



FIGURE 12.1 A Caravansary. Along the Silk Roads, caravansaries were vital outposts where merchants traveling between Turkey and China could stay and meet other traders to exchange goods, commodities, and ideas. The Shah Abbasi caravansary shown here is now a national heritage site in Nishapur, in modern Iran. (credit: modification of work “Abbasi caravanserai of Nishapur” by Sonia Sevilla/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

CHAPTER OUTLINE

12.1 The Indian Ocean World in the Early Middle Ages

12.2 East-West Interactions in the Early Middle Ages

12.3 Border States: Sogdiana, Korea, and Japan

INTRODUCTION The early Middle Ages was a time of increased connections across continents. This period was marked by the continued development of the maritime networks centered on the Indian Ocean, and of the Silk Roads—a series of trade routes linking China and parts of central Asia, India, and the Middle East. A globally connected medieval world was emerging, one united by long-distance trade networks and enhanced by the exchange of ideas. An important element of this system was the **caravansary**, an inn funded by the state or wealthy individuals where travelers could spend the night and store their goods securely (Figure 12.1). In addition to providing shelter, caravansaries were a place for merchants to meet other traders to exchange goods as well as share and spread Islamic ideas and traditions.

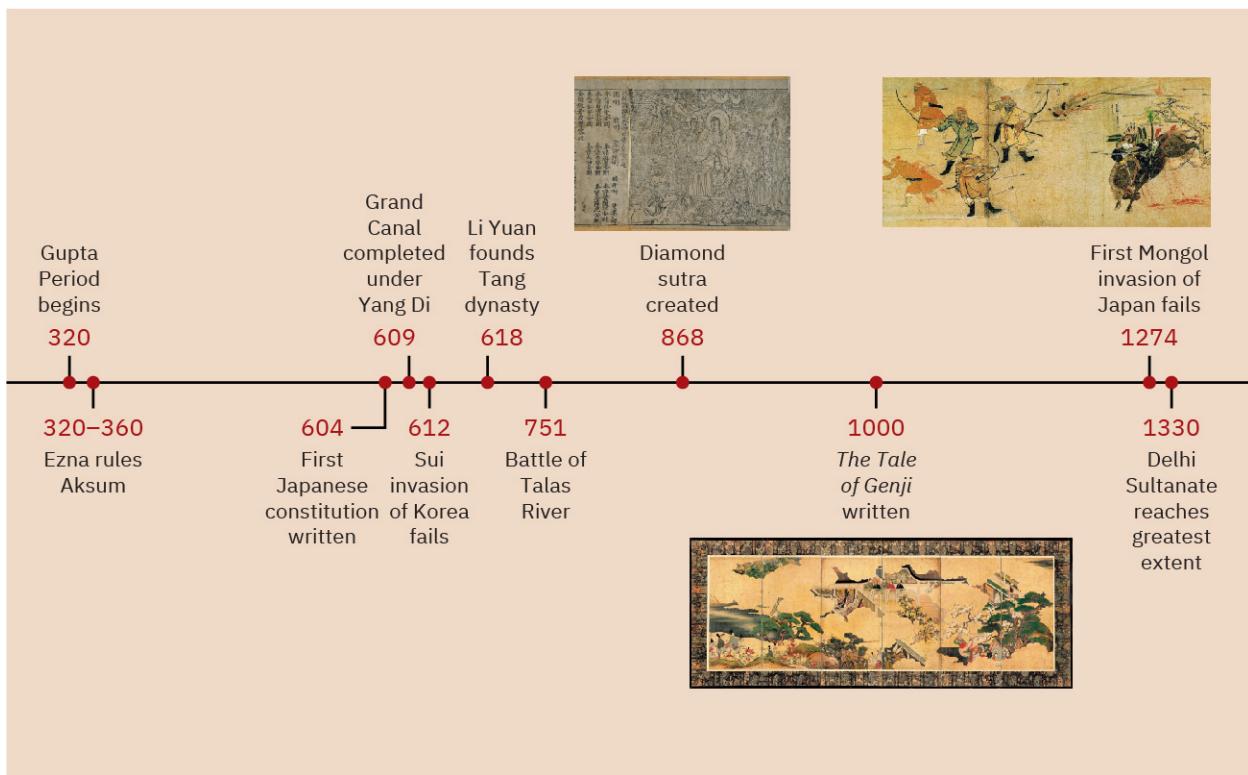


FIGURE 12.2 Timeline: India, the Indian Ocean Basin, and East Asia. (credit “868”: modification of work “Jingangjing” by British Library/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit “1000”: modification of work “Scenes from the three chapters of The tale of Genji [Genji monogatari]” by Art Gallery of South Australia/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit “1274”: modification of work “Mōko Shūrai Ekotoba 2” by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

12.1 The Indian Ocean World in the Early Middle Ages

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- Identify important political developments in South Asia
- Discuss religious and social practices in South and East Asia
- Describe the rise and fall of the Sui and Tang dynasties in China

Beginning in the eighth century, the Khyber Pass, renowned as the means by which Alexander the Great and his army traveled from Afghanistan to India, made it possible for a new religious tradition to enter northern India. This tradition was Islam, which soon came to dominate the areas of modern-day Pakistan and Bangladesh as well as portions of India. In time, Muslims created the powerful Delhi Sultanate, which stretched from the Punjab in the northwest to Bengal in the northeast.

Islam arrived in China during the early Tang period (618–690 CE) by way of the Silk Roads trade as well as through diplomatic missions sent to the Tang court at Chang'an by the Umayyad caliph at Damascus. Before Islam’s appearance in China, the Tang dynasty, like its predecessor the Sui, had been influenced by the Indian tradition of Buddhism; the Sui emperor and his Tang cousins adhered to many Buddhist precepts.

Monumental constructions such as the Grand Canal and the Huaisheng Mosque, which was built in the seventh century CE and stands today in Guangzhou, demonstrate the grandeur of these two dynasties. Yet, in the end, their expenses outran their income, leading to their ultimate collapse.

South Asia in the Early Middle Ages

India, usually referred to as South Asia, shares the Asian subcontinent, culture, and history with several

countries in the modern period, including Pakistan and Bangladesh. Before the Middle Ages, two powerful religious and philosophical traditions emerged there, Hinduism and Buddhism, the latter spreading by traveling merchants via the Silk Roads, both overland and overseas.

In the fourth century BCE, Alexander the Great, his army, and his people came to what is today Afghanistan and the region of the Hindu Kush. Although they did not remain there, for the next three centuries this Hellenistic Seleucid kingdom continued to trade with India and spread Greek ideas. The arrival of Alexander's army in the region was a crucial step in the process of bringing the Afro-Eurasian world closer together. Long-distance travel in this period was still arduous and undertaken primarily by merchants, but important cultural shifts were beginning. Although Alexander's death shortly after his Indian campaigns meant that neither he nor his successors came to rule over this part of the world, disparate and previously separate cultures and peoples began sharing material goods, technologies, and ideas in ways that only continued as the centuries passed. This change was accelerated by the rise of the Mauryan Empire, the first major kingdom to dominate the Asian subcontinent. The Mauryan Empire was founded by Chandragupta Maurya in 322 BCE and lasted until around 185 BCE. During that time, the region saw great intellectual developments, such as the implementation of place value in numbers and the addition of zero to the numbering system, while long-distance trade continued to expand and widen the spread of these new ideas and concepts.

While India experienced a time of unity and great success during the Mauryan age, the subcontinent again broke into separate kingdoms following invasions by the White Huns, which fatally weakened the empire. One of the more stable regimes to emerge in this period was the northern kingdom of Thanesar, under its Buddhist ruler Harsha Vardhana, whose reign lasted from 606 to 647 CE. We know a great deal about Harsha thanks to contemporary accounts by the Indian poet Bana and the Chinese Buddhist monk Xuan Zang. According to both, Buddhism had penetrated the region surrounding Thanesar to a considerable degree, despite the Guptas' earlier favoring of Hinduism. It was also clear, though, that Buddhism had declined as a result of Gupta neglect because its monasteries throughout India were in a state of disrepair. Still, Xuan Zang found Harsha's kingdom well run, wealthy, and justly administered. As far as the monk was concerned, Thanesar was a model state. It did not outlive its king by many years, however. Soon after Harsha's death, the Arab advance that began in the early part of his reign had become a wave that, in the early eighth century, swept across northern India.

In the early seventh century, the new religion of Islam had begun to expand, encompassing Arabia and soon spreading even farther. By 659, Muslim forces were advancing eastward and clashed with the rulers of Sindh in modern-day Pakistan; by the early eighth century, armies of the Umayyad Islamic state had conquered the region. Under increasing pressure from foreign invaders, India splintered into rival principalities ruled by independent rajas, or princes. These kingdoms, which extended from the Indus River valley in northwestern India to the Ganges River in the northeast, flourished for a time. However, long centuries of fending off invasions by Islamized Turkic warlords from central Asia had taken their toll.

The career of Mahmud of Ghazna is a good example of these developments. The son of a Turkic mamluk, or military slave, who ruled from 998 to 1030, Mahmud was intent on developing his region as an important Islamic state and launched dozens of campaigns against the princes of northern India from his base in Afghanistan. The onslaught was quite successful, for by the twelfth century, the Muslim Ghaznavid dynasty ruled an area that stretched from the Aral Sea in the north to Lahore in the east and encompassed the vital Silk Roads conduit of Khurasan in the southwest ([Figure 12.3](#)). The Muslim advance did not end with the establishment of the Ghaznavid state, however. Wars raged across northern India, and by the end of the twelfth century, the remaining independent Indian princes had become fatally weakened. Vulnerable to conquest, the kingdoms of the rajas collapsed.



FIGURE 12.3 The Ghaznavid Dynasty. At its height, the Ghaznavid Empire encompassed a vast swath of central Asia and included parts of modern Iran, Afghanistan, and the historical region of Turkestan. With several vital trade centers such as Samarkand and Merv, the state for a time played a key role in maintaining Silk Roads connections between the East and West. (credit: “Map of the Ghaznavid Empire” by Unknown, created in DEMIS World Map Server/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 4.0)

In the twelfth century, a new line of Turkic invaders arose in present-day Afghanistan, led by Muhammad of Ghur (Ghur was an especially important town in the region). A Persian ruler subject to the Ghaznavids, Muhammad declared his independence from Ghazna and conquered most of the lands of his former lords. In 1192, his forces defeated an army of some 100,000 Rajputs, considered Hindu India’s most ferocious warriors, in one of the most violent engagements of his increasingly bloody career. The crowning achievement of Muhammad’s campaigns was establishing a Muslim state at Delhi, deep in the heart of northern India. It endured as the Delhi Sultanate for more than three centuries (1206–1526), during which time it was the center of Islamic India (Figure 12.4).



FIGURE 12.4 The Delhi Sultanate. The orange shading shows the Delhi Sultanate in 1330, at its greatest extent. Its size allowed it to control much of the Indian Ocean trade on the western side of the subcontinent. However, the absence of larger cities in the center and south-center of the subcontinent meant that Indigenous peoples there were less likely to come into contact with Islam and its practitioners, so this region was not under the control of an Islamic state. (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

Thus, through a series of invasions over the course of some five hundred years, Arab and then Turkic invaders made their way into northern India, bringing Islam and stimulating political integration in the process. Because the minority Muslim rulers did not enforce cultural homogeneity, the invasions also strengthened the cultural diversity that was already a hallmark of Indian social order. For example, the Islamic rulers of the sultanate gave Hindu subjects the status of *dhimmis*, which protected their rights as non-Muslims, although they still had to pay the special tax, the *jizya*, placed on non-believers. The sultans of Delhi often employed Hindu laborers on construction projects such as the building of mosques, which led Muslims to integrate certain forms of Hindu symbolism and motifs such as trees and plant life into the structures. In the fourteenth century, Sultan Muhammad bin Tughluq expanded and even encouraged Hindu religious freedom, himself participating in Holi, the annual celebration of spring, while he allowed Hindu pilgrimages to the Ganges River, Hinduism's holiest site.

Before the arrival of Islam in South Asia, Hinduism was the dominant religion in the subcontinent. The result of a synthesis of beliefs that occurred after the Vedic period of Ancient India (c. 1500–500 BCE) and a response to Buddhism's commercial and urban influence, Hinduism developed a philosophy and belief system more widely accessible to the rural and agrarian peoples of India. An elaborate universe of Hindu deities was also established that included divinities from other religions, widening Hinduism's accessibility and appeal. Perhaps most importantly, Hinduism stressed personal devotion to a particular deity to obtain a truly individualized religious experience.

The Muslim Turks who arrived in India in the twelfth century recognized the Hindus as a protected people, allowing them to practice their own religious traditions and govern individual territories so long as they paid taxes and tribute. Buddhists, however, were not given the same measures of religious freedom, although it is

not clear why. They were forced to flee or be executed, and many went to areas of Southeast Asia, Nepal, or Tibet, where Buddhism remains a major religion today. Over time, in the northern areas of the Indian subcontinent, which include modern Pakistan and Bangladesh, many Hindus converted to Islam, which then became the majority religion of the region. In the Vijanagar Empire in southern India, on the other hand, far fewer conversions took place, perhaps due to its distance from the centers of Islam.

In 1221, the province of Khurasan, which had invaded the Punjab in the tenth century, was itself invaded by the Mongols from China, led by Chinggis Khan (often referred to as “Genghis Khan” in the West). The Mongols then turned their attention to the Delhi Sultanate, which managed to successfully weather an attempted Mongol invasion in 1222. Over the next several decades, northern India experienced a series of invasions accompanying renewed Mongol expansion. Although most were repelled, countless Muslims were displaced and resettled on sultanate lands deeper in the subcontinent’s interior.

