–12th c. © Ivonne Wierink/Dreamstime.com.
In the 1960s, archeologist William Mulloy suggested that the statues were transported by a system of leverages and a large forked sled attached to the front of the statue. He estimated that an average-sized statue would have taken thirty men one year to carve, then ninety men 2 months to move it from the quarry to its final resting place, and then another 3 months to get it erect.

Several mysteries still remain. To begin with, what was the inspiration behind creating these huge monuments? And second, were they meant to portray their ancestral chiefs or their powerful gods? These questions may never be answered. Easter Islands today use all forms of modern gas and electrical engines to help stand many of these statues upright so that they may be more appealing to the growing number of tourists who visit the island. But there is no suggested proposal that they try carving out new moai that rival their ancestors' work done 1,000 years ago. See also Gods and Goddesses.

Further Reading

Robert D. Craig

Musical Instruments

Music played a major role in the cultural life of Oceanic peoples, although the number and types of their musical instruments were extremely limited. In one Micronesian Island group, for example, the only two "instruments" known were the conch shell, used primarily for signaling purposes, and the rolled-leaf oboe, used primarily as a toy. Despite these limitations, however, European explorers who first visited the islands of the Pacific were deeply impressed with the expertise with which the islanders performed, although their instruments seemed extremely primitive. Traditional musical instruments in Oceania consisted primarily of a variety of drums, slit gongs, flutes, and panpipes, although not all existed in every island group. Most music was performed not for entertainment but for religious and ritual ceremonies.

The most common instrument was the drum, cylindrical in shape with a sharkskin membrane stretched over the hollow end and secured with a type of rope made of coconut fibers through slotted holes in the drum's base. Sizes of the drum ranged from the small knee variety (uniquely found in Hawai'i) to the hourglass-shaped drums found in New Guinea and Melanesia and the tall, slender drums with elaborate carvings found in Tahiti and other Polynesian groups. These drums were beaten by one's fingers and the full hand in a variety of percussion rhythms, depending upon the desired sound.

Slit gongs were found in various cultures throughout the world, except for Australia. They were made of various sizes of bamboo or hollowed-out wooden logs with one or more slits cut into them. Many gongs had three slits cut into them in the shape of an "H." The ends of the logs were closed, and sound was produced by striking the log with a wooden mallet. The size and the thickness of the gong and mallet determined the pitch and volume of the
sound. Large gongs pounded with heavy mallets could be heard for miles and were used for signaling as well as for accompanying singers and dancers. Smaller slit gongs were struck with a variety of sticks at various speeds and rhythms to accompany performers in their dances. Precision drumming in the islands continued into modern times, and drumming groups from Bora Bora, the Cook Islands, Tonga, and Tahiti are especially noted for their precision and skill.

Nose flutes were popular in Polynesia but found less often in the rest of the Pacific. They were usually made from a section of bamboo about 12 to 18 inches long and up to an inch in diameter. In New Zealand, however, where bamboo was scarce, the Māori made their nose flutes (guru) from hollowed out soapstone. Nose flutes had a hole on one side at one end and up to six holes on the other side. The performer placed the thumb of the right hand against the right nostril and held the flute with the right fingers up to the left nostril through which air was blown. Covering and uncovering the other holes produced a variety of notes. Its sound was described as soft and plaintive, but its range was extremely limited, consisting of three to four notes and unlike Western music could produce half and quarter notes on the scale. The flute was played to accompany singing and dancing.

A unique form of wind instrument was the panpipe, sometimes referred to as the pan flute. It was found throughout the ancient world—Europe, Asia, and South America—and in the Pacific. It became a highly sophisticated instrument among the ‘Are’are people of Malaita (Solomon Islands in Melanesia). Panpipes usually consisted of three to nine closed tubes, doubled by open tubes, which produced a higher octave, and all were then secured together in irregular distribution of lengths. Sound was produced by blowing across the open end of a tube. Its length and width determined its particular pitch and sound, while at the same time, the main tube vibrated its neighboring tubes, which added a varied dimension to the main sound. During village performances, many members of the community would join in so that there could be fifty or more performers. Complex ensemble playing was the norm among the ‘Are’are. Their music depicted sounds from nature, like bird and animal calls, the sounds of the ocean and rivers, as well as human sounds and actions. In modern times, contemporary musical groups have revived their unique panpipe-playing traditions and have performed to sold-out audiences around the world.

Although the Indigenous Australians had far fewer sound-producing instruments than the rest of Oceania, one that stands out as unique to them was the didjeridu (didgeridoo), found primarily in northern Australia among the Yolngu people. The didjeridu accompanied most singers and dancers in their religious ceremonies, or it could be used for signaling or communicating with one another for several miles. It was constructed from a wooden branch or log that had been hollowed-out by termites or ants. The bark was removed and the surface smoothed and sharpened. A rim of beeswax was placed around the rim of one of the ends to form a mouthpiece. It was then played with one’s vibrating lips very much like a trumpet, trombone, or other similar instrument. What made the didjeridu unique was its special technique of circular breathing, a feat not easily accomplished without training. Air is breathed in through the nose while at the same time it is blown out of the mouth to produce a continuing droning type of sound. (Contemporary players have been known to sustain a single note for over 40 to 50 minutes!)
Internet searches (at YouTube.com, for example) can find actual video clips of performances of the various instruments described above, for example, “slit gong” or “slit drums,” “Cook Island drummers,” “Tahiti drummers,” “Pacific nose flutes,” “Solomon Islands/Malaita panpipes,” and “Australian didjeridu.” See also Dance.

Further Reading

Robert D. Craig

Nan Madol

The house platform ruins on the island of Ponape (Pohnpei) in Micronesia rank as some of the most magnificent in all of Oceania, including the moai statues found on Easter Island. Nan Madol lies on the southeastern side of the island and consists of ruins of a small town including a religious center that perhaps date back to 900 to 1200. Approximately ninety-two platforms of coral rubble faced with basalt retaining walls (some 18 to 25 feet high) make up the site with the most impressive structure being the chiefly burial site called Nan Douwas. Most of the platforms were surrounded by water, and travel between the “islets” was by boat. For this reason, Nan Madol is often referred to as the “Venice of the Pacific.”

The exact date of the settlement of the island is still unknown, but permanent settlements existed from the first two centuries C.E. Apparently, the building of the megalithic structures only began, however, with the conquering San Deleur (Lord of Deleur) family around the twelfth or thirteenth centuries. The entire island population may have reached twenty-five thousand with Nan Madol sustaining a population of about one thousand. Ponapean oral traditions maintain that the San Deleur dynasty was overthrown, perhaps in the early 1600s by a legendary hero named Isokelekel, and he divided the island into three separate, autonomous districts in order to prevent any future centralization of power on the island. Isokelekel’s title was Nahnmwarki of Madolenihmw, and he ruled from the center of Nan Madol. By the early modern period (c. 1700), the Nahnmwarki family had abandoned Nan Madol, and, consequently, the site fell into ruins.

Nan Madol was first observed by Western outsiders to the island in 1828 and 1833. Other visitors to the island reported their finds throughout the century, but it was only in 1910 that the German archaeologist Paul Hambruch seriously made any precise site measurements and detailed observations of the site. Since then, numerous scientific research teams have visited the island (especially the Smithsonian Institute in 1963) and have contributed to the understanding of the site and its relationship to the other neighboring monuments in the islands.
New Guinea, Fauna of

The fauna of New Guinea is one of the richest in the world, particularly within rainforests. It is impossible to give the exact number of species found in New Guinea, as many of them, particularly invertebrates, remain undescribed or undiscovered.

There are about 190 species of mammals here, representing all three types. Monotreme mammals lay eggs and, after they hatch, nurse the young on milk. The two species of New Guinea monotremes are spiny anteaters, or echidnas. The marsupial mammals include about seventy species: bandicoots, certain rats, wallabies, tree kangaroos, gliders, possums, and cuscuses all have pouches for their newly born young to develop further. Placental mammals, such as ourselves, stay in the womb longer where they get nourishment through the placenta. These include bats (about seventy species), such as flying foxes, blossom bats and insect-eating bats; and rodents (about fifty-five species), such as tree mice, melomys, and rats.

All around the coasts and out on the beautiful coral reefs, New Guinea teems with marine life. Experts say there are more fish per cubic meter than any other place in the world. Yet there are relatively few native freshwater species, and most edible ones like carp and tilapia were introduced by Europeans very recently.

There are at least twenty-five thousand species of beetles, and six-thousand moths and butterflies in New Guinea. There are also grasshoppers, earwings, termites, bees, wasps, ants, dragonflies, damselflies, lacewings, mayflies, cicadas, aphids, flies, and those ubiquitous mosquitoes. Of the frogs alone there are about 160 species.

New Guinea has two species of crocodile. The estuarine or saltwater crocodile is widespread throughout the Indo-Pacific, including tropical Australia. It lives in marine habitats and coastal river systems. The New Guinea crocodile is found in freshwater rivers, lakes, marshes, and swamplands. The two actually exist together in New Guinea rivers.

New Guinea has a rich lizard fauna with about 170 species, including geckoes, legless lizards, dragon lizards, monitor lizards or goanna; and one hundred species of skinks. Approximately 110 species of snakes can be found, including sea snakes, tree snakes, pythons, and (more rarely) poisonous front-fanged snakes such as death adders and taipans. See also New Guinea, Flora of.

Further Reading
New Guinea, Flora of

The island if New Guinea, which today comprises Papua New Guinea in the east and Indonesia’s West Papua Province to the west, is the second largest island in the world, after Greenland.

About 75 percent of New Guinea is covered by rainforest—some of the most extensive and unspoilt rainforests in the world. Rainforests have greater plant than any other habitats, which in New Guinea include mangrove forests, swamps and lakes, flood plains, grasslands, savannahs, scrubland, woodland, and cultivated areas.

In New Guinea there are actually five types of rainforest: lowland alluvial and lowland hill; and then lower, middle, and upper montane or highland rainforest. Lowland rainforests support the most plant species (up to twelve hundred) with gingers, palms, strangler figs, climbing palms, woody lianas, and orchids the most notable.

In the rainforest plants and animals are adapted to three strata: the forest floor, the understory, and the canopy. The entire system depends on a lot of rainfall, and the humidity within it may reach saturation. Inside the canopy this moisture may be absorbed directly by tree bark or plant roots, or it may evaporate; the excess rains off and down into mountain gullies and creeks that eventually cascade over waterfalls and flow into lowland rivers to the sea.

One need only look at the mighty Sepik River to comprehend how much water drains off the mountain rainforests of New Guinea.

The forest floor is covered with a maze of surface roots in shallow systems that extend horizontally from trunk bases and buttresses. Plant seeds germinate on the warm moist forest floor, developing into saplings that strive toward the lighter understory and canopy.

The forest understory is made up of hundreds of tree trunks, most of which produce flowers in their canopy. But some, such as cluster figs, produce flowers and fruits from their main trunks in the understory. Plants in the understory may be terrestrial, epiphytic, climbing, strangling, or parasitic; they include tree ferns, gingers, wild taros, cordylines, pandanus, some orchids, and many shrubs and trees.

Ginger plants have large leaves and red, orange, yellow, and even blue flowers or fruits; and cordyline are thin-stemmed plants with clusters of leaves in red. Highlands peoples use bundles of cordyline for “arse-gras” and plant it to symbolize peace. The variety of rainforest palm trees includes pandanus, or what some call screw palms, which produce bright orange, red, or yellow fruits with edible kernels and oily seeds much prized as food. Coconut palms are the most thoroughly exploited palm, as their trunk fiber provides a kind of netting, their leaves a range of woven materials, and their fruit all kinds of
food. Tall, thin, small-crowned betel palms provide the center nut that people chew everywhere; they mix it with crushed coral or limestone to make a mildly stimulating pulp (see Betel Chewing).

The rainforest canopy is crowded with interlocking tree crowns and their beautiful flowers and succulent fruits, supporting an arboreal garden of tangled vines, mosses, lichens, orchids, and bird’s nest ferns. Lowland rainforests are taller than mountain rainforests, and their canopies fuller, rounder, sometimes consisting of three crown layers. Giant emergent trees several hundred to more than 1,000 years old project well above the canopy. The red, pink, and purplish pigmentation on some young leaves in the rainforest protects them from strong radiation. See also New Guinea, Fauna of.

Further Reading

Nancy Sullivan

**NguzuNguzu**

In the Western District of the Solomon Islands the canoe prows are carved as stylized human warriors with their hands clasped together, sometimes holding a totemic bird or miniature skull. Inlaid with mother of pearl or nautilus shell eyes, tortoise shell ears, and bright red lips, these striking black heads with beard-like jaw lines have become national symbols for the Solomon Islands. They are called Toto isu (in New Georgia Island) or NguzuNguzu, and they originated in the fierce western islands of New Georgia, Choiseul, Santa Isabel, and Nggela.

These warrior figureheads were important protection during headhunting raids throughout the pre-Contact era. They watched out for enemies and evil water spirits as they also helped navigate around dangerous reefs and shorelines. Where the figures hold small birds, these are considered to be deity figures than help avoid submarine perils during the journey. Where they hold skulls, the latter are considered sources of mana or power transferred from the victims to the victors.

The anthropologist Edvard Hviding, in the following passage, describes these figures as dog-like:

These small anthropomorphic images (often with dog-like features) were carved from light wood, stained black, and elaborately inlaid with nautilus shell. They are depicted as holding either a human head (for success in headhunting) or a
bird (for navigational aid) in the hands. A toto isu was lashed to the bow of every departing New Georgian war canoe to ensure safe passage and success in warfare; its wide open staring eyes were supposed to ward off any troublesome maritime spirits. (Hviding, 76–78)

Further Reading

Nancy Sullivan

Pigs
Pig production is the most important smallholder livestock management in mainland New Guinea. In Papua New Guinea alone, more than one half the rural population raises pigs. How they arrived in New Guinea, and Oceania more generally, is still a subject of archaeological debate, however. The current consensus seems to be that the pig came to Melanesia within the last 3,500 years (possibly only 2,000 years ago), during the later Lapita migrations from Southeast Asia.

Throughout Oceania pigs are important sources of wealth and are ceremonially killed at all major occasions, from funerals to births, to peace-making and compensation ceremonies. In Melanesia, where they play key roles in highlands exchange systems, the owner rarely consumes his or her pig and indeed looks at the transaction of a pig with some remorse, especially where it has been raised lovingly by hand. Highlands bigmen must cajole their wives into separating from their pigs for a public exchange, as in some cases, where a sow has a large litter, the wife may have nursed a pig at her own breast.

Robin Hide tells a story from the Madang Province of New Guinea that describes the relationship between domestic and feral pig husbandry in Melanesia. In 1979, he says, an interesting practice was observed by a visitor while hunting for wild pigs on Long Island. When the hunter caught a feral boar, they castrated him, and docked the tail and ears, before letting him loose to the wild. The hunters explained that this way the pig would grow fat and they could capture it again, guaranteeing a portion of the meet by the marks they just made (Hide, 13–14).

One of ecological anthropology’s classic studies was conducted in the highlands of New Guinea by the anthropologist Roy Rappaport, who collected meticulous quantitative and qualitative data on food consumption and energy expenditure, as well as the world-views of the Maring people, demonstrating exactly how important pigs are to the material and ideological life of these people. See also Bigman.

Further Reading

Nancy Sullivan
Polynesia

The term Polynesia comes from two Greek words—polys, many and nesos, islands—and is used to designate one of the major geographical areas of the Pacific Basin. The term was first used in the English language by Charles de Brosses in 1756 to mean all the islands of the Pacific, but the word was restricted to only one section of the Pacific by the French scholar Jules Dumont d’Urville in a lecture he gave in 1831. That geographical area is represented roughly by a vast triangle drawn from the islands of Hawai’i in the north, southwest to New Zealand, east to Easter Island, and then north back to Hawai’i.

Early European explorers to the Pacific (eighteenth century) noticed a similarity in the language, customs, and cultures of the island peoples living within that region as they did with the peoples living in what became known as Melanesia ("Black Islands") and Micronesia ("Small Islands"). Essentially, Polynesia today includes the modern states of American Samoa, Cook Islands, French Polynesia, Hawai’i, New Zealand, Samoa, Tonga, Tokelau, Tuvalu, and Wallis and Futuna and the isolated islands of Nauru, Niue, Pitcairn, and Easter Island. There is a group of nineteen small Polynesian islands lying outside of this area in the cultural areas of Melanesia and Micronesia. They include Nukuoro and Kapingamaangi (Micronesia); Nukuria, Taku’u, Nukumanu, Ontong Java Atoll, Sikaiana, Rennell and Bellona, Tikopia, Anuta, Pileni, Tau- mako, Mae, Aniwa, Mele, Fila, West Futuna, and West ‘Uvea (Melanesia). Although modern scholars find the terms—Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia—less useful in their scholarly pursuits, the words still are convenient in less intellectual settings.

Early Mongoloid-type humans pushed out of Southeast Asia about 3000 B.C.E. As they sailed into the Melanesian islands to their southwest, they picked up certain genetic traits from the local population that set them apart—a tall, heavy build, for example—and then they sailed further eastward into the unpopulated territories of the Tongan and Samoan islands. There they remained for several hundred years where they developed their unique culture before setting out again into unknown waters. The settlement of the vast Pacific by the Polynesians is considered one of the greatest navigational exploits in all of human history. From Samoa, they pushed out across the ocean in their large, double-hulled, ocean-going canoes to the east where they reached the Marquesas Islands before the second century before Christ, and from the Marquesas they reached Hawai’i, the Cook Islands, Tuvalu, Tokelau, Tahiti, and Easter Island by 1000. For the next 600 years, here in these isolated islands of the Pacific, the Polynesian developed complex political, social, religious, and cultural characteristics that formed a sophisticated and unique Neolithic society.

Having no written language, the Polynesians were proficient in the art of story and genealogical recitation. They passed these myths, legends, and family histories down from one generation to another, despite the fact that many are thousands of lines in length. It was only in the nineteenth century that concerned Westerners and then island scholars began to collect, transcribe, and translate these for posterity. Unfortunately, we do not know how many thousands of others that may have been lost. It is from these extant documents, that we draw much of our knowledge of ancient Polynesia.

Polynesian societies tended to be highly structured and complex, although essentially the classes were divided between the rulers (high chiefs, chiefs,
priests) and commoners. The communities were organized in clans and tribes
around a particular island in districts over which the tribal chieftains pretty
much ruled as they saw fit. There existed no “king” as such over an island or
even an island group, but certain island groups had begun to show this ten-
dency by the time of European contact. Chiefs were semidivine whose rule
was absolute, and fighting (warfare) between them was frequent. Commoners
had little or no say in the “affairs of state.” Their daily life consisted of subsis-
tence farming and hunting and paying dues (in kind) required of them by
their superiors. Women were subordinate to men (except those with high-
ranking chiefly status) and their duties consisted of making tapa cloth, weav-
ing mats, growing food crops befitting their status, and rearing the smaller
children. Complex social restrictions (called tapu) kept classes and genders in
harmony with their age-old traditions. Subsistence living took most of the is-
landers’ daytime hours, but evenings were taken up with various entertain-
ments, including storytelling, swimming, dancing, and playing various games.
This way of life changed drastically once Europeans started visiting the is-
lands, and by the mid-nineteenth century, this old order had pretty much dis-
appeared. See also Voyaging/Ancient Navigation.

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Pulemelei Mound

On Samoa’s Savai’i Island, the great pyramid mound Pulemelei is the larg-
est Oceanic fortification of the Middle Ages. Believed to be the point from
which the people of Western Polynesia made their final migration eastward,
this curious stone structure measures 197 feet by 164 feet at the base and 39
feet in height. Actually a complex of structures, the central mound is sur-
rounded by smaller mounds discovered to be burial sites.

The main mound is considered to have been a shrine or temple of worship.
But what makes Pulemelei special is a stone pathway that runs right through
the center and is said to represent the gateway to Pulotu, the afterlife (an im-
portant part of the Samoan funeral ritual, called auala, or path). Carbon dating
has revealed the site to date from around 900. Some believe it was originally
constructed as a pigeon-snaring mound for chiefs—that is, a platform for the
bizarre sport of pigeon snaring that was exclusive to the western Polynesian
islands of Samoa and Tonga. But it is also believed to have played a part in the
defense of Savai’i against Tongan warriors in roughly 950, as they passed
through to conquer the island of “Upolu.”

Further Reading
Kirch, P. V. On the Road of the Winds: An Archaeological History of the Pacific Islands Before
Traditional legends from the islands of Vanuatu (once called the New Hebrides) maintain that in the thirteenth century (about 1265), a foreign chief arrived on the shores of the island of Efete, united the warring tribes under his command, and brought a great period of peace and stability to the island. It was said that he instituted a peace-making ceremony called the *natamwate*, which was held every 5 years and during which rival factions could talk out their differences. Sometime later, however, Roymata’s jealous brother seems to have killed him by a slow death with a poisoned dart to the throat. The villagers carefully carried the great chief from one village to another to say his goodbyes, and after his death, he was taken to the nearby islet of Retoka (Hat Island) where he was buried along with forty-seven men and women (as was the custom in those days). Afterwards, the island became taboo, and until the modern day, very few outsiders ever ventured near the island.

In 1967, a French anthropologist—José Granger—gained permission to do some archeological digs of the gravesite as long as everything was returned to its original state. Sure enough and according to traditional legends, Granger found the Roymata’s tomb and the numerous skeletons mentioned in those legends. Most of the skeletons unearthed were adorned with beautiful bracelets, shells, and carved bones, and evidence indicates that some may have been buried alive, as also was the custom. Roymata’s head was supported by a slab of limestone, and he, too, was adorned with similar ornaments.

Archeological evidence derived from Granger’s excavations indicate that Vanuatu was settled by 1300 B.C.E. by distinctive *lapita* potter immigrants from the Melanesian islands to the west, and by the time of Roymata, the people had developed a highly stratified society. Recent archeological work in the 1990s, suggests, however, that the traditional dating of Roymata may have been distended. The redating of artifacts from his burial site and other archeological evidence now place Roymata’s death in the 1660s and not in 1265. Traditional legends also suggest that Roymata emigrated from the islands to the south, possibly from *Polynesia*, but the scientific finds suggest that Roymata was indigenous to the island, possibly a chief who was able to bring an end to the Takarua War and peace to the island.

Further Reading
Salamāsina (fl. late fifteenth century)

Salamāsina is the most famous of Samoan queens. Born in the late fifteenth century, she was the first Samoan and the first queen to hold all four of Samoa’s highest pāpā titles. Her genealogy united the kingdoms of Tonga, Fiji, and Samoa, as well as a lesser line from ‘Uvea (Wallis Island), making her the perfect regent of ancestral Polynesia. In the main, Polynesian families tend to be patrilineal rather than matrilineal, but titles often pass to and through first-born or otherwise high-ranking women. But this also means that women are sometimes, as was the case in Tonga, Samoa and Fiji, of higher status than their brothers.