A Multicultural South Asia

Throughout the decline of the independent principalities of northern India and, ultimately, the conquest of the Delhi Sultanate, the north slowly became increasingly Muslim, while the south retained Hindu cultural beliefs and ideas. By the thirteenth century, Buddhism had diminished as a popular form of worship in India and Hinduism had evolved from a religion in which only priests offered sacrifices to one in which a wider array of people could actively participate. With this change came increased personal devotion to the individual gods, including Vishnu and Shiva ([Figure 12.5](#)). Each village usually had a temple in which they were enshrined and worshipped, and various incarnations of the gods developed from these numerous local beliefs. For example, Krishna was an incarnation of Vishnu. Eventually, Vishnu and Shiva came to have consort wives, and their powers could not be activated except through union. Thus, many female deities also came to be worshipped. In contrast, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Confucianism all feature male-centered systems.



FIGURE 12.5 The Hindu God Vishnu. This eighteenth-century painting on paper shows the poet Jayadeva (left) bowing to Vishnu, the beneficent preserver. Vishnu is one of three major Hindu gods; the others are Brahma (creator of the universe) and Shiva (giver and destroyer of life). (credit: “Jaydev worshipping lord Vishnu” by The Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The Hindu religion evolved to become the dominant religion likely because it was a belief system with broader appeal than Buddhism. Originating in the period following the Vedic Age (c. 1500–500 BCE) and evolving over

centuries, Hinduism developed from much older traditions, especially those of the Aryan peoples who arrived in India beginning in the third millennium BCE. One particularly distinctive facet of Hindu tradition that originated among these peoples was the Indian caste system. At its origin, the caste system was limited, and all of society was organized into four categories known as *varnas*. The four major *varnas* were Brahman (priests), Kshatriya (warriors), Vaishya (merchants and farmers), and Shudra (servile people). In these early days of the system, a person's *varna* was determined by their profession but also their **dharma**—their adherence to proper behaviors for their caste as stipulated by cosmic law, including avoiding contact with lower castes—and the karma they accrued by virtue of their dharma ([Figure 12.6](#)).



FIGURE 12.6 Bodhisattvas. In Buddhism, bodhisattvas are people who are seen as spiritually advanced and on the path toward Buddhahood. This detail of a twelfth-century manuscript painting depicts Maitreya, a bodhisattva who, according to Indian tradition, is the teacher of dharma. (credit: “Astasahasrika Prajnaparamita Maitreya Detail” by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Karma worked both ways: A believer's failure to follow their dharma resulted in negative residue, whereas faithful obedience resulted in positive residue. At the personal level, the incentive behind amassing karma was *samsara*, the continuance of the soul after death and the soul's transformation. The more positive karma someone built up, the greater the chances of being reincarnated in a higher *varna* in the next life—with the ultimate goal being the attainment of **moksha**, or release from the karmic cycle and the achievement of a complete understanding of the world. If too much bad karma accumulated, on the other hand, the opposite occurred: reincarnation at a lower *varna*.

Yet the ramifications of the caste system went far beyond the personal. Nothing less than the continued existence of the universe was at stake. Adherence to dharma helped ensure the universe remained in balance, while failure to do so risked chaos and destruction. A rigidly hierarchical system of social segregation maintained this belief system. However, the *varna* communities created by the caste system also provided social support to their members and a vital stabilizing element in an Indian society otherwise rocked by political upheaval, foreign invasion, and war ([Figure 12.7](#)).

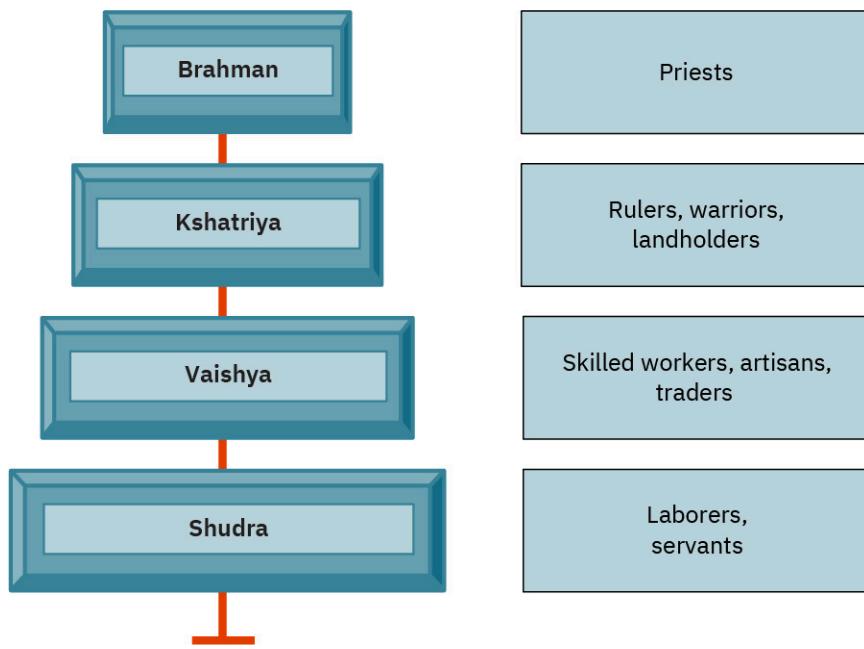


FIGURE 12.7 The Indian Caste System. The Indian caste system was a hierarchical one, with ranked *varnas* that, in the system's earliest days, related to a person's profession. Someone could move up or down within this hierarchy depending on their dharma and their accrual of karma during their lifetime. Still, such mobility came primarily through reincarnation at the end of a person's life. (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

The basic social unit of Indian society and the focus of life was the extended family, which included parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and in-laws. Most peasant families lived in villages and worked as farmers. Farming was more important than cattle raising for several reasons, not least the prohibition against eating cows. Hindus believe these animals to be sacred but also used them as draft animals on farms. Their manure helped fertilize crops, and their milk was a sustaining element of the Hindu diet. Key crops were rice, millet, wheat, barley, lentils, and peas. The extended family's large web of relationships encouraged everyone to work together for the betterment of the community. Villages were usually walled, with gates that were shut at night after the farmers returned from the fields.

Like Confucianism in China, Hinduism fostered a patriarchal family structure in which women were subservient. Men were viewed as stronger than women and less governed by their emotions, while older men, due to age and presumed experience, were thought to be wiser than younger men and thus superior to all others. Male domination of Hindu family life was reinforced by the fact that the oldest male was head of the household and might have several wives, who generally came to live with their husband's parents.

Although children often assisted the family in daily work such as farming, in wealthier homes the basics such as reading, writing, and arithmetic might be taught. Daughters were often married at a young age, and finding the ideal husband—who could provide for the family financially—was a key concern. A wife had no life apart from her husband, and if widowed, she might shave her head, sleep on the floor, eat only a single meal a day, and avoid attending family festivals. A wealthier widow, particularly from the Kshatriya or warrior caste, might throw herself on her husband's funeral pyre in an act of ritual suicide known as *sati*.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Crime and Punishment in Tenth-Century India

Abu Zayd al-Sirafi was a sailor from Sirafi, a center of the spice trade, who traveled throughout the Indian Ocean

during the tenth century. The following is his account of how Indians used ordeal by fire to allow the gods to decide whether an accused person was guilty. As you read, note whether Abu Zayd felt this was an effective system and consider what biases may exist in his account.

Moving now to India, if a man accuses another of an offense for which the mandatory penalty is death, the accuser is asked, “Will you subject the person you have accused to ordeal by fire?” If he agrees to this, a piece of iron is first heated to such a high temperature that it becomes red-hot. The accused man is told to hold out his hand, palm up, and on it are placed seven leaves from a particular tree of theirs; the red-hot iron is then placed on his hand, on top of the leaves. Next, the accused has to walk up and down holding the iron, until he can bear it no longer and has to drop it. At this point, a leather bag is brought out: the man has to put his hand inside this, then the bag is sealed with the ruler’s seal. When three days have passed, some unhusked rice is brought, and the accused man is told to husk it by rubbing it between his palms. If after this no mark is found on his hand, he is deemed to have got the better of his accuser, and he escapes execution. Moreover, his accuser is fined a maund [about 82 pounds] of gold, which the ruler appropriates for himself. On some occasions, they heat water in an iron or copper cauldron until it boils so furiously that no one can go near it. An iron finger-ring is then dropped into the water, and the accused man is told to put his hand in and retrieve the ring. I have seen a man put his hand in and bring it out unharmed. In such a case, too, his accuser is fined a maund of gold.

—Abu Zayd al-Sirafi, *Accounts of China and India*

- What biases do you see in this account?
- Does Abu Zayd feel ordeal by fire is an effective system? Why or why not?
- Why do you think ordeal by fire was once a common method of identifying guilt around the globe?

Toward the end of the Gupta period, in the sixth century, rulers began giving land grants to officials and Brahman priests to help stimulate local economies. Often entire villages were included in the gifts, and their inhabitants came under the control of the grantees. Eventually, land grants were also awarded to temples and monasteries, in the hope that this could encourage wider economic growth and lessen dependence on the central state.

Although this was a politically chaotic period, new ideas and belief systems spread and many cultural and technological advances occurred. Improvements in shipbuilding and textile manufacturing stimulated coastal trade, for example, especially in Southeast Asia. Paradoxically, many such developments were the result of the same forces that destabilized India’s politics, for the continual invasions and migrations of foreigners in the north cross-fertilized the region’s cultural base, producing new ideas and practical innovations. The diffusion of ideas was enhanced by India’s annual monsoon winds, which lengthened maritime traders’ exposure to Indian society and culture by preventing those who arrived in summer from returning home until the winter monsoon season.

One of the most influential and enduring effects of trade was the spread of Buddhism, which began to take hold elsewhere as it competed with, and in some ways reshaped, Hinduism. Many Southeast Asian regions adopted it, from what is now Thailand up to the Mekong Delta in Vietnam and down to Java. By the first century BCE, there were two branches of Buddhism: Theravada (“the path of the elders,” the oldest extant form of Buddhism) and Mahayana (“the greater vehicle”). Mahayana, the larger branch, spread along the great trade routes of Asia into the borderlands of the Parthian Empire, eventually reaching China, Korea, and Japan, where it was gradually infused with local ideas. Theravada Buddhism established itself in Sri Lanka, southern India, and parts of Southeast Asia. Unlike Hinduism, Buddhism did not emphasize the caste system and in many instances opposed it, thus strengthening its influence abroad. It therefore appealed to lower-caste

individuals as well. Nonetheless, Hinduism influenced many monarchies, particularly through the concept of dharma. Sanskrit, the written language of India, also spread to many southeast Asian courts, cementing the broad influence of Indian culture.

Sui and Tang China

Following the collapse of the Han Empire in 220 CE, three states ruled over China: the Wei in the north, the Wu in the south, and the Shu in the west. A temporary reunification occurred under the Western Jin dynasty from 265 to 316, but from 316 to 589 China was again divided, this time into north and south. Along the Silk Roads, merchants established monasteries, convents, and shrines, bringing Buddhist traditions into China. Many Chinese traders therefore adopted Buddhism, particularly under the Sui dynasty (Figure 12.8).



FIGURE 12.8 The Sui Dynasty. This map shows the extent of the Sui dynasty in 609. Like the Qin before them, the Sui pursued empire-building and vast public works projects such as the Grand Canal, which was vital to the movement of Sui armies during campaigns in the south. (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

LINK TO LEARNING

Read the Metropolitan Museum of Art's brief overview "[Buddhism along the Silk Road](https://openstax.org/l/77BuddhismSilk)" (<https://openstax.org/l/77BuddhismSilk>) to follow the trade routes of the Silk Roads in East Asia and to explore the images, iconography, and ideas of Buddhism as it traveled those routes.

A Mongol general from northern China, Yang Jian, was an affirmed Buddhist. His military abilities allowed him to gain such fame that he was able to create a marriage alliance between one of his daughters and a northern prince. With growing power, at the death of the ruler, he claimed the role of regent to his grandson before later deposing him. Yang then made himself the first emperor of the new Sui dynasty in 581 and adopted the name Wen. Emperor Wen gained his soldiers' allegiance by granting them lands acquired through conquest, a years-long process that reunified most of the old Han lands. To consolidate his control over the empire, Emperor Wen created a powerful centralized government, with loyal bureaucrats appointed to rule its many territories. To eliminate the risk that these powerful regional administrators could amass followers into a rebellious army, Wen periodically moved them to different territories, forcing them to build new networks from scratch.

Emperor Wen was succeeded by his son Yang Guang. Like his father before him, Emperor Yang Di, as Yang was known, was ambitious and grandiose. During his reign, he continued his father's practice of building large public works through forced labor, completing the Grand Canal in 609 to connect Luoyang in central China with Hangzhou in the south. The canal made the movement of foodstuffs and supplies between north and south possible on an unimaginable scale. From the south, with its warmer and wetter climate, came rice; from the drier and cooler north came crops such as wheat and millet (Figure 12.9). A crucial step in the economic integration of overland trade was taken when the canal was connected to the Sui capital and eastern terminus of the Silk Roads in Chang'an, finally extending all the way north to Beijing. Construction of this arm of the canal took seven years and required as many as five million workers, sometimes including entire populations conscripted to labor on the project. An early form of a police force supervised, enforcing corporal punishment on anyone refusing to work.