To preserve their rank, royal Tongan women married Fijian men, and their brothers, in turn, took Samoan brides. Rather like the royal houses of Europe, this sometimes meant that a sister-in-law would also be a cousin, and a cousin might also be a wartime enemy. It was inevitable that the royal houses of Tonga, Fiji, and Samoa would eventually combine in one person, Salamāsina. Her mother was the daughter of the Tuitoga of Tonga, and her father was a descendant of Tuitoga and Tuiftī lines, as well as the high chiefs of Samoa and Fiji. She was made Tupu O Samoa and Tafaifa (supreme monarch of Samoa) as a child and the 40-year period of her adult reign was peaceful. This is attributed, by legend, to her kindness, her sense of justice and her skills at diplomacy. See also Tongan Empire and Women.

Further Reading


Shell Valuables

One of the best ways to view the diversity of cultures across the Pacific is to study the variety and circulation of shell valuables. Considering the fairly limited palette of materials, the variety of their assemblage and purpose in all manner of currencies and bodily decorations is truly remarkable. Just as language is a means by which people create and sustain differences, so too are these shells and their combinations a way of distinguishing between people who live in the vast watery domain of the Pacific. As jewelry, functional instruments, monetary valuables and objects of aesthetic beauty, shells are still extremely important markers of gender, status, culture, and kinship, and the people of the highest mountains of interior New Guinea are just as obsessed with their clam shells as those in the Tuamotu Islands of Eastern Polynesia (Strathern).

Shells are combined with a wide variety of other ingredients as well, from bark and rattan to stones, seeds, beads, feathers, teeth, bones, and human hair.
Turtle shell, pig tusks, beetle carapaces, whale ivory, ebony wood, even flowers are included in the ceremonial dress or daily currency of Oceanic peoples. We know from lapita excavations that some of these shell networks have an antiquity of over 3,000 years, in particular the exchange of clam shell arm-bands found everywhere from the Micronesian islands through the Solomons and Vanuatu to Polynesia. Archaeologist Patrick V. Kirch, for example, published a photo from one example of a burial crypt in the Ndughore Valley of Kolombangara Island, in the Solomon Islands, that is full of shell valuables from roughly 2,000 years ago. He postulates that the shells have something to do with the forts and the sophisticated irrigation systems found in the same area, as reflecting a kind of intensification of production and inter-island raiding that might have led to taking slaves (Kirch, 133–134). What is fascinating is that these conus and clamshell armbands are ubiquitous across chiefly societies in Oceania, where they are used in mortuary, marriage, and other ceremonial exchanges, as well as to indicate a person’s rank. This same shell is also a major player in the Kula Ring of the D’Entrecasteaux and Trobriand Islands off New Guinea, where it is circulated across language and culture groups around a widespread ring of islands in exchange for highly decorated necklaces of different seashells (Malinowski).

Further Reading

Nancy Sullivan

**Stone Money (Yap)**

Before the modern period and the introduction of Western culture to the Pacific islanders, “money” as a means of economic exchange was generally unknown. On the Micronesian island of Yap, however, there existed the practice of executing certain exchanges and evaluating one’s wealth by the use of stone “money” called rai. These rai stones ranged in size from a few inches in diameter to over 12 feet in diameter, some of the latter weighing thousands of pounds. Holes were carved in each for ease in carrying—the small ones with a sennit (coconut) rope often strung around the neck and the larger ones with wooden poles that were carried by several men.

The stones were unique and not indigenous to the island of Yap. They were actually cut from limestone quarries on Palau (Belau), another island, some 220 miles to the southwest. They were then carried back to Yap by way of small native canoes where the stone-cutting was completed. Chiefs on the island were primarily responsible for rai production, and it is estimated that approximately 10 percent of the adult male population was involved in the business. The value of the stones was determined by their size, the difficulty of cutting and transporting them back to Yap, and the amount of time to finish the stones. The larger and more valuable stones were given names of important chiefs of the island. These stones, of course, could hardly be transported from
one place to another. When the “value” of such a large stone was actually transferred from one person to another, the ownership of the stone was “transferred” to its new owner, such as we do today with deeds to property.

Not money in the modern sense of the word, rai stones acted as reminders of gifts or goods that were given at one time to someone with the expectation that sometime in the future a comparable favor would be given in return. Anthropologists call this a “gift economy.” The stones were not used in exchange between Yap and its trading partners. In these cases, the common means of exchange was finely woven mats, prized by most Pacific islanders. Rai, however, continued to be used into the twentieth century, and the most renown continue to retain their cherished value to this day. See also Yap Empire.

Further Reading

Nancy Sullivan

Tapa

Tapa is the name given to bark cloth that was produced in most of the Polynesian Islands as well as in the Melanesian islands of Fiji and Papua New Guinea. The English word tapa comes from the Tahitian language, while it is called siapo in Samoa, kapa in Hawai‘i, masi in Fiji, and ngatu in Tonga. Anciently, it was created for decorations and more important for everyday clothing. Today, it is produced primarily in Fiji, Samoa, and Tonga as an art form, and the cloth is principally used only on important ceremonial occasions. Stereotyped designs, hand painted on the fabric, represent unique motifs that come from various cultural groups, and one can differentiate the different tapas that come from Samoa, Tonga, or Fiji.

Tapa production was a time-consuming task, most usually performed by women in the community. First, the inner bark of the mulberry, hibiscus, or breadfruit was stripped from the trees, dried in the open air, and then soaked in water for several days to make it pliable. (These strips usually measure approximately 6 inches in width and about 5 feet in length.) The strips were then placed over a smooth wooden anvil (often a large tree trunk) and then pounded with a grooved ironwood beater until the width of the strip stretched to almost 9 times its original width. The final beating was then done with the smooth, flat side of the beater. After several strips were made, they were “glued” together with starch made from the tapioca or similar tree to form a larger strip. It was then hung up to dry. Afterwards, another strip of similar size was glued cross-grain to add stability to the cloth.

The undecorated cloth was ready for everyday use, but in many cases, it usually underwent some form of painted decoration. Each island group had its own particular designs and means of decoration. Freehand painting could be done with brushes made from the seeds of the pandanus plant, while stencil blocks made from the ribs of the coconut fronds were placed under the fabric and then the brush (dabber) was rubbed over the surface to produce the desired design. The stencils were then moved to a new section of the tapa, and the design repeated again. Paints were made from the various roots, berries, leaves, bark, or flowers. Final touches and accents were given to the cloth once
it was rolled out on the ground. Some traditional tapa measured 10 feet wide and 60 feet long, but these were usually done in a community effort for some very important occasion—such as a wedding, installation of a new chief, and the like.

Further Reading

Robert D. Craig

Tapu

The English word *taboo* is derived from the Polynesian word *tapu*, which essentially means sacred, forbidden, or banned from general use. In ancient Polynesia, *tapu* was used to protect chiefly prerogatives, to regulate society, and to keep certain properties sacred or holy, although it varied in intensity from the very strict use in Hawai‘i (where it is called *kapu*) to the less stringent approach in the Polynesian outliers like Tikopia (eastern Solomon Islands). *Tapu* was also closely associated with the Polynesian principal of *mana*—power, authority, prestige, honor—and one who possessed more *mana* was generally more *tapu*.

In many islands, *tapu* was proportionate to one’s rank. Māori high chiefs and priests, who were infused with very potent *mana*, for example, were so *tapu* that they ate apart and commoners could not come near them. Their first-born sons were even more so. In Tahiti, they were carried about on a dais so that they could not touch the ground, otherwise that particular land would forever belong to them. Even the passing of their shadow upon a commoner might mean death, an excruciating death brought about by being burned alive, being strangled, or being stoned to death. It was this form of prohibition that regulated Polynesian aristocratic societies, and in the more populated islands such as Hawai‘i, Tahiti, and New Zealand, for example, every male member of society had a certain amount of sanctity (or *tapu*) proportionate to his rank or status. Females were generally excluded, except the first-born daughters of the high chiefly class. **Women** normally ate separate from the men, could not eat food prepared by men, and could not touch occupational tools associated with manly work, such as fishing and hunting. Hundreds of other *tapu* restrictions regulated women’s daily lives. Of course, sexual restrictions existed throughout the whole Pacific region other than just in Polynesia.

Chiefs often proclaimed *tapu* over certain fishing and hunting grounds to prevent commoners from entering them. Certain fish were *tapu*, and certain days were set aside for high chiefs to fish and other days for the commoners. Such prohibitions were often proclaimed to prevent the over use of fishing and hunting areas, but in other instances, it was merely a means for self-aggrandizement or for selfish reasons. In a preliterate society such as Polynesia, such *tapu* areas could be recognized by the several poles on the reef or shore on which were attached bunches of bamboo leaves or *tapa* cloth similar to the “No Trespassing” signs one might see today on fences or poles surrounding
private property. But in ancient Polynesian, tapu “signs” were far more feared than the written “No Trespassing” signs in our modern society. To them, it might mean death.

**Further Reading**

Robert D. Craig

**Taro**

One of the chief root crops widely found throughout all three geographical regions of the Pacific islands—Polynesia, Melanesia, and Micronesia—was taro. It first originated in the tropic, wetlands of Malaysia thousands of years ago and then spread westward through India to the ancient civilizations of Greece and Rome. (The Roman recipe book, the *Apicius*, for example, gives several ways of cooking taro.) As the Pacific islanders moved out of Southeast Asia and settled the Pacific, they also brought with them their basic food staples, including various species of taro.

Of the three varieties known to these early Pacific islanders, “true” taro (*Colocasia esculenta*) had a much wider distribution and was much more popular than the other two (the *Cyrtosperma chamissonis* and the *Alocasia macrorrhiza*). In Palau, *Colocasia* was the traditional prestige staple of all their foods. *Cyrtosperma* (swamp taro), however, was more prominent in coastal Melanesia and in the atolls of Micronesia. *Colocasia* grew year round in shaded, wet soil up to an altitude of about 7,000 feet. In dry areas where water was not immediately available, irrigation brought water from near-by ponds, streams, or man-made dams. Ancient bamboo aqueducts or extensive canal systems have been found in New Caledonia, Fiji, and Hawai‘i.

The corm (underground bulb or rhizome) of the taro was harvested (dug up and cut from its leaves), and the top portion was planted again to produce a new crop of taro. A new crop could be harvested within 7 to 12 months. *Colocasia* taro was much less hardy than *Cyrtosperma* and had to be harvested and eaten much quicker. Once harvested, taro corms were then eaten in a variety of ways. The universal method was broiling uncovered or leaf-wrapped over hot ashes or stones. The corms could also be boiled in clay
pots, coconut shells, marine shells, or wooden bowls. (Heated stones were placed in the water of the coconut shells and wooden bowls to heat it up.) Another popular alternative (especially in Polynesia and Micronesia) was to bake it in an underground oven, consisting of heated stones and ashes and covered with banana leaves and sand. Once cooked, taro could then be sliced or diced and eaten with other foods. In Hawai‘i and other islands of Polynesia, it could be pounded (mashed) and served as poi.

Because ripe *Colocasia* needed to be harvested and eaten rather quickly, some island groups developed a unique method of preservation in case of possible famine. Poi was stored in underground pits where fermentation preserved it for months on end.

Taro leaves were often used as a vegetable (like spinach). The most common dish was a food packet made of taro leaves into which either fish, pork, or fowl pieces were placed along with some coconut cream. This was then tied up and placed with other items in the underground oven. (Uncooked taro leaves are toxic and can cause sickness, thus it was important that they be thoroughly cooked for several hours.)

**Further Reading**


*Robert D. Craig*

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**Tattoo**

The word *tattoo* only entered the English language in the late eighteenth century. It came from the Polynesian languages in the Pacific (Samoan, Tahitian, Marquesan, Māori, etc.) where the word *tatau*, means “tapping.” Apparently, the English sailors aboard the European ships of “discovery” first saw the elaborate tattoo designs practiced by the Pacific peoples and returned home with their own personal “souvenirs” of their trips to the Pacific. They popularized an ancient art form that has continued to the present day.

Actually, the art of tattooing (applying permanent colored designs to one’s body) goes back to Neolithic times where it existed in various parts of the world. It had a resurgence of popularity in Western civilization, however, only after Europe’s contact with the peoples of the Pacific, primarily Polynesia and Micronesia. Captain James Cook first recorded the word in his journal of 1769 when he made references to the Marquesan custom of “tattau.” Tattooing was common throughout ancient Polynesia and Micronesia, but to a far lesser extent in Melanesia and Australia because the darker skin of these peoples did not show off the dark inks as it did with the lighter brown color of the other Pacific islanders.
The variety of design, the number of tattoos on one’s body, and the original social or religious purpose of tattooing varied from one island group to another. In the Marshall Islands (Micronesia), for example, only the chiefs and noble families were tattooed, and in other parts of the Pacific, it carried little or no social distinction. Tattoos were more commonly found on men, however, on Ponape (Micronesia), tattoo was far more extensive and decorative on women than men. In the Marquesas (Polynesia), both sexes were tattooed, but not far away on Mangareva, only the men were tattooed. In Polynesia, the tattoo artist was generally a male (often associated with a religious order), but on Palau (Micronesia), the women did the tattooing.

Anciently, the Pacific tattoo artist used a sharp serrated comb (usually made of bone) attached to a handle or rod about 12 to 18 inches in length. The sharp comb was first dipped into a type of ink made from various dyes from plants, ashes, or soil, mixed with oil, and then placed on the exact location of the body. The skin was stretched tightly, and then the comb hit sharply with a small mallet that caused the comb to pierce the skin and deposit the colored pigment beneath it. Any blood flow was wiped away with a piece of tapa cloth either by the artist or by one of his assistants. Finer lines could be drawn by the use of a type of sharp needle made of bone or other material. Depending upon the extent and size of the tattoo, the process could take hours, even days, and often the procedure was accompanied with chanting, singing, and periods of silence.

In some areas of the Pacific, tattooing was associated with the rite of passage to adulthood. In Samoa, for example, boys were tattooed from the age of 15 in groups of six to eight during a special feast called the umusāga. Samoan tattoos were unique in that they covered their bodies only from the lower part of the torso to the knee, while in the Marquesas, where tattooing reached its peak, men were tattooed from the head to their toes. Several European artists to the Pacific left drawings of what traditional Marquesan tattooing looked like.

Despite having been settled from the Marquesas Islands, the Hawaiians developed a relatively conservative approach to tattooing. Their designs were more restrained with simpler motifs than found in the Marquesas or in Samoa. It was also limited to a relatively small area of the body—on the right chest and shoulder, for example, balanced with another on the upper left leg—and consisted of checkered patterns and triangle motifs.

New Zealand Māoris also limited their elaborate tattoos (ta moko) primarily to the face, but simpler tattoos might be found elsewhere on the body. Male tattoos were highly decorative and covered the whole face, while female tattoos generally were limited to the lips and chin area. Māoris tattoos also differed from other island tattoos by being “incised” or carved deeply into the flesh rather than just the skin being punctured. Naturally, the incising caused considerable swelling and, consequently, a small area of tattoo could be undertaken at any one time. Throughout the islands, the complexity and extent of one’s tattoo increased the mana (prestige, power, respect) of that particular individual.
Christian missionaries to the islands generally banned all forms of tattooing, and it was not until 20 to 30 years ago that there has been a resurgence of tattooing in many of the islands. It is a traditional art form that islanders wear with great respect and dignity. See also Dress.

Further Reading

Robert D. Craig

Tongan Empire (c. 1250–1450)

Traditions tell us that from about the middle of the thirteenth to the middle of the fifteenth centuries, the Tu’i Tonga (the Ruler of Tonga) dominated many of the islands around him, including the three major Tongan island groups—Tongatapu, Ha’apai, and Vava’u—as well as parts of Samoa (lying further to the north) and parts of the Fijian islands (lying further to the west). This period in Tongan history is usually referred to as the “Tongan Empire.” Some contemporary writers further claim that Tonga dominated the entire area, including all of Fiji and Samoa as well as parts of Micronesia in the North Pacific Ocean.

Actual historical records regarding the “empire,” however, are scant. Tonga had no written language until the coming of the Europeans in the late eighteenth century, therefore, the only records we have are a few comments made to Captain James Cook and his fellow explorer William Anderson in 1777 while visiting Tonga. One islander told Cook that Tonga had once conquered “Hamoa” far to the north, but we should not assume that this meant all of the Samoan islands in the chain. By the tenth and eleventh centuries, only Tonga had indeed developed a unitary, centralized political system under a single ruler. Neither Fiji nor Samoa had similar developments, but both island groups had close connections to Tonga. The rulers of Tonga, for example, traced their lineage back to the sacred island of Manu’a in Samoa, and intermarriage between them and Samoan women was common. Fiji lay within such close proximity to Tonga that there was substantial trade and travel between the two island groups, and as a result cultural traits certainly passed from one people to another. War tribute may have initially been exacted from the defeated Samoan chiefs, but a continuous domination of one government with a centralized bureaucracy over another is hard to imagine during this period in Polynesian history. Neither is there any evidence of a sustained occupation of Samoa by the Tongans, in fact, each new Tu’i Tonga after Talakaifaiki had to reestablish his own right to tribute. Also, the Manu’a islands in Samoa appear to never have been touched by the Tongan conquest at all.

It is true that for several centuries, Tonga acted as a type of middleman between Samoa and Fiji most likely because Tonga’s very few natural resources had forced its islanders to take to sea. Canoe building and navigation had, therefore, become far more advanced in Tonga than the other areas. Its large, double-hulled lomipeau canoes plied the ocean (perhaps as far away
as Micronesia) trading for red feathers, timber for boat building, adze blades, tapa, and pandanus cloth. Rather than a marketplace type of trade as one might think of in Europe or Asia at the same time, exchange came primarily during traditional ceremonies, often coupled with treaties, marriage alliances, and the like.

Also associated with this expansion of Tongan trade and influence was the building of monumental stone works, as evidenced in the surviving triathlon monument the Ha‘amonga-a-Māui (The Burden of Māui), located about 20 miles from the modern capital of Nuku‘alofa. Tongan traditions say it was built by Tu‘i Tuitatui, the conqueror of Samoa, as a reminder to his sons (represented by the two upright supports) not to quarrel and to remain always united (represented by the lintel). Today, the structure is nicknamed the “Stonehenge of the Pacific” and rivals the other stone structures found in the Marquesas or the moai statues on Easter Island.

The decline of the Tongan empire came to an end with the frequent assassinations of the 19th, 22nd, and 23rd Tu‘i Tonga, all of which introduced a new period of violence and instability in the realm. A new political practice of dividing royal authority similar to the Samoan custom was eventually established, and the Tu‘i Tonga was relegated to a lower, but complementary authority. By 1610, the central authority was divided again creating yet another new title, the Tu‘i Kanokupolu, which, of course, led to the foundation of the current ruling dynasty in Tonga.

Further Reading

Robert D. Craig

Uncles

Uncles in Oceania play very important roles throughout a person’s life. These vary by region and place, but the mother’s brother, or kandare, for example, of the Sepik River of New Guinea, is a classic example. Because he has given his sister to the brother-in-law, those in-laws remain forever indebted to him. When his sister’s son comes of age and enters confinement for initiation, the kandare plays a major part in symbolically finishing off the child and handing him over to his brother-in-law’s clan.

In the Sepik River region, as in many parts of Melanesia, these coming of age rituals involve cutting skin and bloodletting. This is a figurative way of releasing the postpartum mother’s blood so as to re-create the child as a full member of his father’s clan. In so doing, the mother’s brother also reclaims the substance of his line. For Sepik initiates of the Iatmul tribe, a mother’s brother will cradle him on a log as a special cutter incises his back and chest with hundreds of small notches by a bamboo knife. These keloid cuts are irritated and become raised welts on the skin, in a pattern of scars that is designed to resemble the totemic crocodile. But it is crucial that the Uncle take his nephew
through this process with the kind of loving and firm hand of a father figure. For his service, the young man is forever indebted to the *kandare*, even as he is symbolically handed over by the *kandare* to his father.

**Further Reading**

_Nancy Sullivan_

**Voyaging/Ancient Navigation**

One of the greatest of achievements of any people anywhere was the human settlement of the thousands of islands scattered throughout the Pacific Ocean. Although living in a Stone-Age culture and without iron and the benefit of a literate society, these peoples set out thousands of years ago from Southeast Asia and the Philippines and pushed eastward from one island to another until the farthest points were reached—Hawai‘i and Easter Island—by 1100. This could only have been accomplished by the remarkable development of boat-building and advanced navigational skills.

Most of the Melanesian islands lying to the east of Southeast Asia are within 50 miles of one another, so the movement through these islands was without difficulty and could be accomplished by the use of rafts or small dug-out canoes. As the islanders moved further, however, the distances increased substantially, and by the time Hawai‘i and Easter Island were settled, the crossings increased to nearly 1,700 miles one way. These vast distances could only have been made by the development of larger sea-going vessels—the Polynesian double outrigger canoe with sails, for example—and the development of advanced sailing techniques gained from observing astronomical and marine phenomenon.

As the early migrants entered Polynesia (via Tonga and Samoa), they used canoes similar to the Fijian *drua*, a double-hulled canoe with lateen sails that could carry several hundred people in addition to cargo. The Fijians had developed this peculiarly unique sailing vessel by improving upon the fast-sailing outrigger canoes of the Micronesians in the north Pacific, and by 1000 B.C.E., this new design moved eastward from Fiji into Tonga and Samoa. Here the design was modified to include a full covered deck, a large raised platform (with crew housing), and booms connecting the hulls midship. By 200 C.E., this type of sailing vessel made its way into eastern Polynesia—into the Marquesas Islands—where it too underwent substantial design changes to become the
model upon which the richly decorated canoes of New Zealand and Hawai‘i were fashioned.

Polynesian canoe building was not only an arduous physical task, but it was highly religious in nature. All workmen were duly consecrated for the duration of the task, and every step of the process involved the recitation of traditional chants and prayers by them or by their priests. Construction usually occurred near the beach, and the site was tapu (forbidden) to foreigners and women. A ceremonial feast usually marked the end of its construction, and upon launch, human sacrifices might be offered. Navigation of the canoe was usually restricted to priests or highly skilled chiefs who had received the exact knowledge of canoe construction and navigation from their fathers. The Marquesan canoes were elaborately decorated with carved sternposts of stylized birds and human masks and figures. Large Māori canoes of New Zealand included beautifully carved canoe prows and sterns. These vessels were often carved with grotesque human figures in the front to frighten the enemy whereas the stern pieces were highly carved with scroll-like patterns.

These large double-hulled canoes plied the Pacific throughout the Middle Ages, accomplishing tasks that not even the expert Vikings or Chinese could fathom. They sailed long voyages (making trips back and forth) from Tahiti and the Marquesas to Hawai‘i and to New Zealand. Traditional chants detail numerous crossings with the names of their intrepid navigators. The Māori tell of chief Kupe from Hawaiki who first discovered New Zealand and upon returning home gave such a glowing report of the new land to his relatives that they quickly packed up and left for good. The Hawaiians tell stories of their three major navigational heroes—Hawai‘i-loa, Pa‘ao, and Moikeha from the islands of Tahiti far to the south (over 2,000 miles)—and their back-and-forth voyages over several generations. The Easter Islanders tell of their Hotu-Matua who left Marae-Renga (possibly in the Marquesas) because of family squabbles and with his hundreds of followers settled Rapanui (Easter Island) over 1,500 years ago. Then there are the demigod heroes of Polynesian myth—Rata (Laka), Māui, Tahaki (Kaha‘i), and Tinirau (Kinilau)—whose superhuman voyaging trips are well known throughout the islands.