FIGURE 12.9 China's Grand Canal. This map of China's Grand Canal shows how it connects the country's north and south, just as rivers connect the east and west. The canal became critical to centralizing control of the Sui Empire. Its primary route is shown in orange, while the purple indicates shorter-lived expansions constructed to connect the southern Chinese provinces with this important economic thoroughfare. (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

The Grand Canal was essential to the economic and administrative integration of the newly reunified Chinese empire under the Sui. The canal made it easier for goods to be transported and provided increased revenue by allowing the government to tax the products being shipped. It also greatly improved communication and the effectiveness of the government, as officials were able to travel quickly between north and south and to send communication more easily across the Chinese interior. The canal was also a vital tool of Sui foreign policy, allowing Chinese armies from the north to travel to the borders of Korea, from which Yang Di launched his futile campaigns of conquest.

THE PAST MEETS THE PRESENT

The Grand Canal

The modern city of Hangzhou, situated at the head of a large bay extending out into the East China Sea, has a

population of almost twelve million and is known around the country and world for its robust economy. One of the keys to Hangzhou's success is the busy canal that extends northward from the city and is plied around the clock by numerous barges carrying bulk materials to distant locations in the interior. The origins of the canal date back over two thousand years to pre-imperial China, and its use today is a reminder of the enduring legacy of ancient Chinese engineering and determination.

Commonly referred to as the Grand Canal, this man-made waterway has portions that were built in the fifth century BCE. But it was during the Sui dynasty when these older canals were connected, refurbished, and extended to create a continuous water route stretching 1,100 miles from Hangzhou to Beijing. Built with conscripted workers, it was intended to supply southern-produced grain to the large cities in the north, facilitate the movement of troops, and to generally better integrate the northern and southern portions of the vast empire.

Completing the canal, fitted with lock gates to regulate water levels over different elevations, was an engineering feat and a testament to the boldness of the emperor. It was supplemented by a parallel imperial road dotted with post offices. Unfortunately for the enslaved, peasants, and others conscripted to build it, the costs were enormous. An estimated two million workers died constructing the canal; and the cost in both lives and taxes almost certainly contributed to the downfall of the short-lived Sui dynasty in 618. Later dynasties, however, found the canal quite useful. By the fifteenth century, hundreds of years of expansions and technological improvements had made the Grand Canal the central feature of a vast and indispensable inland transportation network ([Figure 12.10](#)).

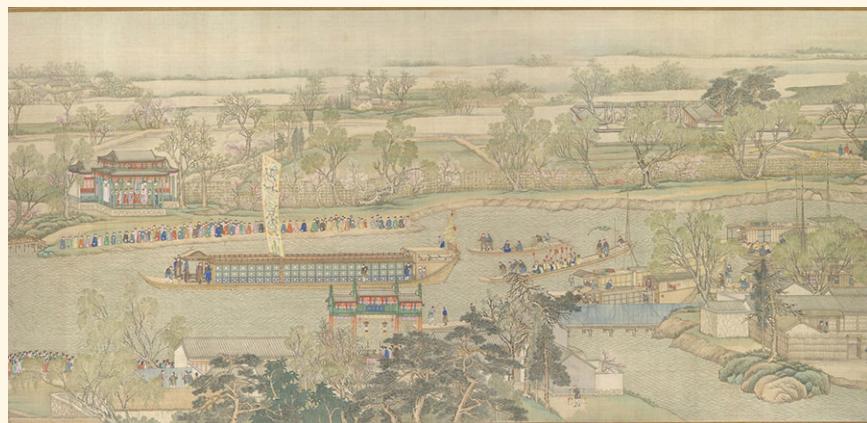


FIGURE 12.10 Touring the Grand Canal. This image from a larger scroll shows the canal as it looked in the late eighteenth century. Created by court painter Xu Yang in 1770, the scroll commemorates the emperor's 1751 tour of south China. Here you can see the emperor's large touring boat moving through the city of Suzhou on a now defunct portion of the canal. (credit: "The Qianlong Emperor's Southern Inspection Tour, Scroll Six: Entering Suzhou along the Grand Canal" by Purchase, The Dillon Fund Gift, 1988/Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain)

During the nineteenth century, the canal entered a period of decline as a result of a change in the course of the Yellow River and the rise of competing transportation routes made possible by railroads and steam-powered ships. Today, ships can no longer travel the full length of the canal. North of Jining, the canal is too shallow. Nonetheless, the canal remains an important transportation route, facilitating the flow of many millions of tons of raw materials through the interior. And improvement efforts have been underway for decades.

- What does the construction of the Grand Canal suggest about the ambitions of the Sui rulers, especially given the enormous costs involved in building the canal?
- In a modern world where so much freight is moved by air, rail, and highway, why do you think the Grand Canal continues to be a vital transportation route?

In the end, and despite the great benefits of the Grand Canal, its construction overextended the Sui. Enormously costly in labor and materiel, the waterway became a great source of grievance among the Chinese people, millions of whom were forced to work on it and neglect their families and farms. The situation was worsened by the combined effects of a natural disaster—the Yellow River flooded the North China plain and triggered famine throughout the countryside—and military defeat—the Sui invasion of Korea was repelled in 612. Undaunted, Yang Di pushed ahead with a second invasion campaign, stopping only when the exhausted military revolted. The emperor was assassinated in a period of turmoil in the region before Li Yuan, a provincial governor, acceded to the throne and announced the founding of the Tang dynasty in 618.

The Tang Empire, which lasted until 907, emerged just as Islam exploded out of Arabia and swept across North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula and into central Asia. Like the great Islamic empires that thrived during this period, the Tang promoted a cosmopolitan culture, a character greatly enhanced by wider international developments. In 674, for example, the advancing tide of Arab armies from the west forced members of the Sasanian royal family to flee to the safety of the Tang court at Chang'an, at the eastern terminus of the Silk Roads. This event inspired whole communities of merchants to move from Sasanian Persia to the Chinese capital, bringing all manner of exotic products and luxury goods, from silver artwork to Arab, Persian, and central Asian musical forms and dance.

It did not take long for the Tang elite to develop a taste for these items, creating an impressive industry of Persian-Arab-inspired goods and services to meet the growing demand. As a taste for Persian-Arab culture spread, trade relations between the Tang and India blossomed, bringing everything from mathematics to new sciences and medicines to China. These different cultural streams met in Tang China's major cities, which soon generated a diverse international culture greatly enhanced by the presence of merchant communities of Jewish people, Christians, Zoroastrians, peoples of the major Indian traditions, and a sizable minority of Muslims.

For much of its duration, Tang China was the most powerful empire in existence, and among its priorities was completing the consolidation and expansion begun under the Sui. To this end, the Tang embarked on a series of military campaigns into central Asia. Their large professional army was organized around a core of aristocratic cavalry of some seven million troops who routinely clashed with the mounted nomads of the Inner Asian Steppe, and an immense peasant infantry several million strong and garrisoned in the interior. By the 750s, Tang frontier units increasingly relied on pastoral nomadic peoples from the steppes, such as the Uyghurs, Turkish-speaking peoples who constituted the empire's most potent military force. Over time, Tang forces pushed into Manchuria (the area immediately north of the Korean Peninsula), Vietnam, and Tibet. At its height in the late ninth century, the Tang army controlled more than four million square miles of territory, an area roughly the size of the entire Islamic world during the same period.

The Tang achieved several early foreign policy successes, including reestablishing Chinese rule over Korea in 668, resulting in a tributary relationship with the peninsula's Silla dynasty. The Tang also opened diplomatic relations with Japan, which proved so effective that in 645 Japan embarked on its "Great Reform"—an all-encompassing adoption of Tang culture, including its imperial institutions (which the Silla also adopted), Confucian bureaucracy, and Buddhism.

The spread of Tang culture was greatly enhanced by several major innovations in China, including the world's first block-printing process, which proved opportune for printing Buddhist scriptures ([Figure 12.11](#)). Like the Sui, the Tang embraced and promoted Buddhism, the scriptures of which were usually hand-copied by scribes and disseminated among students. The scarcity of these works meant that most commoners and even many elites had no access to them. China's artisans, however, devised a way to carve the mirror-image of a text into a block of wood, add ink, and then press the block onto paper. Scriptures and other forms of writing now became more accessible, spreading ideas from the elites to the masses. Block-printing remained the major method of transferring images onto paper until the end of the nineteenth century.



FIGURE 12.11 The First Block-Printed Book. This is a page from the *Diamond Sutra*, the world's first block-printed book, made in China in 868. Note the image of the Buddha in the center, and consider how the production of multiple copies of documents such as this could lead to wider knowledge of Buddhism. (credit: modification of work "Jingangjing" by British Library/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Buddhism was important not only under the Sui. The Tang period witnessed the rapid growth of two forms of Mahayana Buddhism in particular: Pure Land, which had originated much earlier in India and had found adherents in China since the fifth century, and Chan, which developed during the fifth and sixth centuries but became popular under the Tang. **Pure Land Buddhism** was a school of popular devotion to Amida (or Amitabha), the Buddha of the “pure land” or the uncorrupt plane of existence believers anticipated reaching on their rebirth. Like the Hindu *bhakti* sects in India, Pure Land Buddhists held that to achieve salvation it was necessary not to study sacred texts but rather to engage in practices accessible to everyone, especially by invoking Amida’s name.

Chan Buddhism, like Pure Land, deemphasized scriptural study but rejected the notion of personal devotion to a savior. Instead, Chan Buddhism, known more popularly by its Japanese name Zen, stressed the disciplined practice of meditation and following the example of a Chan master, who underwent great hardships performing humble tasks and wrestling with paradoxical questions, to achieve enlightenment. Chan Buddhism was austere and monastic in character, whereas Pure Land was the more popular form observed by lay people.

Buddhism’s popularity became a flashpoint for violence in Tang China, however. In the mid-ninth century, the Tang Empire cracked down on what it perceived as the threat that hundreds of thousands of Buddhist monks and nuns posed to its Confucian and Daoist leaders, who argued that Buddhism represented an alien influence on the state. Although this prompted the active suppression of Buddhist monasteries and the confiscation of their wealth, it was not enough. Blatant persecution unfolded under Emperor Wuzong, resulting in the destruction of some forty thousand temples and shrines, the closure of more than four thousand monasteries, and the forced secularization of hundreds of thousands of Buddhist monks and nuns. Culturally, the state

moved to expunge the impact of Buddhism by reviving classical prose styles and the teachings of Confucius and his followers ([Figure 12.12](#)).



FIGURE 12.12 Emperor Wuzong. Emperor Wuzong, represented in an ink drawing from a Chinese encyclopedia of the early seventeenth century, engaged in widespread persecution of Buddhist monks and nuns in ninth-century China. (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license) (credit: modification of work "Emperor Wuzong of the Tang dynasty" by Baidu/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The Tang period also produced a great deal of poetry, much of it influenced by the prevalent religious and philosophical traditions. For example, in the eighth century the poets Wang Wei, Li Bai (Li Bo), and Du Fu were influenced by Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism, respectively, and many people could recite their poems from memory. Along the Silk Roads during this period, poetry spread along with China's religious and philosophical traditions, first to Korea and from there to Japan. Neither area had a written script of its own yet, so admirers learned the poets' works in Chinese.

Entrance into the Tang bureaucracy was based on passage of a merit-based exam administered every three years. This civil service exam, the first fully written such exam in history, had been developed from the Sui dynasty and tested sophisticated literary skills and knowledge of Confucian and Daoist classics. In theory it was open to all; in practice, however, until the late Tang period, women, the sons of merchants, and those who could not afford a classical education were excluded. Most laborers were also excluded because of their circumstances, as they could not take time away from their fields to study. In the end, people became government officials thanks to their literary achievements or the influence of their prestigious families.

Tang China also witnessed contradictory trends in personal behavior and relations between the sexes. In 665, Emperor Gaozong, infirm and sickly, handed power to his second wife, Wu Zetian. Following Gaozong's death in 683, Wu ruled as empress dowager and regent for her son, though she held all the real power of the state. A devout Buddhist, she declared Buddhism the state religion, ordered scholars to write biographies of famous women, and in 690 took the extraordinary step of founding her own dynasty, the Wu Zhou (not to be confused with the much earlier Zhou dynasty). Three years later, Wu assumed the Buddhist title "Divine Empress Who Rules the Universe." Although she was an intelligent and competent ruler, the founding of her own dynasty and the adoption of imperial titles felt to many like usurpation. Resistance soon followed, prompting her abdication and the restoration of the Tang dynasty.

Wu's reign was remarkable in China's male-dominated society. Still, the Tang Empire has been described as a "golden age" for women in China, perhaps because lingering contact with the nomadic peoples of the north and their relatively egalitarian society encouraged a somewhat similar view among the Chinese. As evidence of

the increased prominence of women, historians also point to a flourishing culture of poetry written by courtesans, the careers of Empress Wu and her daughter-in-law Empress Wei, and the practice of using diplomatic marriages of Tang daughters to prominent foreign officials to forge political alliances. However, sumptuary laws dictated what women could and could not wear, elite men kept concubines, and the Tang legal system considered women property.

The Tang Empire reached its zenith in the early eighth century (Figure 12.13). By mid-century, however, internal and external challenges had set in motion the empire's terminal decline. Externally, the Tang were defeated at the Battle of Talas River in 751. There, Tang forces were beaten by the combined Turkic and Arab armies of the Abbasid Caliphate, which was expanding the frontiers of the Islamic empire deep into central Asia after overthrowing the Umayyads. Internally, China faced revolts in Korea, Yunnan (in extreme southern China), and Manchuria, which distracted and weakened the state.