Unfortunately, by the time of European contact (eighteenth century), long-distant, ocean-going voyaging had all but ceased in the Pacific, and very few islanders retained the knowledge and expertise to build and captain one of these vessels. When British explorer Captain James Cook visited Tahiti in 1777, however, he witnessed a gathering of 170 smaller double-hulled war canoes that he estimated carried 7,760 men. He was so impressed with the Tahitian war canoe that he personally drew an accurate blueprint for one with instructions for building.

In the last part of the twentieth century, Pacific scholars and island experts began to detail the exact science of how the Pacific peoples were able to navigate between the islands so well. It was a matter of heading the boat out in the known direction by lining up landmarks at one’s homeland (island), keeping the proper direction while out to sea, and then finding the correct destination when close to land. The direction at sea (a voyage of 3 or 4 weeks, for example) was determined by the various wind, sea swells and currents, and meteorological observances (the sun during the day and especially the stars at night). The suggested readings below will provide technical details for those interested. All this navigational knowledge could only be gained over hundreds of
years of experienced sailing, but unfortunately in the Pacific, it could only be transferred from one generation to another by word of mouth. See also Documents 6 and 10.

Further Reading

Robert D. Craig

Warfare

Warfare in Oceania during the Middle Ages was much unlike warfare in Europe or samurai Japan whose governmental structures were based on a constant feudal order of fighting. Certainly Oceanic peoples spent a good deal of their time in some form of fighting between communities and between islands, but the complexity and extent of their organized battles were far less than we might see elsewhere, except perhaps in Papua New Guinea and some parts of island Melanesia where their cultures were shaped by an aggressive war ethic.

The extent and scope of fighting that did occur depended, of course, upon the size of the communities and their available resources. Family units, subsisting on far-flung atolls, might fight against another family across the lagoon using primitive weapons fashioned from the available trees, stones, and coral.
Complex populations, however, living on large islands such as Hawai‘i or Papua New Guinea might launch major pitched battles on land using a wide variety of weapons while at the same time being accompanied by large naval contingent.

The reasons for conflicts among Pacific peoples were many, just as in modern times. Often it was for revenge, breaking a mutual treaty, jealousy between leaders or groups over land or food, competition for the love of a beautiful woman, rivalry over genealogical rights to rule, or even just for the pleasure of it! The list was extensive.

Organized group training of warriors was found only in a few societies. Most men learned to fight from childhood as they were taught by their fathers to use the spear and club in the daily hunt. Most adult men took their protective weapons with him whenever they left the bounds of their home community or district, not just for protection against their enemy, but for protection against wildlife they might confront along the way. Male children often participated in daily sports consisting of mock skirmishes and exercises to increase their fighting abilities. In Fiji, for example, young children were allowed to use captured prisoners as targets to improve their skill with the spear and club. Other groups often participated in war dances that gave the performers experience in quick footwork and in the use of clubs or other weapons. There were no standing armies as such, but some larger island societies had some skilled fighters attached to the chief’s court while the rest of the needed fighters consisted of adult males from the villages that could be mustered when needed.

War weapons consisted of handmade slings, javelins, spears, scythes, and clubs, all of various lengths and sizes (iron was unknown in those days). Bows
and arrows were used only in Melanesia, and the unique boomerang-shaped club only in southeastern Australia. Long spears with sharp or barbed-shaped tips were more frequently used, but like their arrows, having no feathers (unfledged), they were less accurate in hitting the target. Some warriors painted colored designs upon their faces and bodies to make them look more frightening, and the Māori warriors attempted to frighten their enemies by extreme facial and tongue gestures, fierce shouting, and unusual body gestures, not to mention their elaborate facial *tattoos*.

A few societies used protective shields made of bark that varied in size from the small parrying shields used in Australia to those colorful Melanesian shields big enough to shield a whole man. Many warriors threw off all clothing that was not essential, while others put on additional clothing to help protect them from their enemies’ weapons—protective cane armor around the torso was used along the Digul River in New Guinea and elaborate head-dresses and gorgets around the neck in Tahiti.

War preparations might include calling a general council to discuss the advisability of going to war; petitioning the high priests for divine guidance through the use of trances, dreams, or auguries; and perhaps offering a human sacrifice if the occasion was significant enough. Once all had been said and done, the chief made the final decision. If it was war, the council would be dismissed and the whole community would prepare for a battle. Men would ready their weapons, psyche themselves up, and collect at the designated gathering place.

On the day of the battle, the “armies” would face each other and sometimes each side would send in its favored champion to do hand-to-hand combat against the other. Eventually, one side would rush the other without any real preplanned strategy for attack, although at times warriors fought in ranks or groupings in various formations. Fighting would continue until the enemy was routed and fled the battlefield. The victors then buried their own dead, but let the enemy's rot on the battlefield.

Various forms of peace treaties were negotiated—either between victor and vanquished or between sides acknowledging a draw—and religious prayers and thank offerings were made, often in the form of *food* or human sacrifices being offered up in the temples by the high priests. Oftentimes, the victors would return home to celebrate their victory with feasting, dancing, and *entertainment*. See also Documents 3 and 11.

**Further Reading**


Robert D. Craig

**Windward. See Leeward and Windward**

**Women**

In Australia during the Middle Ages, women were the main *food* collectors and providers for the family. While their husbands were out hunting, they
spent long hours gathering plant foods (fruits, yams, and grass seeds) and small animals (lizards, snakes, witchetty grubs, and ants) from the desert as well as sea-food from the rivers and lagoons. They were also responsible for fetching drinking water and firewood, caring for babies, helping build the family hut or lean-to, making household utensils (bags, baskets, nets, and mats), and preparing meals, which took place early evening. Virtually all of her life was focused upon her family unit and its successful operation. Although most women's lives were held secondary to men and final authority within the family units rested with the husband, wives were not necessarily servile and submissive. If a fight between husband and wife occurred, the battered wife, who often fought back, could easily pick up her children and goods and move to a camp of a near relative until her husband came to his senses. In general, Australian wives were not inhibited to voice their own opinions. This attitude may have been a result of the more egalitarian character of Australian family and clan units, which were less organized and had far less hierarchical social structures than elsewhere in Oceania.

On the other hand, almost all Polynesian societies adhered to a highly structured, patriarchal form of governance. The right to rule was inherited by male chiefs through their fathers' senior blood lines, but on occasion, it could come through their mother's line, if, for example, it outranked her husband's. High-ranking chiefesses were recognized throughout the islands, but their actual rule was negligible, although on occasions they did challenge the ruling authority for one reason or another. Common women, on the other hand, were regulated by custom and tapu (things being forbidden). They were forbidden to participate in public religious ceremonies, they could not eat with men, they had to cook their own food, they were forbidden to touch their husbands' fishing equipment, and they could not eat specific foods (certain fish, dog, pork, sea turtles, and whales, for example). Each month during their menstrual period, they had to live in an isolated hut set away from the main village complex because they were considered "unclean." Women reared the children at home, fished in lagoons and shallow waters for food, produced tapa in the construction of clothing and decorative coverings, plaited all of the baskets and mats for clothing and household furnishings, gathered firewood, and often helped in the family's garden. In all of this, however, Polynesian women were not considered chattel, for they had the freedom to choose their husbands as well as the liberty to leave them. A beautiful woman was highly prized and much sought after in a Polynesian marriage. Surprisingly, the social status of a Polynesian woman was much higher in medieval Oceania than it was after having adopting European "civilization" in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Hundreds of different social and cultural groups lived on the 2,100 Micronesian islands in the North Pacific Ocean. Their lives reveal a far more complex scenario than Australia or Polynesia, and, as a result, generalizations about these peoples are much more difficult to make. Unlike Polynesians,
most male chiefs inherited their status through their matrilineal descent (through their mothers), although patrilineal and other descent groups did exist. Families lived on lands belonging to their particular matrilineal clan, and often husbands had little decision regarding descent affairs in the community in which they lived. Men usually worked the gardens, gathered and cut wood, made their boats, fishing tackle, rope, domestic utensils, and weapons, while the women attended to the domestic chores—planting and weeding yams, weaving mats and baskets, making the clothing, caring for the children, cooking the food, and even doing the tattooing. Similar to other areas of Oceania, Micronesian women separated themselves from the community each month during their menstrual cycles and for birthing of children, actions considered “unclean” by the male population. Polygamy was allowed, but it was not widely practiced. Divorce was easy and simple. The couple parted by mutual agreement, although the father usually retained the right to keep the children. For all indications, it appears that Micronesian women were well respected and held in high esteem. On Truk, for example, it was unmanly to hit a woman whatever the provocation might have been, and on Kosrae, women would never be asked to do a chore that rightly “was not hers.” It was also expected, however, that women would show total respect for their older brothers by not speaking to them directly and by crouching in their presence.

The widest diversity in the status of women occurred in Melanesia. At one extreme, the men of Sambia (Highlands of New Guinea) considered their women irresponsible, licentious, dangerous to men, and ready to “siphon off their strength.” As a result, they adopted numerous hygienic practices to prevent the absorption any of their wives’ “infectious” body fluids or smells. They also ate and slept in their own male-clubhouses to avoid the closeness of women. The Nagovisi women of south Bougainville (Papua New Guinea), on the other hand, controlled all matters regarding their descent group affairs. Land was inherited by the eldest daughters, and their husbands had to ask permission to use it because they were considered “outsiders.” Heads of the various clans were women, and they had the final say over clan affairs, including the marriage of all the young women. Women supervised the gardening and food production, while their husbands helped in the heavier tasks of clearing land and weeding. Although Nagovisi wives deferred to their husbands as heads of their particular household, the husband knew that if his wife left, she would take everything with her—including the children and all the wealth he had helped build up. See also Trukese Love Stick.

Further Reading
Yams

Cultivation of yams (various varieties of the *Dioscorea* family) occurred throughout Africa, Latin America, Asia, and Island Oceania, but not in Australia, where the indigenous peoples were primarily food gatherers and not cultivators. Along with *taro* and sweet potatoes, yams provided islanders with a substantial starchy food stock that was high in various vitamins and minerals and one that, unlike the others, could be stored for months at a time. Some Pacific island societies valued yams to such a degree that their whole way of life revolved around yam cultivation. Scholars refer to these societies as “yam cultures.”

Two particular species of yams were primarily cultivated in Oceania—*Dioscorea esculenta* and *Dioscorea alata* (great yam), the former being the tastier and the latter being the larger. They were propagated through cuttings from the last tubers harvested. These cuttings were planted deep in well-drained soil or earth mounds usually before the beginning of the wet season. The leafy vine that emerged above the soil had to be trained either on poles or trees, and because all of this process took time, energy, and patience, yams were more time-consuming than the cultivation of taro or sweet potatoes. Harvesting took place between 5 and 8 months after planting, and the mature tubers that had been well cared for could measure up to 12 feet in length and weigh up to 150 pounds.

Several island societies developed remarkable yam cultures that venerated its cultivation. In Tonga (western *Polynesia*), for example, yams were their most important food crop. The months of the year were named in reference to its cultivation, and the most important ceremony of all, the ‘inasi, would take place 10 days after the announcement of the first yam harvested (usually at the beginning of October). During the festival, all types of food and crafts would be on display, but it was the huge ceremonial yams (*kahokaho*) that gained most of the peoples’ admiration.