FIGURE 12.13 The Tang Dynasty. This map shows the extent of China's Tang dynasty at its height in the eighth century. (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

Then, in 755, the Tang Empire was rocked by the massive An Lushan rebellion. Some 150,000 frontier troops led by the Tang commander An Lushan revolted against Emperor Xuanzong and the decadent court at Chang'an. It took eight years for the Tang to crush the rebellion, by the end of which China was both militarily and economically exhausted. The empire carried on in an enfeebled state, but over the ensuing decades, Chang'an ceded much military and civil authority to provincial warlords. In 906, following additional civil wars, the Tang dynasty collapsed, leading to a period of disunity until the Song rose to dominance in 960.

12.2 East-West Interactions in the Early Middle Ages

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- Discuss the trade in goods, technology, and ideas that occurred along the Silk Roads
- Describe how Islam spread in South and Southeast Asia
- Discuss the role of East Africa in Indian Ocean trade

The Silk Roads made up one of the greatest trade routes in world history, linking east and west in a vast interlocking network that reached its heyday between the fifth and eighth centuries. It had begun to form a few

hundred years before, when the Chinese Han dynasty sought to placate and control the great Xiongnu nomadic peoples to the north by trading with them, and with other nomadic peoples such as the Yuezhi in Bactria (modern-day Afghanistan). The Silk Roads eventually connected China, central Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and even the Mediterranean basin, facilitating the exchange of goods such as silk and spices, technologies such as papermaking, and cultural traditions and religions such as Buddhism and Islam.

These road networks were critical to the spread of Islam, as seen in the wake of Muslim raiders entering the Sindh area of northwest India in the early eighth century. Maritime networks centered on the Indian Ocean also played a large role in this expansion. From India and through both the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea, Muslim sailors began to dominate much of the Malabar Coast of western India and the Swahili coast of eastern Africa, becoming fixtures in the lucrative Indian Ocean trade all the way to China and beyond. The influence of Muslim traders throughout the region went far beyond commercial exchange, however. One of the most significant results of this trade-based diffusion of Islamic culture in South and East Asia was the emergence of powerful states such as Indonesia, which has the world's largest Muslim population today.

Travel and Exchange along the Silk Roads

By the first century BCE, China had become firmly established as the eastern end of the Silk Roads, with Rome as the western end. The Romans also traveled by sea to secure the goods that came through the ports of western India, the Red Sea, and the Persian Gulf, as well as trading through key centers in Syria such as the great caravan cities of Petra and Palmyra, the Nabatean city famed as the main entry point for Chinese silk and eastern incense. In exchange for such goods, the Roman provinces of North Africa traded Roman glassware, wool, gold, and silver through intermediaries in the Middle East and central Asia and even into India ([Figure 12.14](#)).

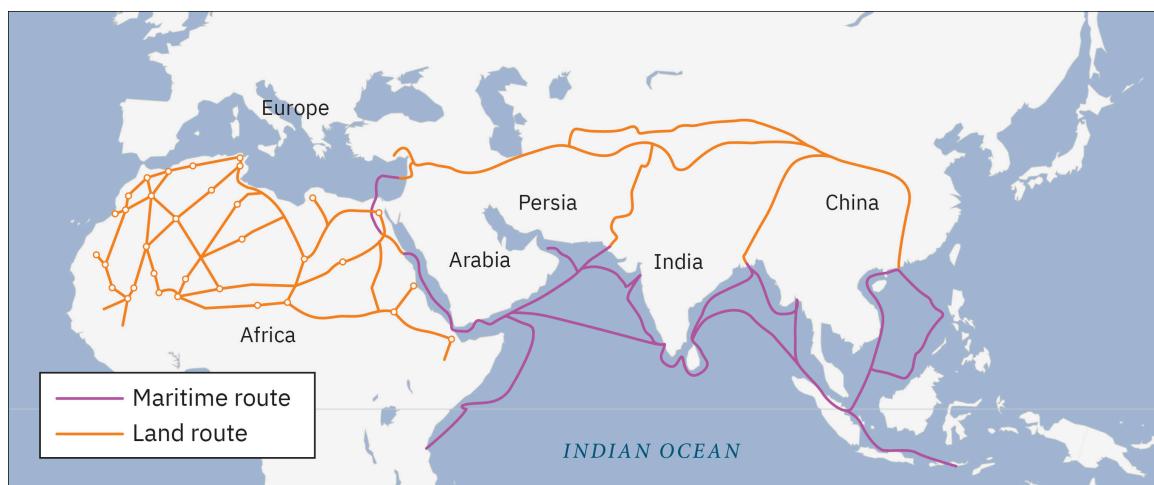


FIGURE 12.14 The Silk Roads in the First Century CE. The Silk Roads network was not a single route but many, including caravan routes that linked to the main trading regions, oasis towns, and overseas routes—the so-called Maritime Silk Roads—throughout the Indian Ocean. (credit: modification of work “World map blank shorelines” by Maciej Jaros/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Before they reached the Romans, trade goods from the east were largely in the hands of the Kushan Empire. The Yuezhi confederacy in Bactria had unified to form this empire, trading with both China and the Indian subcontinent and providing a conduit between the two, particularly from the city of Taxila. The Kushan Empire managed to stabilize the trading routes connecting the Parthian western leg of the road with that of the central Asian steppes, spreading its control halfway down the Indian subcontinent in the process and ideally positioning itself to handle trade between India, China, and the Mediterranean.

By the third century CE, many empires using the Silk Roads had begun to decline, including the Romans, the Kushans, the Parthians, and the Han. The Kushans and Parthians were replaced by the Sasanids in Persia, who

also annexed the northern portion of the Kushan Empire. The Gupta soon controlled the southern portion of India. The Mediterranean world was changing too; the Silk Roads' new trade destination was the surviving Eastern Roman Empire, known as the Byzantine Empire from the late fifth century onward, following the fall of Roman dominance in western Europe. These new players continued and extended the trade network.

Long-distance trade during the early and later Middle Ages was fraught. The Silk Roads were not a four-thousand-mile-long superhighway outfitted to bridge eastern and western markets from Rome to China but rather a series of interconnected roads, many ill maintained, that were built up over time and eventually linked dozens of oasis towns and market cities such as Palmyra in the west and Bactria in the east. It is most useful to imagine it as a network of “legs” on a journey, along which merchants and traders traveled via caravan with their wares, pausing to rest at caravansaries along the way. Goods changed hands many times over these long distances, being exchanged between merchants who each traveled only part of the “road,” and their price increased the farther they went from their origin.

Buddhism arrived in China sometime during the period known as the Six Dynasties (220–589 CE). Monks traveling the Silk Roads between northern India and Afghanistan brought its universalizing message of a lifestyle open to all and offering salvation to any willing to listen, and they found a receptive audience among countless merchants traveling between China and central Asia. Over time, Buddhist monks established themselves in small communities and set up monasteries at a string of oases the length of the Taklamakan Desert—a chain that ran all the way to the Great Wall in northern China. At one of these, Yungang, weary travelers were greeted by five huge Buddhas carved from the cliffs and surrounded by tens of thousands of statues representing Buddhist deities and patrons ([Figure 12.15](#)). This great religious complex offered not only an opportunity to rest and recover but also an entry point to the Chinese market.



FIGURE 12.15 Buddha Statues at Yungang. These huge statues of Buddha were carved along the Silk Roads by the Northern Wei dynasty in China around the fourth century. They clearly demonstrate the importance of trade routes in the spread of culture and ideas. (credit: “Yungang Grottoes 2008” by Mirinda K./Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Many legs of the Silk Roads were perilous in the extreme. For example, upon departing Chang'an, the Tang capital and eastern terminus of the network, travelers almost immediately confronted the Gobi, the largest desert in Asia. Its terrain is compacted and rocky and thus ideal for long-distance travel by camel, but the lack of water necessitated the establishment of caravansaries, usually about a day apart along the road connecting China to the central Asian interior. To geographic and environmental hazards, travelers could add warring tribes and roving bandits and thieves. A menace since the beginning of the Silk Roads, robbers targeted the convoys of precious cargoes as they headed across open and unprotected terrain. While small armies and groups of archers accompanied some larger and better-funded caravans, and caravans sometimes merged into “super-caravans” for safety, these were the exceptions, not the rule. Most travelers undertook a caravan journey at great risk to themselves and the goods they carried.

Despite its dangers, however, the overland route was more appealing for many than the alternative, a hazardous and costly voyage across the sea. Pirates lurking in coastal waters harassed ships on the Maritime Silk Roads, and shifting weather and poorly charted waters posed enormous challenges to even the sturdiest vessels and hardiest merchants. The loss of a ship to a sudden storm or shallow reef (as happened repeatedly at the Gelasa Strait in Indonesia) could mean not only the deaths of crew and passengers but also the ruin of the merchants whose goods were sunk. To most merchants and traders, the risks posed by seaborne trade, not to mention the cost of hiring a ship and its crew, made it the less appealing of the two Silk Road routes open to them. As land empires such as the Sasanian Persians’ realm in central Asia grew more stable, the overland route became even more attractive.

LINK TO LEARNING

Read the short article [“Unearthing the Islamic Relics of China’s Medieval Port City”](https://openstax.org/l/77ChinaPort) (<https://openstax.org/l/77ChinaPort>) for more information about the importance of trade to the spread of religious ideas.

The Sasanian Persians were able to provide a great deal of security, allowing for more peaceful and effective trading. Much of their power in fact relied on and was derived from this trade. The Sasanian Empire was soon displaced by the Islamic Umayyad Caliphate, however, which came to control trade and produce textiles and other goods of its own to sell along the route, although demand for Chinese silks continued. In 750, the Umayyads in turn were overthrown by the Abbasids (749–1258), a new Islamic dynasty that sought to expand eastward from the Middle East even as the Tang dynasty drove westward from China. The Abbasids moved their capital to Baghdad, along the Tigris River in what is modern-day Iraq. This change streamlined their dominance of the Silk Roads, letting them use the Persian Gulf to effectively bypass the Red Sea, which was the seaborne trade route closest to the former Umayyad capital in Syria.

Despite their ambitions, the Abbasids’ eastward expansion was halted in 751 when a combined Arab-Tibetan army met Tang forces in the Battle of Talas River near the town of Atlakh (Figure 12.16). Initially a stalemate, the battle turned in favor of the Abbasids when Turkic forces that were allied with the Tang switched allegiances and joined the Abbasids. Although the Abbasids were victorious, the engagement marked the end of expansion for both empires.

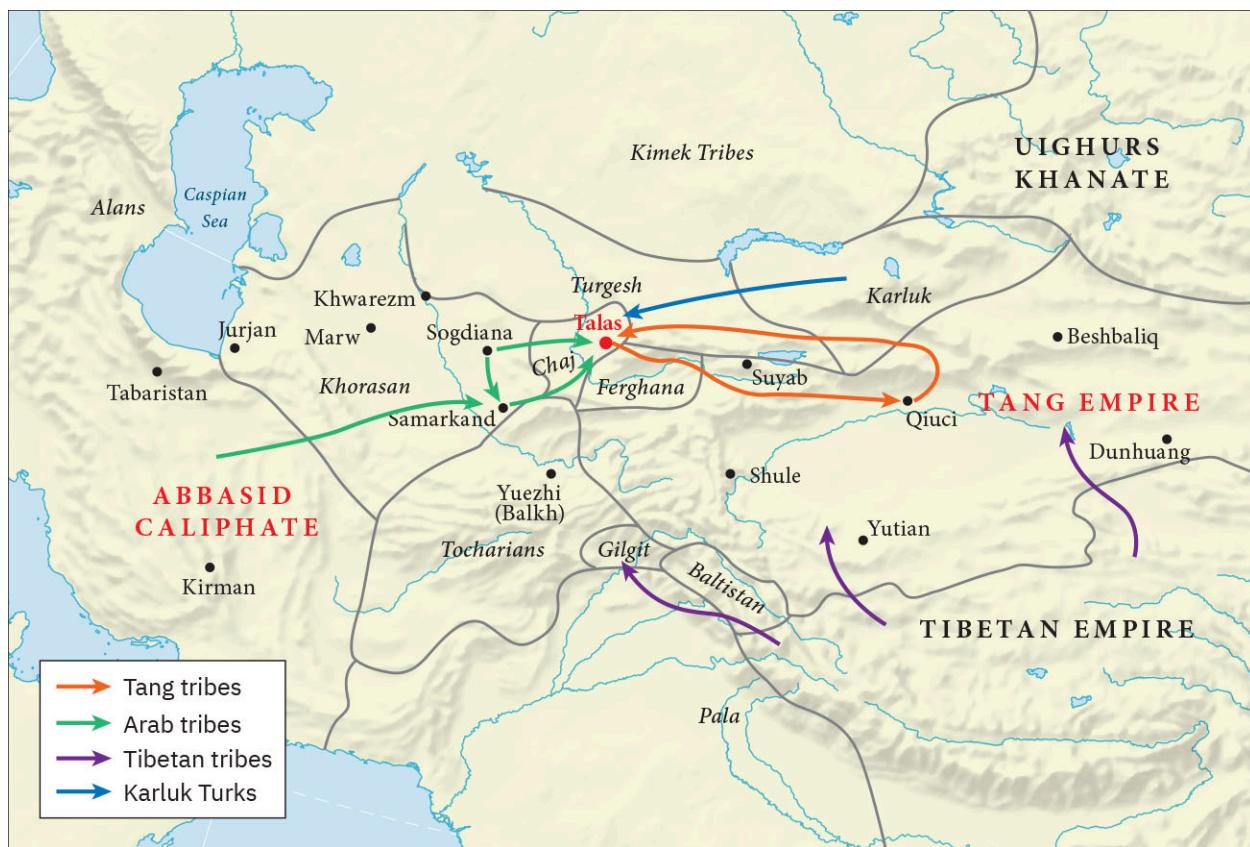


FIGURE 12.16 The Battle of Talas River. Note the centrally located site of the 751 Battle of Talas River, between the Abbasids in the west and the Tang in the east. (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

Throughout the rise and fall of these empires and others, control of trade routes, particularly the Silk Roads, was paramount. For example, people from the central Asian steppes exchanged hides, wool, and livestock for Chinese manufactured goods such as lacquerware, silk, floss, paper, porcelain, and iron tools. These goods and commodities were then traded for similar items along the way, eventually reaching buyers as far away as the Sanhaja tribes of West Africa and the Egyptians and Ethiopians in East Africa. The Silk Roads were never as vital to the Chinese economy, however, as they were to the others. The domestic Chinese economy was large enough to meet all the needs of the state and its people without imports, frustrating European powers intent on breaking into the Chinese economy well into the modern period. At the same time, there was great desire for Chinese goods by western peoples, meaning that the balance of power in trade was almost always skewed in favor of East Asia.

The silk that gave the Silk Roads their name may have originally come from China, but it was not long before many other states began raising silkworms and processing the silk thread from their cocoons into luxurious cloth. The Byzantines, legend has it, acquired silkworms clandestinely in the sixth century when Christian monks visiting China spirited some cocoons away in hollowed-out walking sticks. Much of the labor of producing silk fell to women, who grew the mulberry trees needed to feed the silkworms, unraveled the cocoons, and wove the threads into textiles. They were vital to the trade that led to Chinese dominance of the luxury goods market that the Silk Roads were so famous for. The men were responsible for the upkeep of the tree farms and the sale and exchange of the finished products. Many rural and even urban areas survived by producing silk cloth in this way, like the cottage industries that thrived later in Europe.

BEYOND THE BOOK**The Art of Papermaking**

Before the invention of paper, the key writing material in China was bamboo strips, which were very bulky and took up a great deal of room (Figure 12.17). For centuries, however, the Chinese had been perfecting the art of papermaking. During the second century CE, craftspeople took the bark from the mulberry tree (whose leaves were fed to silkworms) and pounded the fibers into a pulp. By spreading the mixture as sheets to dry, they created paper. Later they discovered they could add hemp rags or fishing nets or any number of similar items to the pulp to strengthen the paper, which was then sometimes called parchment. Unlike bamboo, paper and parchment could be rolled up and were much easier to carry.



FIGURE 12.17 Bamboo Strips as Writing Material. This set of bamboo strips dating from the Warring States Period (fifth to third centuries BCE) illustrates how writing was achieved in China before the invention of paper. (credit: “Strip no. 22 of Kǒngzǐ Shīlùn” by Shanghai Museum/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Before the Battle of Talas River in 751, some of this paper had already made its way to Mecca in Arabia. Some Chinese prisoners of war from the battle were said to be papermakers who were taken to Samarkand and Khurasan, where they began to build paper mills. Evidence suggests this may be merely a legend, however, and that papermills were probably already in existence in Samarkand by this time. Nonetheless, the first paper mill in the Abbasid Caliphate was built in 794–795, and Spain began producing paper as early as the tenth century.

- What does the story of Chinese papermaking suggest about the ways in which ideas and technologies can be diffused to other cultures?
- How was this diffusion of ideas and technologies connected to, but not a product of, trade via the Silk Roads?

LINK TO LEARNING

Watch [this video to view a specialized technique of papermaking](https://openstax.org/l/77Papermaking) (<https://openstax.org/l/77Papermaking>) that differs from the one discussed in the preceding “Beyond the Book” feature.

Religion and Trade in South and Southeast Asia

The growth of Islam gave Muslims a considerable role in world trade, particularly along the Silk Roads and in the Indian Ocean. By the middle of the eighth century, Islam had moved into northern India, and when the Abbasids overthrew the Umayyad dynasty and then moved their capital from Damascus to Baghdad, they established what became one of the most important cities along the Silk Roads and a location that allowed them to dominate the growing Indian Ocean trade.

This new capital was situated along the Tigris River, a vital trade conduit to the Persian Gulf and to the Indian Ocean beyond. In the ninth century, the city of Siraf on the Persian Gulf coast was regularly sending ships to China and back and became one of the most important trading ports of this period. However, Siraf's hold on trade weakened when an earthquake struck and damaged it in 997. Other regions stepped in, including Hormuz, Omar, and particularly Qeys, an island city in the Persian Gulf. Arab expansion into the Indian Ocean trade initially filtered through these ports, but it eventually expanded along the African coast as well ([Figure 12.18](#)).



FIGURE 12.18 Indian Ocean Trade Routes. In the tenth century, Indian Ocean trade spread from the Red Sea and Persian Gulf down to Africa and around India to China. (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

The Muslim presence in northwest India was also an important link in the chain of Indian Ocean trade. Muslim raiders invaded India in the eighth century and came through Khurasan and Ghazni in the late tenth and eleventh centuries and many of the local inhabitants converted to Islam. In Gujarat, just south of the Sindh region, the Hindu Chalukya dynasty still controlled much of the Indian Ocean trade through their key city of Khamphat. However, by the end of the twelfth century, their power was waning. When the Turkic peoples from present-day Afghanistan began to rule the area of Delhi independently as the Delhi Sultanate in 1206, this region slowly came under their influence.

Generations of incursions from Persian dynasties into South Asia meant that Persian influence deeply affected the region. That Persian influence can still be seen today in the language of Urdu in modern-day Pakistan, which combines Hindu and Farsi elements. One portion of the Delhi Sultanate was Gujarat, which the sultan Ala al-Din annexed in 1304 after years of ransacking Gujarati cities. When the central Asian warlord Timur (also called Tamerlane in the West) sacked and captured Delhi at the end of the century, Gujarat split off from the weakened state to become an independent Muslim sultanate under the Tughluq dynasty. The Tughluqs set

about subduing the region's Hindu Rajput chieftains and building a navy at Diu, strategically located along important trade routes between the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean. Thus, much of the Indian Ocean trade in northwest India fell into the hands of this Islamic state.

From the decline of the Guptas to the rise of powerful northern Muslim sultanates such as Gujarat, peninsular India was home to the Hindu Chola kingdom, a maritime trade empire. With its vassal states including parts of the modern-day Maldives and Sri Lanka in the south, Chola dominated trade in the nearby portion of the Indian Ocean from about 970 to 1300. Crucially important to its dominance was control of the Palk Strait between Sri Lanka and southern India. The strait acted as a choke point where vessels had to stop to pay taxes, usually a portion of their cargo. Many of these vessels were known as *dhow*s and carried twelve to twenty-four sailors ([Figure 12.19](#)).

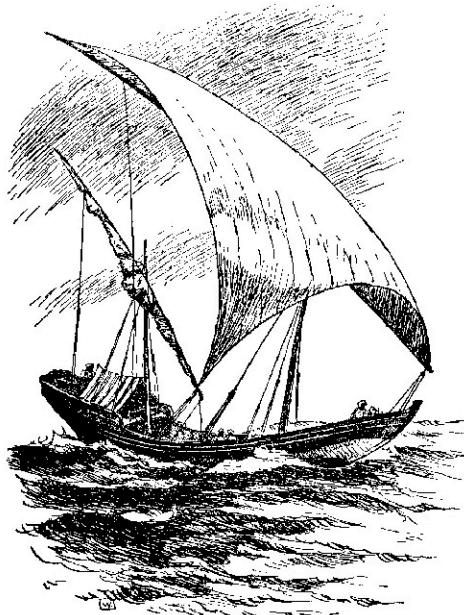


FIGURE 12.19 An Arab *Dhow*. This is an image of a ship called a *dhow*, with lashed and stitched hull construction and a lateen (triangular) rigged sail, such as Arab merchants used en route to India. (credit: "Arab Dhow" by The New Gresham Encyclopedia, Vol IV, Part 1/Project Gutenberg, Public Domain)

Secondary trading also occurred, in which authorized middle merchants conducted exchanges between these larger ships and smaller port cities, a system known as **cabotage**. In the eleventh century, the Chola were trying to extend and consolidate their control over regional trade. To this end, Rajendra I, the "Victor of the Ganges" (1019–1021), sailed up east India's Coromandel coast and seized ports with the goal of deepening commercial ties with China, where trade in items such as ivory and glassware were common.

The Chola enjoyed an artistic, architectural, and literary flowering during the tenth and eleventh centuries. This "Imperial Golden Age" saw an explosion in the construction of monumental temples, like the one at Thanjavur on the southeastern coast, in the so-called Chola style—identifiable by such elements as high surrounding walls and stepped, pyramidal towers ([Figure 12.20](#)). Many of these sites housed intricately ornamented bronze statues of deities commissioned by the rulers, signifying their prominence, wealth, and devoutness. The golden age of the Chola is also known as the greatest epoch in South Indian literary tradition. One notable work of this tradition is the *Ramavataram*, a twelfth century Tamil epic written by the poet Kambar that was based on the *Ramayana*, the Sanskrit epic that told of the exploits of Prince Rama. All of this is a clear reminder that throughout world history, art and architecture tend to flourish when there is economic and political stability to support and sustain those efforts.

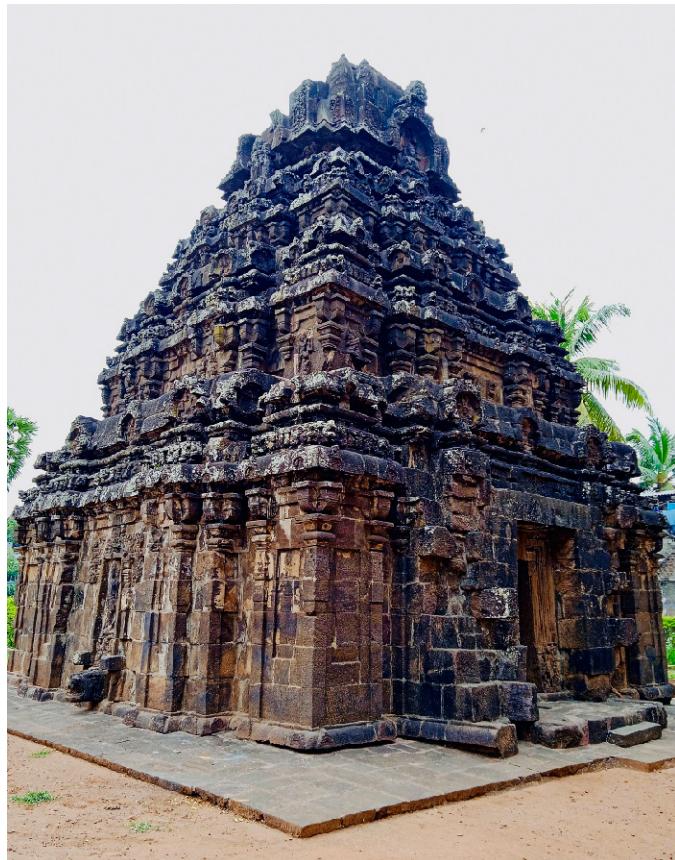


FIGURE 12.20 Chola Architecture of the Golden Age. This Hindu temple dating from the Chola dynasty's golden age represents the distinctive stepped-pyramidal shape that was a common feature of Chola architecture. (credit: "A Surya temple from Eastern Chalukyas of Vengi era" by G.N. Subrahmanyam/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Their golden age would not have been possible had the Chola not controlled trade through the Palk Strait, which generated enormous revenues. The monopolization of choke points was essential to anyone wishing to profit from maritime trade, as the founders of the Srivijaya Empire discovered with their command of the Malacca Strait. Traders sailing from the eastern Indian Ocean to Southeast Asia had to travel through this strait, between today's Sumatra in the Indonesian archipelago and Malaysia ([Figure 12.21](#)). From around 650, Srivijaya profited by managing and taxing the lucrative trade that passed through the strait.



FIGURE 12.21 Srivijaya Trade Routes. This map shows the maritime trade route of the Srivijaya Empire, which went through the Strait of Malacca, the narrow stretch of water between the Malay Peninsula and the island of Sumatra. For a time, Srivijaya, with its capital at Palembang, controlled most of Southeast Asia's waterborne trade.
(attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

During its early history, Srivijaya was highly influenced by both Buddhist and Hindu traders coming from India. For example, in the Srivijaya capital of Palembang in southern Sumatra stands a magnificent Buddha statue dating from the seventh or eighth century. Sculpted in the highly ornate and detailed Amaravati style still popular in contemporary India and named after the southeastern region where it originally developed, this work attests to the role of trade in spreading art, culture, and ideology. Hindu shrines and temples that still stand also show the depth to which Hinduism penetrated Srivijayan culture and society during this formative period.