The Abelam people in Papua New Guinea (*Melanesia*) represent the ultimate in yam-growing cultures. Their whole lives were influenced by its cultivation and harvest. The size of harvested yams determined the status of not only the individual farmer, but the whole village as well. At a yearly festival, ceremonial yams would be put on display, after which, a farmer would present his largest yam to a particular rival who in return had to grow even a larger sized yam the following year, otherwise he would risk “losing face.” Similar exchanges took place between villages, whose prestige and political powers were dependent upon the size and quality of their ceremonial yams.

The growing cycle of the yams determined the social intercourse of the whole village. Only men grew yams, and they spent their entire time in the garden tending to their best plants. Women were forbidden to enter the gardens. Even sexual relations were deterred in fear that any outpouring of emotions might disrupt the tranquility needed for successful yam cultivation. (Disagreements, anger, hunting, the eating of red meat, and other emotional actions were also prohibited.) It was believed that yams contained spirits of one’s ancestors, and for that reason, they were highly revered. The plants were lovingly cared for during each stage of cultivation, and every possible means was employed so that the final product was the largest and finest yam ever produced. That included reciting certain magical spells, applying special fertilizers, and arranging the vines in particular patterns.
Once the first tubers were harvested, all sexual relations commenced in earnest again and repressed hostilities reappeared, but everyone looked forward to the festival that was to come. On that day, all of the prominent yams were exhibited on long poles in the display area. Many of them were highly decorated with yam masks, which had been hand-woven or carved from wood and colorfully painted. The women of the villages prepared lavish feasts for everyone, after which the ceremonial exchanges began. These exchanges usually led to friendly alliances with men from other villages and certainly to the distribution of the best breeding stock throughout the area. Once all the ceremonies were finished, most of the men began to contemplate the next year’s harvest and the best methods of producing the finest ceremonial yam.

Further Reading

Robert D. Craig

**Yap Empire**

Fiefdoms, kingdoms, and empires were unknown in medieval Oceania. Instead, one hears of local, district, and tribal chieftains governing through a decentralized system of personal rule. Two exceptions, however, might be suggested that could be interpreted as “empires” in the broadest sense of the word. They are the *Tongan Empire* in *Polynesia* and the Yap Empire in *Micronesia.*

For several hundred years, “subject” peoples living on the *atolls* east of Yap would set sail in their ocean-going canoes (every 2 or 3 years) and deliver “tribute” goods to the tribal leaders on the island of Yap. No one knows the origin of this complex custom. Some assume that it was established by the inhabitants of the poorer and more vulnerable atolls to the east so that, in case of hurricanes or tidal waves, they could find protective shelter on the larger island of Yap. Tribute gifts to tribal leaders on Yap, they believed, would provide that needed hospitality. Yet the tribute and gift giving was not entirely reciprocal. The various tribal leaders on Yap claimed “ownership” of these eastern atolls and asserted that they could punish any community that failed to pay their tribute. (Not much unlike the Athenian empire in classical Greece, for example.) Atoll visitors were also treated like tenants or persons of lower-caste status when visiting Yap. These last two statements suggest that perhaps there had at one time been a military defeat of the small atolls by Yap, but this has never been suggested or confirmed from island traditions.

Once a planned expedition had been announced, ocean-going canoes would set sail from Namonuito, Pulap, and Pulusuk atolls, almost 700 miles away from Yap. They would make their way to the next group of islands, where their leaders would give up their responsibilities to the new canoe “captains” of those islands who now joined them. The larger group would then continue westward and meet up again with other canoes and relinquish their leadership to the new captains. It was the chief of Mogmog who then represented the whole fleet when it arrived at the main district of Gatchepar on Yap.
The canoes carried with them three kinds of gifts—religious tribute, canoe tribute, and tribute of the land. The first two, of course, were given to the tribal leader of Gatchepar, while the third was given to the various Yap chiefs who claimed ownership over the atolls or districts from which the canoes had come. Tribute consisted of woven fiber skirts and mats, loincloths, sennit twine (rope made from twisted coconut husks), coconut oil, and various shell articles.

After a length of time and when the seasonal winds changed in their favor, the atoll dwellers would pack their gifts (food, turmeric, flint stones, and hand-carved wooden objects) from their Yapese hosts and return home in the same manner in which they had arrived.

Further Reading

Robert D. Craig
For written descriptions of life in Oceania, we are often forced to rely on documents generated by the first European contacts with the peoples of Oceania in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and thus the selections provided below date from that period. Note that Europeans came to the region as explorers, traders, and missionaries; and, as the following documents indicate, their accounts of the peoples they met and the traditions and practices they encountered were influenced by their own political ambitions, economic goals, social backgrounds, and religious beliefs.

1. Captain James Cook’s Account of an Encounter with the Māori of New Zealand, 1769

James Cook (1728–1779), a British explorer, navigator, and cartographer, is best known for his three voyages to the Pacific Ocean, during the course of which he explored the Hawaiian Islands and the eastern coast of Australia, and also achieved the first circumnavigation of New Zealand. The following excerpt from Cook’s journal of his first voyage describes an encounter with the Māori, whom he describes as “Indians,” that occurred on October 8, 1769 along the shores of a bay on the North Island that is today known as Poverty Bay. This encounter, and another the next day, ended with the death of a Māori warrior and greatly disappointed Cook, who had hoped to establish friendly relations with the people of New Zealand and learn from them about the geography of their islands. For a Māori perspective of a second encounter between Cook’s party and the people of New Zealand, see Document 2, below.

[S]eeing some of the natives on the other side of the River of whom I was desirous of speaking with, and finding that we could not ford the River, I order’d the yawl in to carry us over, and the pinnace to lay at the Entrance. In the mean time the Indians made off. However we went as far as their Hutts which lay about 2 or 300 Yards from the water side, leaving 4 boys to take care of the Yawl, which we had no sooner left than 4 Men came out of the woods on the other side of the River, and would certainly have cut her off had not the People in the Pinnace discover’d them and called to her to drop down the Stream, which they did, being closely pursued by the Indians. The coxswain of the Pinnace, who had charge of the Boats, seeing this, fir’d 2 Musquets over their Heads; the first made them stop and Look round them, but the second they
took no notice of; upon which a third was fir’d and kill’d one of them upon
the Spot just as he was going to dart his spear at the Boat. At this the other 3
stood motionless for a Minute or two, seemingly quite surprised; wondering,
no doubt, what it was that had thus kill’d their Comrade; but as soon as they
recovered themselves they made off, dragging the Dead body a little way and
then left it. Upon our hearing the report of the Musquets we immediately
repair’d to the Boats, and after viewing the Dead body we return’d on board.

Source: Reed, A. H., and A. W. Reed, eds. Captain Cook in New Zealand: Extracts from
the Journals of Captain James Cook. 2nd ed. Wellington: A. H. and A. W. Reed, 1969,
pp. 34–35.

2. Hore-ta-te-Taniwha’s Account of Captain James
Cook’s Visit to New Zealand, 1769

Although not written down by Europeans until about 1852, this account
by an aged Māori chief remembering his youth relates to events that oc-
curred in November 1769 near the mouth of the Whitianga River on
New Zealand’s North Island. After the disappointing encounter with the
Māori at Poverty Bay (see Document 1, above) Captain James Cook
sailed his ship Endeavor along the east coast of the island seeking a
suitable site to observe the transit of Mercury, which occurred on No-
vember 9. As this account for a Māori perspective indicates, the Māori–
European interaction at Whitianga was, at least initially, more friendly,
though the Māori considered their visitors to be very strange and re-
ferred to them as “goblins.” Nonetheless, Cook was able to view the
transit of Mercury and to get information about the shape of the islands.
A brisk trade also developed during Cook’s 10-day stay between his
crew and the Māori, though it was a dispute arising from this trade that
led to another Māori death.

In days long past, when I was a very little boy, a vessel came to Whitianga.
Our tribe was living there at that time. We did not live there as our permanent
home, but were there according to our custom of living for some time on each
of our blocks of land, to keep our claim to each, and that our fire might be kept
alight on each block, so that it might not be taken from us by some other
tribe.

We lived at Whitianga, and a vessel came there, and when our old men saw
the ship they said it was a tupua, a god, and the people on board were strange
beings. The ship came to anchor, and the boats pulled on shore. As our old
men looked at the manner in which they came on shore, the rowers pulling
with their backs to the bows of the boat, the old people said, “Yes, it is so:
these people are goblins; their eyes are at the back of their heads; they pull on
shore with their backs to the land to which they are going.” When these gob-
lins came on shore we (the children and women) took notice of them, but we
ran away from them into the forest, and the warriors alone stayed in the pres-
ence of those goblins; but, as the goblins stayed some time, and did not do any
evil to our braves, we came back one by one, and gazed at them, and we stroked
their garments with our hands, and we were pleased with the whiteness of
their skins and the blue eyes of some of them. . . .
After the ship had been lying at anchor for some time, some of our warriors went on board, and saw many things there. When they came on shore, they gave our people an account of what they had seen. This made many of us desirous to go and see the home of the goblins. I went with the others; but I was a very little fellow in those days, so some of us boys went in the company of the warriors. Some of my playmates were afraid, and stayed on shore. When we got on board the ship we were welcomed by the goblins, whom our warriors answered in our language. We sat on the deck of the ship, where we were looked at by the goblins, who with their hands stroked our mats and the hair of the heads of us children; at the same time they made much gabbling noise in talking, which we thought was questioning regarding our mats and the sharks' teeth we wore in our ears... but as we could not understand them we laughed, and they laughed also. They held some garments up and showed them to us, touching ours at the same time; so we gave our mats for their mats, to which some of our warriors said "Ka pai," which words were repeated by some of the goblins, at which we laughed, and were joined in the laugh by the goblins.

There was one supreme man in that ship. We knew that he was the lord of the whole by his perfect gentlemanly and noble demeanor. He seldom spoke, but some of the goblins spoke much. But this man did not utter many words: all that he did was to handle our mats and hold our mere, spears, and wahaika [all types of weapons], and touch the hair of our heads. He was a very good man, and came to us—the children—and patted our cheeks, and gently touched our heads. His language was a hissing sound, and the words he spoke were not understood by us in the least. We had not been long on board the ship before this lord of these goblins made a speech, and took some charcoal and made marks on the deck of the ship, and pointed to shore and looked at our warriors. One of our aged men said to our people, "He is asking for an outline of this land"; and that old man stood up, took the charcoal, and marked the outline of Te Ika-a-Maui. And the old chief spoke to that chief goblin, and explained the chart he had drawn. The other goblins and our people sat still and looked at the two who were engaged with the chart marked with charcoal on the deck. After some time the chief goblin took some white stuff, on which he made a copy of what the old chief had made on the deck, and then spoke to the old chief...

One of our tribe was killed by the goblins... We—that is, our people—went again and again to that ship to sell fish, or mats, or anything that we Maori had to sell; and one day one of our canoes, in which were nine persons, paddled off to the ship; but one of that nine was a noted thief, and this man took a dogskin mat to sell to the goblins. There were five of them at the stern of the canoe and four in the bow, and this thief was with those in the stern. When they got alongside the ship, the goblin who collected shells, flowers, tree-blossoms, and stones was looking over the side [probably the naturalist Joseph Banks]. He held up the end of a garment which he would give in exchange for the dogskin mat belonging to this noted thief; so the thief waved with his hand to the goblin to let some of it down into the canoe, which the goblin did; and, as the goblin let some of it down into the canoe the thief kept pulling it towards him. When the thief had got a long length of the goblin's garment before him, the goblin cut his garment, and beckoned with his hand to the man to give the dogskin mat up to him; but the their
did not utter a word, and began to fold up the dogskin mat with the goblin’s garment into one bundle, and told his companions to paddle to the shore. They paddled away. The goblin went down into the hold of the ship, but soon came up with a walking-stick in his hand, and pointed with it at the canoe which was paddling away. Thunder pealed and lightening flashed, but those in the canoe paddled on. When they landed eight rose to leave the canoe, but the thief sat still with his dogskin mat and the garment of the goblin under his feet. His companions called to him, but he did not answer. One of them went and shook him, and the thief fell back into the hold of the canoe, and blood was seen on his clothing and a hole in his back. He was carried to the settlement and a meeting of the people called to consult on the matter, at which companions told the tale of the theft of the goblin’s garment; and the people said, “He was the cause of his own death, and it will not be right to avenge him.”