By the tenth century, Srivijaya controlled all trade between the Indian Ocean and China. Alarmed by the exorbitant taxes on trade and the threat of piracy the Srivijaya posed, however, the Cholas sent a maritime expedition against them in 1025, crushing their major ports including Palembang and reducing Srivijaya's power and influence for a time. Although Srivijaya managed to recover somewhat, its grip on maritime trade soon weakened permanently. By the thirteenth century, it had largely been displaced by the port of Malacca, which came to dominate a region that included modern-day Singapore.

The thirteenth century marks a time of considerable Islamic expansion into Southeast Asia; the Acehnese peoples on the northern tip of Sumatra were the first to embrace the religion. Many merchants in particular converted to Islam, which ensured the safe movement of their goods and protections against loss, especially in the states on the northeast coast of Sumatra such as Perlak and Aru, followed by Pasai in the north, and Malacca, the new maritime center. A further stream of Islamization came with Sufi missionaries. Sufism, a branch of Sunni Islam, blended Islam with local religious traditions, encouraging non-merchants to convert. Over time, Islam came to dominate much of the Malay Peninsula as well as Sumatra and, particularly in the fifteenth century, northern Java.

Hinduism, like Islam, grew in Southeast Asia during the later Middle Ages. In the twelfth century, for example, construction began on the great temple complex of Angkor Wat in Cambodia. Dedicated to Vishnu, Angkor Wat was meant to serve as the state temple, funerary complex, and capital city of the reigning monarch Suryavarman II. Hindu motifs decorated the exterior of the structure in bas relief form, featuring images of the gods and scenes from the epic Indian poem *Mahabharata*, while the temple's five towers were meant to

represent Mount Meru, the dwelling place of the gods in Hindu religion. By the end of the twelfth century, however, the complex had been transformed into a Buddhist center of worship.

LINK TO LEARNING

This [illustrated magazine article](https://openstax.org/l/77Indonesia) (<https://openstax.org/l/77Indonesia>) discusses how Indonesia became one of the largest Muslim countries in the world.

East Africa and the Indian Ocean Trade

East Africa played a large role in the Indian Ocean trade network that connected it with the Middle East, China, and East and Southeast Asia. Trade in East Africa first centered on the Red Sea. After all, Egypt had been a Hellenistic and then a Roman-controlled territory, making exchange with Greece and Rome especially important and lucrative. Luxury goods such as ivory, furs, and spices like frankincense and myrrh were traded with the Roman Empire. However, following the Roman Empire's collapse, other groups from areas such as Arabia began to take over this trade. As trading ports sprang up farther down the east coast of Africa and as Bantu-speaking Africans moved into the region, a new and sophisticated culture arose on the Swahili coast, expanding its role in the Indian Ocean trade network, establishing powerful city-states, and connecting with the African interior via trade.

Aksum and Ethiopia in the Middle Ages

During the period of the Roman Empire, trade between Rome and China crossed central Asia on the Silk Roads. However, there was also a demand for goods from the Indian Ocean, Arabia, and Africa. The route for this trade centered on the Red Sea for a time and was controlled by the Kingdom of Aksum (Figure 12.22).



FIGURE 12.22 The Kingdom of Aksum. This map shows the Kingdom of Aksum at its greatest extent in the early sixth century CE. Though it appears to separate Africa and Arabia, the Red Sea was in fact a conduit of regular cultural exchange and movement of goods and people throughout the premodern period. For most of Aksum's existence, however, the kingdom did not control the fertile lands of southern Arabia, which today form part of Yemen. (credit: modification of work "Map of the Sassanid Empire just before the Arab conquest of Iran" by "DieBuche"/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The Red Sea connects the Gulf of Suez and the Sinai Peninsula with the Indian Ocean. In the third century CE,

traders from Saba, the Yemeni area of the Arabian Peninsula, crossed the Red Sea to the coast of Eritrea. They began focusing much of their trade in the city of Adulis, which became the most important port of the Kingdom of Aksum. The city of Aksum, the capital of the kingdom, was eight days' journey south from Adulis, over a mountain range to the Ethiopian plateau.

The Kingdom of Aksum owed its power to this Red Sea trade, particularly in the fourth century CE. Traded goods included gold, silver, iron tools, cotton cloth, tortoise shells, and, above all, ivory and spices such as frankincense and myrrh. The fourth-century king Ezna expanded the kingdom to its farthest extent through conquering peoples south of Egypt and north of Ethiopia. In 350, toward the end of his reign, Ezna was converted to Christianity by the Syrian missionary Frumentius. Frumentius was later appointed bishop of Aksum by the patriarch in Alexandria, which meant the kingdom followed an Egyptian Coptic form of Christianity that held that Jesus had only a divine and not a mortal body.

During the reign of Ezna, caravans traveled from the interior to take part in the trade at Adulis, creating a constant stream into and out of the port city. The Kingdom of Aksum became increasingly wealthy and powerful. However, in the sixth and seventh centuries, all began to change. In 528, the Aksumites expanded their control as far as Yemen and were said to have reached the gates of Mecca in 571. However, they had evidently overextended themselves. With the help of the Sasanids from Persia, the king in the region of Yemen, Sayf ibn Dhi Yazan, rose up and pushed the Aksumites out of the peninsula.

In the seventh century, the Sasanids were in turn conquered by the Arab Muslim population, particularly the Umayyads. Arabs quickly expanded their control over the peninsula and into North Africa, especially Egypt, and thus access to the Red Sea naturally came into their hands. Particularly as Islam expanded to the Sindh region of northern India, the Persian Gulf became increasingly important for oceangoing vessels, which began bypassing the Aksumite port of Adulis.

Simultaneously, internal problems, some of them environmental, racked the Aksumite Kingdom. For centuries, if not longer, trees had been chopped down and agricultural fields planted, and the land was becoming increasingly barren due to soil erosion. Given this threat to the food supply and the decline in Red Sea trade, which is evidenced in the archaeological record by the reduced number of Aksumite coins used in this period, groups in the interior such as the Beja peoples began to rebel. The Aksumite Kingdom quickly collapsed into a smaller entity centered on the capital city of Aksum. Slowly the Kingdom of Ethiopia incorporated this area, and Aksum became an agricultural community ruled by a landed aristocracy.

Culturally, Ethiopia combined traditional pre-Islamic Jewish traditions with polytheistic ones and, as of the fourth century CE, with Christianity. Owing to its important location and support of long-distance trade, East Africa would prove to be a thriving cultural hub with proud heritage and history that linked them to the many peoples who traveled to and through the region. The legendary Christian kingdom led by Prester John was said to be hidden there, for example. And, until the 1970s, tradition held that Ethiopia's rulers were descendants of both the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon of Jerusalem and had even brought the treasured Ark of the Covenant to Aksum. Thus, while the economic power of the region may have declined, its cultural significance continued well into the modern era.

The Swahili Coast and Indian Ocean Trade

Following the decline of the Kingdom of Aksum, the Indian Ocean trade shifted in part to the East African states. Factors that helped elevate the role of maritime trade in this region included improved shipbuilding, the rise of the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates, the decline of the Tang dynasty—which disrupted overland trade—and even environmental changes such as desertification that made some areas of Africa uninhabitable.

While the Kingdom of Aksum was in decline, the internal migration of Bantu peoples was making its way from Africa's northwest to its east and southeast. The Bantu brought their language, their cultural traditions, and especially the technology of ironmongering. Many began settling in coastal communities in East Africa, where they displaced or mixed with the Khoisan and other indigenous African peoples, particularly on the coasts of

modern Tanzania and Kenya. They also traveled south, establishing many fishing and trading villages. These exported ivory, hides, quartz, and gems in return for cotton, glass, jewelry, and other items the Bantu people were unable to make themselves. Port towns such as Shang and Manda began growing into major port centers. Soon Arab merchants began living among the Bantu peoples to participate in the newly developing trade (Figure 12.23).

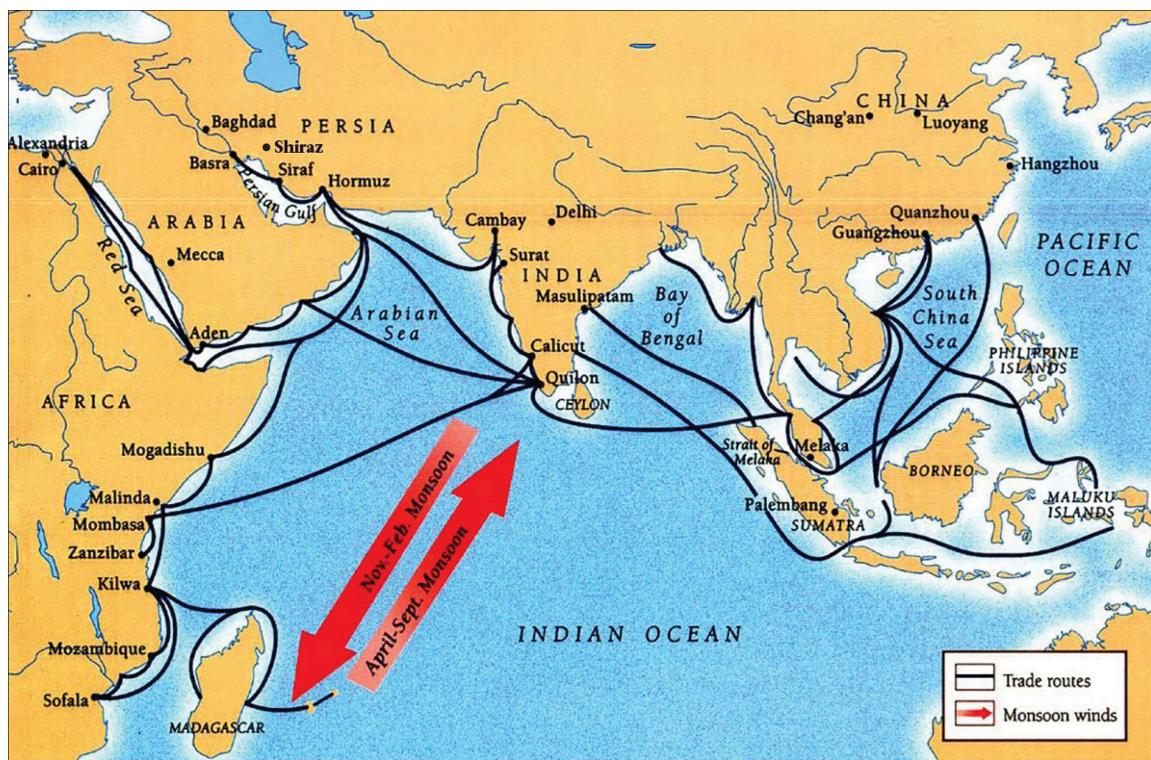


FIGURE 12.23 The Swahili Coast. Key cities along the Swahili coast included Mombasa, Zanzibar, and Kilwa. They were in the path of the monsoon winds and therefore ideally placed to participate in the Indian Ocean trade. (credit: modification of work “Muslim countries Trade” by Muslim countries/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Yemeni traders began arriving along the coast in East Africa in the eighth century and settled in such important areas as Mogadishu (in modern-day Somalia) and the island of Zanzibar. Some of the earliest of these traders were the Kharijites, dissidents from Arabia who held very different opinions from the mainstream on the role of the caliph and the centralization of Muslim society. Many settled in Oman; there and in eastern Africa they developed complex networks of exchange with merchant families and villages and towns along the coast. Over time, the Muslim traders married into these families, mixing cultures and languages, particularly those of Arabs, Persians, and the Bantu-speakers of East Africa, and produced the Swahili (from the Arabic for “of the coast”) civilization.

Thanks to expanding trade with the Muslim world, coastal African traders and port cities from Mogadishu in the north to Sofala in the south adapted to long-distance trade and to Islamic civilization. This adaptation shaped what is known as the Swahili coast, a region of the East African coast dotted by dozens of city-states such as Zanzibar that date from the Middle Ages and served as centers of exchange, particularly of luxury goods.

After 1050, a new wave of Muslim immigrants arrived from the Iranian capital city of Shiraz and pushed many of the previous settlers farther south along the coast. They retained their Islamic cultural heritage and adopted much of the Bantu language, adding Arabic words and creating the language of Kiswahili, which is today a main language of modern Tanzania. The newcomers were eager to trace their Persian heritage as a means of legitimating themselves in the eyes of the peoples of the area, to which end some even claimed descent from the prophet Muhammad himself. In time, these Shirazi Muslims came to dominate trade along the coast, such

as at Mombasa, Malinda, Lamu, and Sofala. Many chose to move onto the islands of the coast, particularly Pemba, Mafia, and Zanzibar. Those who dominated trade and claimed descent from the Middle East were known as patricians.

About forty new Muslim towns formed, many of them city-states independently ruled by their own sultans. A council of other patricians often served as advisors or sometimes simply ran the town without a sultan. In either case they formed an elite, hereditary merchant class, speaking Arabic or Kiswahili and trading with Africans in the interior for such items as ivory, furs, and gold. Gold came from Sofala, the southernmost settled point at that time, and was shipped to the northern part of the Swahili coast, where it was traded to the city-states and from there to the Indian Ocean trade network. The merchants of the city-state of Kilwa sought to bypass intermediaries and purchase gold directly. They therefore established the trading colony of Sofala in the region of the same name. Mostly due to its domination of the gold trade, Kilwa became the most important of the Swahili towns, although Zanzibar proved nearly as powerful. For periods in the fourteenth century, in fact, Kilwa ruled over many other towns.