3. Captain James Cook’s Description of War Canoes in Tahiti, 1774

Taken from the journal kept by Captain James Cook during his second South Pacific voyage (1772–1775), the following selection is important because it is one of the few descriptions we have of how an Oceanian crew worked together to move a large boat through the water. The canoes described here were part of a Tahitian war fleet assembled in 1774 for an attack on the nearby island of Mo’orea. For a later account of Tahitian rowers, see Document 6, below.

[W]e saw a Number of War Canoes coming round the point of Oparre, being desirous to have a nearer view of them I hastened down to Oparre (accompanied by some of the officers etc.) which we reached before the Canoes were all landed and had an opportunity to see in what manner they approached the shore which was in divisions consisting of three or four or more [boats] lashed close a long side each other, such a division one would think must be very unwieldy, yet it was a pleasure to see how well they were conducted, they Paddled in for the Shore with all their might conducted in so judicious a manner that they closed the line a Shore to an inch. . . .

The rowers were encouraged to exert their strength by their leaders on the stages, and directed by a man who stood with a wand in his hand in the fore part of the middlemost Vessel, this man by words and actions directed the paddlers when all should paddle when either the one side or the other should cease etc. for the steering paddles alone were not sufficient to direct them: all these motions they observed with such quickness as clearly shewed that they were expert in their business.

4. Tahitian Sexual Practices: The Mahu, c. 1790 and 1797

The mahu were Tahitian boys who were kept in the households of local chiefs for sexual purposes. The mahu, though male, behaved like women in all social settings and engaged in sex only with other men. Just as they reacted to the berdaches found among many North American tribes, the first Europeans to encounter the mahu found them to be largely incomprehensible. The first selection below was written about 1790 by James Morrison, one of the Bounty mutineers, who spent almost a year on Tahiti. His account is mainly descriptive. However, the second selection, from almost a decade later, is much more judgmental, using words like vile and depraved to describe the mahu and refusing altogether to detail their sexual practices. This selection was written by James Wilson, captain of a missionary expedition sent into the South Pacific in the late 1790s by the London Missionary Society. The mahu were clearly an affront to the religious sensibilities of Captain Wilson.

These men are in some respects like the Eunuchs in India but are Not Castrated. They Never Cohabit with women but live as they do; they pick their Beards out & dress as women, dance and sing with them and are as effeminate in their Voice; they are generally excellent hands at Making and painting of Cloth, Making Matts and every other Women’s employment. They are esteemed Valuable friends in that way and it is said, tho I never saw an instance of it, that they Converse with Men as familiar as women do.


These mawhoos [mahu] chuse this vile way of life when young; putting on the dress of a woman, they follow the same employments, are under the same prohibitions with respect to food, etc. and seek the courtship of men the same as women do, nay, are more jealous of the men who cohabit with them, and always refuse to sleep with women. We are obliged here to draw a veil over other practices too horrible to mention. These mawhoos, being only six or eight in number, are kept by the principal chiefs. So depraved are these poor heathens, that even their women do not despise those fellows, but form friendships with them.


5. Marriage in the Marquesas Islands, c. 1800

Edward Robarts deserted from the whaleship New Euphrates on Christmas Day 1798 and spent the next 7 years, until February 1806, in the Marquesas Islands. He married a Marquesan wife, Ena, by whom he had a daughter. Many years later, with his wife and child dead and he himself living in poverty in India, Robarts wrote a detailed account of what he saw and experienced in the Marquesas during the first years of the nineteenth century. The following excerpt from that account describes a Marquesan marriage ceremony. For a description of the sexual aspects of the marriage ceremony in the Gilbert Islands, see Document 12, below.
Their Marriages are some what singular. A Chief or other great man having a son, perhaps not more than two or three years of age, now another great man has a daughter, and most likely pregnant. Word is sent to the Ladys Parents a few days before hand to inform them of the intended union. If they give consent, it always puts every one in motion in the Neighborhood for several days, some preparing cloths, some food and others gathering flowers and sandal wood.

A[t] length the days come. The Young Gentleman sets out with several attendants. When they arrive near the house of the Lady, Her friends give the signal by the Beat of a Drum. They are ushered in with shouts of Joy. The Young Lover is then seated by the side of his bride on the cloth of his mother in Law. This is the greatest respect they can show, as the Cloth or turban is held, as it were, Sacred. The Moria Drum is then brought with several of the Prophets & their retinue, who being seated the drum beats, and the Prophets party begins to sing their ceremonies [in] a dialect peculiar to themselves, which continues for several hours. A good Hog is roasted, and fish is brought for the Guests with every thing suitable. Plenty of food is brought from the Ladys several relations. The Drums Beat up at the Play ground. The Inhabitants assemble. The merry dance leads off and continues until sun set. In the even[ing] the House is crowded, and they sing the whole night.

In a day or two the father of the Bride groom visits the young couple, followed by a number of attendants, every one bearing a present. This visit causes another feast which continues for several days. On the even[ing] before his departure he gives notice of His wish to remove his daughter in law to her husbands estate. This being complied with, they set out early the next day. Being just Arrived at her new habitation, every mark of esteem and respect is showed to her. The merry day begins, and great plenty of food is provided for the different ranks of Ladies that comes to welcome her to their part of the country. The day is past over with all mirth and festivity. The evening is come.


6. English Missionary William Ellis: Another Description of Tahitian Canoes, c. 1814

This selection by English missionary William Ellis, like the excerpt from the journal of Captain James Cook in Document 3, above, is a rare description of how a crew of Oceanians coordinated the paddling of their larger canoes. Writing about 40 years after Cook, Ellis is also describing a Tahitian crew, although his description of the rowers’ coordination is even more detailed.

The rowers appeared to labour hard. Their paddles, being made of the tough wood of the hibiscus, were not heavy; yet, having no pins in the sides of the canoe, against which the handles of the paddles could bear, but leaning the whole body over the canoe, first on one side, and then on the other, and working the paddle with one hand near the blade, and the other at the upper end of the handle, and shoveling as it were the water, appeared a great waste of strength. They often, however, paddle for a time with remarkable swiftness,
keeping time with the greatest regularity. The steersman stands or sits in the stern, with a large paddle; the rowers sit in each canoe two or three feet apart, the leader sits next, the steersman gives the signal to start, but striking his paddle violently against the side of the canoe, each paddle is then put in and taken out of the water with every stroke at the same moment; and after they have thus continued on one side for five or six minutes, the leader strikes his paddle, and the rowers instantly and simultaneously turn to the other side, and thus alternately working on each side of the canoe, they go along at a considerable rate. There is generally a good deal of striking the paddle when a chief leaves or approaches the shore, and the effect pretty much resembles that of the smacking of the whip, or sounding of the horn, at the starting or arrival of a coach.


7. Trade and Barter on Fiji in the 1840s

The two following selections describe trade and barter as it was conducted in Fiji in the 1840s. The first selection is by the Wesleyan missionary Thomas Williams (1815–1891), who worked among the Fijians from 1840 to 1852. His 1858 publication, *Fiji and the Fijians: The Islands and Their Inhabitants*, made him a recognized expert on Fijian culture as it existed at the time of first contact with Europeans. Williams was also a gifted artist, and his many drawings of Fijian life, which were later transformed into engravings to illustrate his book, are valuable depictions of mid-nineteenth-century Fijians.

Charles Wilkes (1798–1877), the author of the second selection, was an American naval officer and explorer. He commanded the United States Exploring Expedition (commonly known as the Wilkes Expedition), a small flotilla of ships authorized by the U.S. Congress that carried—botanists, naturalists, taxidermists, mineralogists, and artists on a voyage of exploration into the Pacific between 1838 and 1842. The following selection is an excerpt from Wilkes’ narrative of the voyage.

The commercial transactions of the Fijians, though dating far back, have been on a small scale, consisting of barter trade, which is chiefly in the hands of the Levuka, Mbutoni, and Malaki people, who regard the sea as their home, and are known as “the inhabitants of the water.” Although wanderers, they have settlements on Lakemba, Somosomo, Great Fiji, and other places. They exchange pottery for *masi* [barkcloth], mats, and yams. On one island, the men fish, and the women make pots, for barter with the people on the main. Their mode of exchange is very irregular. The islanders send to inform those on the mainland that they will meet them, on such a day, at the trading-place,—a square near the coast paved for the purpose. The people of the continent bring yams, taro, bread, etc., to exchange for fish. The trade is often left to the women, among whom a few transactions take place quietly, when some misunderstanding arises, causing excited language, and ending in a scuffle. This is the signal for a general scramble, when all parties seize on all they can, and run off with their booty amidst shouts and execrations of the less successful.
I also had an opportunity of seeing their manner of trading among themselves. This is entirely conducted by barter. The market is held on a certain day in the square, where each one deposits in a large heap what goods and wares he may have. Anyone may then go and select from it what he wishes, and carry it to his own heap; the other then has the privilege of going to the heap of the former and selecting what he considers an equivalent. This is all conducted without noise or confusion. If any disagreement takes place, the chief is there to settle it; but this is said to rarely happen. The chief has a right to take what he pleases from each heap.


8. Andrew Cheyne’s Account of Food and Feasting on Ponape in Micronesia, 1843

Andrew Cheyne (1917–1866) was a Scottish trader who in 1841 set up two trading stations in the Yap Islands, which at that time were virtually unknown to Europeans. Offering the first written description of various island societies, such as Ponape, and of previously unknown sites, such as the now famous ruins at Nan Madol, Cheyne’s account of his trading voyages to Yap and elsewhere in the South Pacific is an important historical resource. The following excerpt from Cheyne’s account describes food and modes of cooking on the Micronesian island of Ponape (now Pohnpei).

The following description may give some idea of their mode of cooking. A fire is made of wood and covered with small stones. When the wood is all consumed, they rake the ashes out, and place a layer of the heated stones on the ground, on which they place their food well wrapped up in banana and wild taro leaves to prevent it from burning; the remainder of the heated stones are then laid on the top of the leaves containing the food, when that is done the whole is then closely covered up with leaves, mats etc. so as to prevent the steam from escaping. In a couple of hours the food will be sufficiently done. Whole pigs, turtle, dogs, yams and breadfruit are cooked in this way, and persons unacquainted with this South Sea mode of cooking would be rather surprised to find the food so well done. I consider this to be a superior mode of cooking yams and breadfruit to any with which we are acquainted.

Breadfruit being the chief food of these natives, they have, from the little time occupied in cultivating their vegetable productions, a great deal of leisure. It is true that yams are cultivated to a considerable extent, but the process of planting requires but very little time. They have no regular plantations, but small spots of ground here and there are cleared, in which the yams are planted. They merely make a small hole in the ground sufficiently large to admit the seed, and do not even loosen the earth around it to allow the yam to grow to any size; the consequence is that they are of a very small size and
many of them of an indifferent quality. They generally have them planted near trees and have strings fastened to the branches for the vines to entwine round. At other islands small reeds are generally stuck in the ground by each seed for the vine to run up; but these islanders with respect to their cultivation, are far behind others who are in a much greater state of savage ignorance; consequently, their time being much less occupied, amusements and feasting occupy a great part of it. Their feasts generally claim priority to everything else. The King makes an annual visit to every village in the tribe, at which time the greatest festivities take place, the chiefs then vying with each other who shall enthrall him the best. Immense quantities of breadfruit and yams are cooked . . . and Kava drinking is also carried to excess. These feasts commence in the morning and continue until near sunset, at which time the greater part of the chiefs are quite insensible with Kava. . . . young people then commence dancing and continue until Midnight, at which time they all retire to rest. The festivities last for two days at each village during the King’s annual visit; but feasting on a smaller scale is of a daily occurrence.