The development of the Swahili city-states also had the effect of connecting the interior of central southern Africa with the wider trade of the Indian Ocean basin. Merchants from city-states such as Sofala, for example, traveled up the Zambezi and Limpopo Rivers to the great fairs that took place on the Zimbabwean plateau, a region dominated by the Bantu peoples of Great Zimbabwe ([Figure 12.24](#)). There they exchanged shells, ceramics, and coins from the East African coast for such high-value luxury goods as gold and ivory. Archaeologists have found everything from ancient Indian coins to fourteenth-century Longquan Chinese ceramics in the region of the Zimbabwean plateau, testifying to the reach of Swahili-borne oceanic trade in the African interior.

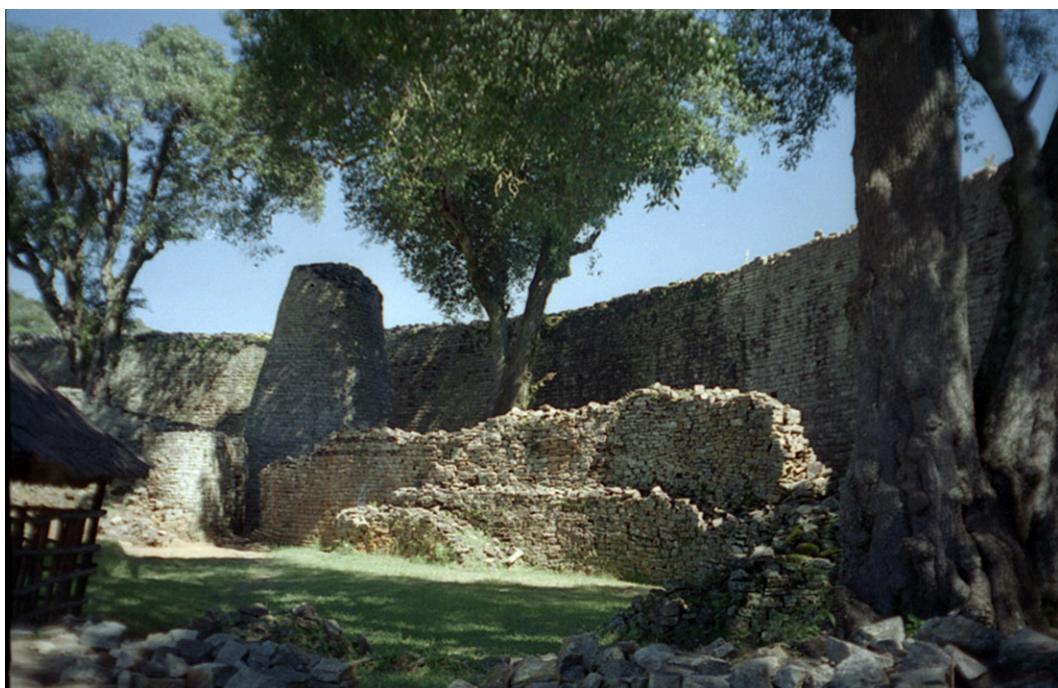


FIGURE 12.24 Great Zimbabwe. Great Zimbabwe was an advanced trade-based civilization established by Bantu speakers between the Limpopo and Zambezi Rivers in the south-central African interior. Shown here are the remains of the one of the walls of Great Zimbabwe. (credit: “Inside of the Great Enclosure which is part of the Great Zimbabwe ruins” by Jan Derk/Wikimedia commons, Public Domain)

The Bantu societies of eastern and south-central Africa tended to be more matrilineal than Arabic or Persian societies were. Many Middle Eastern immigrants cemented their power by marrying the daughters of local ruling elites. But eventually a culture began to form in which women in the city-states veiled themselves and lived in separate quarters. Even the smallest city-state had a mosque, and many of these can still be seen today.

Many of the more powerful city-states, such as Kilwa, began to mint their own money in the form of copper and silver coins. Generally not used internationally, these coins were nonetheless useful among the coastal people themselves.

If the merchant ruling class were the elite and upper class, the second class comprised the townspeople, the artisans, clerks, and other non-elite workers. They were generally non-elite because they could not trace their genealogy in a line of descent from Shirazi Muslims. Many non-Muslims also resided in the towns and were even lower in social status, such as servants or other manual laborers.

The lowest class of all were the enslaved, people purchased from the mainland who performed much, if not all, the necessary agricultural labor. Slavery played as much of a role in East Africa at this time as it did in the Atlantic world later, following European colonization of the Americas. Enslaved people also became a key trade item in the Indian Ocean trade route and remained long after the arrival of Portuguese sailors and other Europeans in the sixteenth century. Merchants purchased enslaved Bantu peoples from the interior through African intermediaries; they then shipped them to southern Iraq. During the ninth century, these enslaved people, whom the Muslims called *Zanj*, labored to drain the swamps near the mouths of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and to grow sugarcane and rice. But one of the greatest uprisings of enslaved people in history began in 868 when the *Zanj* rebelled against their enslavers. Although it was eventually crushed in 883, this unrest effectively ended much of the large-scale slave trade between the Swahili coast and the Persian Gulf in this period. The trade in enslaved people continued throughout the Indian Ocean networks, but this form of slavery never again took hold in the Persian Gulf.

By the twelfth century, East Africa had become a key center of Indian Ocean trade. The combination of monsoon winds that allowed ships to sail toward India in the summer and toward Africa in the winter facilitated the spread of Islam and the unifying culture it created among the merchant classes. Trade-based societies developed along the great arc of land that encircled the Indian Ocean basin. The ivory, animals, skins, rhinoceros' horns, and gold that played such a large role in this trade came from East Africa to be exchanged for luxuries such as silks, glassware, and tools.

12.3 Border States: Sogdiana, Korea, and Japan

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- Discuss the rise of the kingdoms of Sogdiana, Korea, and Japan
- Explain how long-distance trade along the Silk Roads influenced the growth of border states like Sogdiana
- Describe the cultural influence of China on the states of Korea and Japan

Sogdiana, in modern Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, traded both with the Chinese and, increasingly in its long history, with other nomadic peoples such as the Turks. The Chinese, in turn, influenced both Korea and Japan. Both already participated in oceanic trade, but the additional benefits of the Silk Roads' interchange of ideas came to Korea and Japan through the Chinese as Koreans studied writing, Confucianism, and Buddhism in China and brought back the ideas and methods that suited them best. These innovations and ideas then spread to Japan, especially Buddhism.

Sogdiana and Silk Road Trade

East of the Sasanian Empire and west of Tang China, in what is now Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, lay the region of Sogdiana, a territory whose documented history stretches back to the fifth century BCE. Inhabited primarily by nomadic groups, Sogdiana was subject to the rule of a succession of empires and kingdoms throughout antiquity, from the Achaemenid Persians, Alexander the Great, and the Hellenistic successor kingdoms to the Kushan Empire. As a result, the region became a cultural melting pot. Indeed, under first the Seleucids and then the breakaway kingdoms of the Bactrian and Sogdian rulers, Greek learning flourished in Sogdiana,

prompting later Islamic rulers to recruit scholars from the area. The Kushan Empire in central Asia was key to stabilizing the heartland that connected the eastern and western ends of the Silk Roads. After Kushan's fall in 375 CE, the Sogdians came to control an array of vital oasis towns, including Bukhara and Samarkand (both in modern-day Uzbekistan), from which they dominated regional trade for hundreds of years.

Although Sogdiana was never unified into a single polity and was almost always ruled by larger states, its long exposure to so many different cultures produced a multilingual population of merchants and skilled craftspeople. The Sogdians were able to use these traits to dominate their portion of the Silk Roads from their city-states such as Panjikent (in Tajikistan). So effective was their control that Sogdiana became the richest country in central Asia. Archaeological excavations of the palace complex at Panjikent have revealed large and elaborate buildings with interiors bearing frescoes of armored cavalry engaged in combat, clearly showing the influence on Sogdian culture of the warrior aristocracy of the Sasanids (Figure 12.25).



FIGURE 12.25 A Sogdian Fresco. This Sogdian fresco (wall painting) of the sixth or seventh century CE depicts a warrior on horseback. It was discovered on a wall of the palace complex at Panjikent in what is today Tajikistan. (credit: “Panjikent mural (6th-7th century CE)” by “Pendjikent”/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

LINK TO LEARNING

Visit this [Smithsonian site](https://openstax.org/l/77Sogdiana) (<https://openstax.org/l/77Sogdiana>) to learn more about Sogdiana and the Sogdian people, including their religious and cultural diversity, the skills of their craftspeople, and their place in the history of the Silk Roads.

Sogdiana reached the peak of its wealth and influence between the fourth and eighth centuries CE. Concentrated in a patchwork of oasis towns and city-states among larger kingdoms, the Sogdians traded frequently with Romans to the west and with nomadic peoples of the steppes and the Chinese to the east. Sogdian communities that exchanged leather and animal products for Chinese silk and manufactured goods were also found in thriving Chinese river ports like Dunhuang and Chang'an.

The Sogdians were also keen agents of cultural transmission throughout this period. As early as the fourth century, for example, Sogdian merchants and traders helped spread Buddhism beyond the borders of South Asia. By the sixth century, Sogdians had followed the Silk Roads into Europe, bringing Nestorianism, the branch of Christianity from Asia Minor and Syria that believed Jesus had two separate natures. Sogdians also brought Manichaeism, a dualistic philosophy of good versus evil that emerged in the Sasanid Empire and blended Persian Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and Christianity. Manichaeism was the chief competitor of Catholic Christianity in Late Antiquity until the arrival of Islam.

Sogdian traders also established alliances with some of the peoples they encountered in the west, including groups of nomadic Turks who adopted not only Manicheanism but also Sogdian, which was the language of the Silk Roads until the seventh century when it was replaced by Persian. By the eighth century, however, parts of Sogdiana including Samarkand were ruled by the expanding Islamic caliphate, which saw the potential in monopolizing the central Asian corridor of the Silk Roads. The diffusion of Muslim culture into Sogdiana prompted many Sogdian merchants and traders to convert, seeing benefits that included reliable contracts among believers to safeguard goods moving along the Silk Roads. By the middle of the century, the revolutionary Abbasid caliphs who overthrew their Umayyad predecessors had extended their Muslim empire all the way to Tang China, against whose forces they engaged in the Battle of Talas River in 751. For all its significance in ending Abbasid expansion eastward, the battle is also noteworthy in the story of Sogdiana for one unexpected reason: the response of the rebellious Tang general An Lushan.

Although An's biological parentage is shrouded in mystery, the record suggests he was adopted by a Turkic-speaking mother and a Sogdian father and swiftly rose to prominence in the Tang army as an interpreter in the military markets along the Silk Roads. His aggressive nature endeared him to no one, but by the 730s, An had come to the attention of Emperor Xuanzong and ingratiated himself into court politics. He and the emperor became fast friends, but An's fears about his future should the emperor die led him to rebel against the Tang state following its defeat at Talas River. An Lushan's rebellion decided the fate of the Tang presence in central Asia, for it prompted the Tang to withdraw from the region. The story of An reminds us yet again of the interconnected nature of the premodern world.

By the end of the eighth century, much of Sogdiana was ruled by the Abbasid Caliphate, and Sogdian communities abroad gradually assimilated, as in China, for example. Still, Arab, Byzantine, Chinese, and Armenian sources refer to Sogdians as the “great traders of Inner Asia,” while caravanners’ graffiti in India and the presence of Sogdian loanwords in the Turkish vocabulary testify to the intensity and durability of their commercial interactions long after their absorption into the Islamic world.

The dual Muslim/Chinese control of the Silk Roads that began in the eighth century was shaken by the coming of the Mongols in the thirteenth century. Chinggis Khan’s second son Chagatai and his descendants controlled central Asia as the Chagatai Khanate from the mid-thirteenth century onward, until the Turkic warlord Timur (Tamerlane) took over in 1363 and made his capital at Samarkand, the old Sogdian center of the Silk Roads.

Early Korea

The Korean peninsula is a mere six hundred miles long, from the Yalu River in the north to the Korean Strait in the south. Manchuria is located north of it and has historically been home to many nomadic peoples; at times it was part of the kingdoms that made up the lands of Korea. Situated so close to China and at the crossroads of much oceangoing traffic in East Asia, Korea and Manchuria have been influenced a great deal by Chinese culture, from landscape painting techniques to city planning, as well as by ideas such as Confucianism and Buddhism.

Before the common era, an early Korean state was established in the northwest portion of the peninsula and part of Manchuria. This was the state of Gojoseon, and its people founded their capital at the site of Pyongyang, the current capital of North Korea. During the period of the Han in China (220 BCE–220 CE), three separate kingdoms formed in the peninsula: Goguryeo in the north (37 BCE–668 CE), and in the south Baekje (18

BCE–660 CE) and Silla (57 BCE–935 CE). The northern kingdom of Goguryeo had been overrun by the Han, but in 313 CE it was able to throw off the Chinese and reestablish independence. A fourth state, the confederacy of Gaya (42–532 CE), was also established in this period, but it remained relatively weak and in 532 CE was absorbed by the kingdom of Silla (Figure 12.26).



FIGURE 12.26 The Three Kingdoms. This map shows Korea during the Three Kingdoms period. Note the locations of the three—Baekje, Silla, and Goguryeo—which all vied to unify Korea under their own rule. Eventually the Kingdom of Silla absorbed the confederacy of Gaya in 532 and allied with the Tang to defeat Baekje in 660, and then Goguryeo in 668. (credit: modification of work “Map of Goguryeo (476)” by “solicitatia”/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

It was during this Three Kingdoms period that cultural influences such as Buddhism were being spread along the Silk Roads. One of the Chinese dynasties to succeed the Han, the Jin, sent Buddhist missionaries into Goguryeo in 372. Many elites soon converted, and the kingdoms of Baekje and Silla followed suit. Other cultural innovations that influenced the three kingdoms were Confucian teachings and Chinese writing; Chinese became the official governmental language. The three kingdoms soon fell to quarreling among themselves, however. The southern two allied against Goguryeo in 550, though their victory was delayed for quite some time.