9. An English Sea Captain’s Account of Dancing on Bora Bora, 1846

The following description of dancing on the island of Bora Bora was written by Henry Byam Martin, a British naval officer and member of a prominent naval family. Between August 1846 and August 1847, Martin commanded H.M.S. *Grampus*, which was on station between Hawaii and Tahiti. Based on his experiences during this service, Martin’s account, like Captain Wilson’s in Document 4, above, betrays a certain cultural disapproval of island society and practices.

The news of our arrival had brought in the population from all parts of the island; I found them assembled in front of the chapel celebrating their orgies in *honour of me*!

Nothing can be more uncouth or barbarous than the “Bora Bora dance.” The performance would have been void of interest, but that it has been handed down from their earliest & most savage days—and if I am not mistaken I have seen it described and drawn n Cook or one of the early voyagers.

Twenty-five men—naked all but the Maro [loincloth]—sat side by side in a line—with the left leg tucked under the rump and the right projected in front. They grunted and gesticulated in chorus to a sort of wild song, executed by one who sat in the middle. After the exhibition Tivivi, the Regent, invited me to visit another group, which was far more numerously attended.

This was the real native dance, & seemed more attractive, the performers being mostly of the fairer sex. A circle was formed for the dancers, within which 11 drums were hammered with might & main. As for the dance itself, it was a gross exaggeration of that of the Egyptian Almehis. A girl or young man stepped into the circle & for a couple of minutes exhibited the most indecent movements; with certain gymnastical motions of the legs & arms. The great trial of skill seemed to be how nimbly they could wag their sterns. None the less the half naked figures decked in garlands, flitting about in the torch light
were highly picturesque and the scene altogether was one that Salvador Rosa might have made something of.

I believe this ball was got up for my amusement, and therefore I remained as long as patience permitted. Then each chief seized a torch and lighted me to the boat—the 11 drums followed, and the multitude shook hands so vehemently that I was glad to be clear of their rough though cordial greetings.


10. Description of a New Guinea Canoe, c. 1846

Between 1846 and 1850, Captain Owen Stanley commanded the H.M.S. *Rattlesnake* on a voyage of survey and exploration around New Guinea and neighboring islands. The following excerpt is taken from the narrative of that voyage written by the expedition’s naturalist, John MacGillivray. Unlike Documents 3 and 6, above, which focus on how a Tahitian crew handled a large canoe, this description of the boats used in parts of New Guinea focuses on the craft itself, not on the crew.

The canoe of this part of New Guinea is usually about twenty-five feet in length, and carries seven or eight people. It is made of the trunk of a tree, hollowed out like a long tough, roundly pointed at each end, a foot and a half in extreme width, with the sides bulging out below and falling in at top, leaving only eight inches between the gunwales which are strengthened by a pole running along from end to end. the ends—which are alike—are carved like those of the catamaran in imitation of the head of a turtle or snake, but more elaborately. The outrigger consists of a float as long as the canoe, attached by small sticks or pegs let into the wood to eight or nine supporting poles the inner ends of which rest in notches in both gunwales, and are secured there. A portion, or the whole of the framework, is carefully covered over with planks or long sticks, and occasionally a small stage is formed on the opposite side, over the centre of the canoe, projecting a little outwardly, with room upon it for two people to sit and paddle. The canoes of this description which we saw were not provided with any other sail than a small temporary one, made by interlacing the leaflets of the cocoa-palm, and stuck up on poles when going with the wind free. The paddles used here are similar in shape to those seen in the Louisiade Archipelago, with spear-shaped blades and slender handles, but are larger—measuring six feet in length—and of neater construction, the end of the handle being carved into some fanciful device.


11. Settling a Dispute among the People of Australia’s Cape York Peninsula, c. 1848

Edmund B. C. Kennedy (1818–1848) was a British surveyor and explorer who was instrumental in the exploration of northeastern Australia,
particularly the Cape York Peninsula. The following selection is from a narrative of Kennedy’s last expedition, an unsuccessful attempt to traverse the Cape York Peninsula that ended with Kennedy’s death at the hands of hostile aborigines in December 1848. This account describes the resolution of a dispute for an unknown cause involving two groups of aborigines.

One day I witnessed a native fight, which may be described here, as such occurrences, although frequent enough in Australia, have by Europeans been witnessed only in the settled districts. It was one of those smaller fights, or usual modes of settling a quarrel when more than two people are concerned, and assumed quite the character of a duel upon a large scale. At day-break, I landed in company of six or seven people who were going out on different shooting parties. The natives came down to the boat as usual, but all carried throwing-sticks—contrary to their usual practice of late; and at the place where they had slept, numbers of spears were stuck up on end in the sand. These preparations surprised me, but Paida would not explain the cause and seemed anxious to get me away. The shooters marched off—each with his own black—but I loitered behind, walking slowly along the beach.

About 200 yards from the first camping-place, two groups of strange natives, chiefly men, were assembled with throwing-sticks in their hands and bundles of spears. While passing them they moved along in twos and threes towards the Evans Bay party, the men of which advanced to meet them. The women and children began to make off, but a few remained as spectators on the sands, it being then low water. A great deal of violent gesticulation and shouting took place, the parties became more and more excited, and took up their position in two scattered lines facing each other, extending from the margin of the beach to a little way in the bush, and about twenty-five yards apart. Paida, too, partook of the excitement and could refrain no longer from joining in the fight; he dropped my haversack and bounded away at full speed to his camping-place, where he received his spears from little Purom his son, and quickly made his appearance upon the scene of action.

The two parties were pretty equally matched—about fifteen men in each. The noise now became deafening; shouts of defiance, insulting expressions, and every kind of abusive epithet were banded about, and the women and children in the bush kept up a wailing cry all the while rising and falling in cadence. The pantomimic movements were of various descriptions; besides the singular quivering motion given to the thighs placed wide apart (common to all the Australian dances), they frequently invited each other to throw at them, turning the body half round and exposing the breech, or dropping on one knee or hand as if to offer a fair mark. At length a spear was thrown and returned, followed by many others, and the fighting became general, with an occasional pause. The precision with which the spears were thrown was not less remarkable than the dexterity with which they were avoided. In nearly every case the person thrown at would, apparently, have been struck had he stood still, but, his keenness of sight enabled him to escape by springing aside as required, variously inclining the body, or sometimes merely lifting up a leg to allow the spear to pass by, and had two been thrown at one person at the same moment he could scarcely have escaped, but this I observed was never attempted, as it would have been a would have been in war,—here each
individual appeared to have a particular opponent. I had a capital view of the whole proceedings, being seated about fifty yards behind and slightly on the flank of one of the two contending parties. One spear thrown higher than usual passed within five yards of me, but this I was satisfied was the result of accident, as I had seen it come from Paida’s party. Soon afterwards I observed a man at the right extreme of the line next me, who had been dodging round a large scaevola bush for some time back, make a sudden dart at one of the opposite party and chop him down the shoulder with an iron tomahawk. The wounded man fell, and instantly a yell of triumph denoted that the whole matter was at an end.

Paida rejoined me five minutes afterwards, apparently much refreshed by this little excitement, and accompanied me on my walk, still he would not explain the cause of the fight. The wounded man had his arm tied up by one of our people who landed soon afterwards, and, although the cut was both large and deep, he soon recovered.


12. The Sexual Aspects of Marriage in the Gilbert Islands, c. 1920

A British civil servant, Sir Arthur G. Grimble (1888–1956) was a member of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony Administrative Service from 1914 to 1932, serving as colony lands commissioner from 1922 to 1925. During this period, Grimble spent his spare time in ethnographic research, and when colony resident commissioner from 1926 to 1932 he wrote numerous papers on aspects of Gilbert Islands culture. The following excerpt from one of his papers describes the sexual consummation of a new marriage.

[T]he families of the bridal pair came together, as soon as the sun had passed zenith. When all were present and silent, the bride was brought into the house by her mother, mother’s sister, mother’s mother, or adoptive mother. The girl and the old woman immediately mounted into the loft, and there the younger was stripped of all her clothing and laid upon a new sleeping mat especially woven for the occasion. Thus she was left, awaiting the arrival of her groom.

As soon as the groom was known to be ready, the boy was brought by his mother or father’s sister into the lower room. Aided by pushes and encouragement from all his nearest female relations he climbed into the loft; there he stripped off his waist mat and threw it down among the waiting people. As soon as it was seen to fall the whole audience broke out into clamorous exhortation to both the young people, beseeching them to cast off coyness and quickly to consummate the union. Nevertheless, the bride’s kinfolk would have been much disappointed and ashamed had she surrendered herself without demur to the embraces of the bridegroom, for that would have denoted a lack of modesty unseemly in a well-born maiden. Without moving from her mat, it was therefore customary for her to resist the advances of her mate, and to intimate to those below that she was so doing by struggles of which the reverberation could not fail to reach them.
At the moment when her virginity left her she emitted a single piercing scream. Soon after, the bridegroom would call from above, and at that signal his mother would mount into the loft. There she would at once search for traces of blood on the girl’s sleeping mat and, having found them, would cry in a loud voice, “Te tei! Te tei!” (“A virgin! A virgin!”). She then descended alone to exhibit the mat to all eyes, whereupon, taking up the cry of the old woman, the father and uncles of the bridegroom rubbed a little of the virgin’s blood upon his cheeks, where it would remain for the rest of the day. The mat was afterwards carefully burned that no enemy of the family might obtain it and, by using evil magic upon the blood, curse the bride with barrenness.

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Appendix: Major Island Groups of Oceania

**Western Oceania**

*Micronesia*

Yap (the Yapese Empire islands and atolls: Woleai, Yap, Ifalik, Fais, Satawal, Lamotrek, Elato, Satawal, Faralep, Eauripik, Ulithi Sorol, Gaferut, Ngulu, West Fayu, Pikelot, and Olimarao)
Belau (Palau)
Marianas (Guam, Saipan, Tinian, Rota Islands)
Caroline Islands
Chuuk (Truk)
Pohnpei
Kosrae
Marshall Islands (Majuro Atoll, Kwajalein Atoll and outer islands)
Nauru
Kiribati
Gilbert Islands
Phoenix Islands
Line Islands
Tuvalu

*Melanesia*

New Guinea
New Guinea’s outer islands:
  Biak Island
  Numfor Island
  Waigeo Island
  Torres Strait Islands
  Bismark Archipelago
  Admiralty Islands
  Trobriand Islands
  D’Entrecasteaux Islands
  Louisiade Archipelago
  Solomon Islands

Bougainville
Malaita
Santa Cruz Islands
Vanuatu
Banks Islands
New Caledonia
Loyalty Islands

**Central Oceania**

*Polynesia*

Fiji
  Rotuma
  Tikopia
  Futuna
  Wallis
  Vanua Levu
  Viti Levu
  Lau Group
Tokelau
Samoa
  Savaii
  Upolu
  Tutuila
Tonga
  Niuatoputapu
  Vava’u
  Ha’apai
  Tongatapu
  Niue
  Cook Islands

**Eastern Oceania**

*Polynesia*

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  Tahiti
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