When the Sui reunified China in 589, they also sought to regain control of Korea, finding themselves in conflict with Goguryeo but repeatedly defeated. In 612, for example, when the Sui attacked with 300,000 soldiers, only 2,700 were reported to have survived. This and other failed attempts to conquer Korea weakened the Sui and were among the key reasons for the dynasty's collapse and replacement by the Tang in 618.

The second Tang emperor, Taizong, also attacked Goguryeo and was likewise defeated. The Tang therefore allied with the Kingdom of Silla in their bid to dominate the peninsula. Together they defeated Baekje in 660, and then Goguryeo in 668. By 668, Silla was the sole remaining kingdom in Korea. In exchange for victory, however, Korea was now a tributary state of the Tang, although it extended only as far as the city of Pyongyang.

The new capital of Silla was located at Geumseong. Basing their city on the Tang capital of Chang'an, the Silla built many Confucian schools, and many Koreans traveled to China to acquire a solid Confucian education and learn more about Buddhism. The ideas of Confucianism and Buddhism slowly influenced and altered Korean culture. For example, Korea had been relatively matrilocial, with the husband joining the wife's family after marriage. But thanks to the influence of Confucianism and its patriarchal traditions, the opposite now began to occur.

The Koreans did not adopt Chinese values wholesale. Although they accepted aspects of China's examination system for filling the state bureaucracy based on merit, for instance, aristocratic control remained strong. High aristocrats were often given entire villages to govern and directly chose the local governing officers, and many of these nobles did what they could to protect their indigenous identities. And although China had few enslaved people, Korea had many.

In 780, an uprising occurred in which the king of Silla was killed. This event marked the beginning of the kingdom's decline, and a number of additional revolts occurred over the following century. A general named Wang Geon overthrew the kingdom in 935 and established the Goryeo dynasty (from which modern Korea derives its name). The new capital was located where the city of Kaesong now stands, and its administration was based largely on the former Tang governmental system; examination systems and Confucian education increased in importance. To guard against northern nomadic invaders, the Goryeo dynasty built a wall just south of the Yalu River, based on China's Great Wall.

The new Korean state persisted for some two centuries until a military coup in 1170. Although the Goryeo dynasty remained on the throne, successor kings were figureheads; the army generals held real power and maintained a powerful hold on the military establishment. In the early thirteenth century, however, the Korean capital in Kaesong was besieged by the Mongols, and in 1231 the government was forced to flee southward. The Mongols overran the state itself in 1258, bringing this formative period of Korean history to an end.

Early Japan

East of Korea and Manchuria lie the four major islands and thousands of smaller islands that make up modern Japan ([Figure 12.27](#)). The early history of Japan probably began as long as fifteen thousand years ago, when the islands are thought to have physically separated from Korea at the end of the last ice age. But archaeological research in Japan has uncovered artifacts such as arrowheads and spearpoints made from bone and antlers that date from even earlier, closer to 16,500 years ago. This early time is known as the Jōmon period, which lasted until the fourth century BCE.



FIGURE 12.27 Japan, Korea, and China in Context. This modern map of Japan and Korea shows their proximity to each other and to China. Their closeness explains how Buddhism and other cultural elements such as writing were able to spread from China to Korea and then to Japan in the premodern period. (attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license)

The centuries from about 300 BCE to roughly 300 CE marked a new agricultural era in Japan known as the Yayoi period. Crops such as millet and rice began to be cultivated, both probably from Korea and China. After around 300 CE, we have evidence of a complex urban culture, such as burial mounds of a large new ruling class. These *kofun*, meaning “old mounds,” give this era of Japanese history its name, the Kofun period. Lasting until the sixth century CE, this time saw an intensification of cultural exchange and foreign relations between Japan and Korea. In either 538 or 552, for example, King Seong of Baekje in western Korea sent emissaries to Japan along with Buddhist scriptures and a statue of the Buddha, marking the introduction of Buddhism into the country. About a century later, intense warfare on the Korean Peninsula prompted the migration of countless Koreans to Japan, most of whom were welcomed there. In fact, Emperor Tenji employed many skilled Korean technicians and craftspeople to build fortresses along his coastline.

During the Kofun period of the late third to sixth centuries, the arrival of Buddhism in Japan coincided with the rule of the Yamato clan, a group said to have descended from the goddess Amaterasu. The Yamato began to dominate the island of Honshu, one of the four large islands of Japan where another aristocratic clan, the Nakatomi, supervised the court’s religious ceremonies at the imperial palace. The indigenous religion of Japan, Shintoism, held that many gods and spirits must be revered and honored, such as the spirits of trees, rocks, mountains, streams, and former rulers and chieftains. Amaterasu, for example, was the Shinto goddess of the sun. The Nakatomi clan, along with the Mononobe clan, opposed any religion, particularly foreign, that might threaten the dominance of tradition. However, the Soga clan chose to support Buddhism, in opposition to the other two clans.

In the seventh century, the ruler of Japan was Empress Suiko, the daughter of a Soga mother who came to power in 593 after the assassination of her brother King Sushun. For the next three decades, she ruled with her nephew and adviser, Prince Shotoku. In 594, early in her rule, Buddhism became a state religion. This was not the end of Shintoism, but it began a parallel system that continued to the present. In short, by the end of the sixth century, both Shintoism and Buddhism were influencing the cultural makeup of Japan.

In keeping with the ancient East Asian tradition of embracing and borrowing from Chinese culture, the Soga rulers of Japan, like the Koreans in the sixth century, sent envoys to China. These envoys brought back Confucianism, which soon became a way to govern based on principles of appropriate and ethical behavior, as happened in China and Korea. An unusual feature of government in Japan at this time, however, was the adoption of a cap-rank system, which marked an official's rank by the color of cap worn; purple was the most prestigious.

In 604, Prince Shotoku wrote a statement of seventeen articles of government, sometimes referred to as Japan's first constitution. The state was then under great stress, divided among semiautonomous clan-based units. Not surprisingly, the constitution emphasized the Chinese Confucian precepts of a unified state ruled by one sovereign, the meritocratic rather than hereditary system of civil service, and the rights and obligations of the rulers and the ruled.

The Soga clan came to a violent end in 645, marking the rise of the Nakatomi family and the Fujiwara clan. Agitation and civil war persisted until 672, when King Temmu and Jito, his wife and later successor, came to the throne and initiated the Taika Reforms. Seeking to adopt the centralization instituted by the Tang, who came to power in China in 618 CE, Temmu and Jito started to build a capital at Fujiwara-kyo in 694. When it burned down a few years later, they built another at Nara to resemble the Tang capital of Chang'an, inaugurating the Nara period in Japanese history, which lasted until 794. Other reforms included a system of taxation, conscription, and labor service that came to be known as the Taihō Code (701). An administrative and penal code system based on that of Tang China was established in 718.

After the death of Emperor Shomu in the mid-750s, conflict characterized the remainder of the century. In 794, Emperor Kammu moved his capital about twenty miles north to Heian-kyo, the site of today's Kyoto, ending the Nara period. Heian-kyo remained the capital of Japan until 1868. This larger city symbolized Japan's increasing power over all the major islands, with the exception of the northern island of Hokkaido. Emperor Kammu took his Fujiwara patron with him to the new capital. Throughout the ninth century, Fujiwara advisers became increasingly powerful at the expense of the emperors, many serving as regents and even as emperors themselves.

Gender roles became more rigidly defined during this period, and many non-elites were officially categorized as peasant, artisan, or merchant. Even the system of writing changed. Chinese script had been the traditional writing style, particularly among scholars. However, many words in Japanese were pronounced differently than Chinese writing allowed. Thus a new script called kana began to develop, to more accurately depict the way the words were pronounced in Japanese.

The most famous work written in kana is *The Tale of Genji*, the story of the romantic escapades of Hikaru Genji, a fictional emperor's son. Genji is removed from the line of succession for political reasons, and now a commoner, he decides to pursue a career as an imperial officer. Along the way, he has various romantic entanglements, secret love affairs that produce offspring believed to be the emperor's, and something like a midlife crisis, a reflection of the Buddhist belief in the transience of life. Widely considered the world's first novel, *Genji* was composed in the eleventh century by Murasaki Shikibu, a noblewoman and lady-in-waiting in the Heian Court. It skillfully portrays the forms of entertainment, manner of dress, daily routines, and moral code of the Heian nobility at the height of the Fujiwara clan's power. While the facts surrounding much of Murasaki's life and the composition of her magnum opus are not known, what is not disputed is *Genji's* critically important place in the literary canon of world literature, with the work often considered one of the world's oldest complete novels and a master class of Japanese literature. What is also not in dispute is that the work was composed by a woman from a powerful family at a time when the role of women around the world was still secondary to their male counterparts. It leaves us to wonder how much powerful and influential literature could have been composed by other women should they have been given the opportunity and resources that Murasaki was able to leverage during her career.

BEYOND THE BOOK***The Tale of Genji* and Japanese High Society during the Heian Period**

Composed in the eleventh century and attributed to female writer Murasaki Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji* opens a unique window into the culture of Japan during the late Heian Period from the eighth to twelfth centuries. The story reveals many aspects of aristocratic life at court, from the styles of clothes worn to the musical instruments played and the mores and values that guided interpersonal and public relationships.

The scenes and events described in *The Tale of Genji* have been depicted in paintings and drawings over the centuries, weaving the story more deeply into Japanese identity by bringing to vivid life the setting for this ancient tale. One of the central themes in the story is of love and unrequited love. Genji finds his ideal woman in the form of Lady Fujitsubo, who is his stepmother, and therefore his love for her is forbidden. At one point in the story, he kidnaps a young girl (Murasaki), who he discovers is actually Lady Fujitsubo's niece. To satisfy his desire for Lady Fujitsubo, he educates the young Murasaki to be like his womanly ideal before finally marrying her ([Figure 12.28](#)).

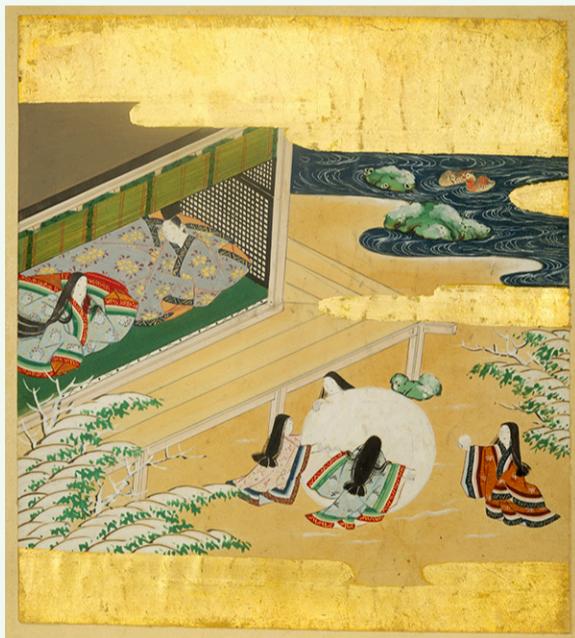


FIGURE 12.28 Scene from *The Tale of Genji*. This scene from a seventeenth-century paper album rendered on paper and consisting of twenty-four album leaves shows the young female servants playing in the snow as Genji and Murasaki watch from their veranda. This scene of childish play was likely intended by the artist to emphasize the youthfulness of Murasaki. (credit: “The Tale of Genji (Genji Monogatari)” by Gift of Mary L. Cassilly, 1894/Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain)

Many of the illustrations that accompanied the novel’s texts provide exquisite detail on the novel’s content and reveal both a close reading of the text as well an intimate knowledge of imperial customs. Consider this mid-seventeenth-century handscroll fragment showing the funeral of Lady Aoi, Genji’s first wife ([Figure 12.29](#)).



FIGURE 12.29 The Funeral of Lady Aoi. This funeral scene from chapter nine of *The Tale of Genji* dates to the mid-seventeenth century CE and was rendered on a paper handscroll in ink and gold. Here we see a high-ranking Tendai monk wearing orange and performing rituals in front of an ornamented altar as many priests from various temples gather around. The attending monks are arranged hierarchically and are recognizable by their elaborate clothing. (credit: “‘Leaves of Wild Ginger’ (Aoi), from the Phantom Genji Scrolls (Maboroshi no Genji monogatari emaki)” by Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1912/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The story of Genji was enormously popular in Japan and illustrations of him and about the story continue to be made. In the nineteenth century, artists using woodblock printing often elaborated on the themes in the story by putting Genji in more modern scenes (Figure 12.30).



FIGURE 12.30 Modern Illustrations from *The Tale of Genji*. In this colorful three-panel woodblock print, Genji (left) is shown entering the Gankiro Teahouse, one of the most famous brothels in nineteenth-century Yokohama. Here the artist, Utagawa Kunisada, is likely blending the sensual imagery in the story of Genji with the sensual atmosphere of the teahouse. (credit: “Prince Genji Visits the Gankirō Tea House” by Bequest of William S.

Lieberman, 2005/Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain)

- What do the images suggest to you about gender and social relations during the Heian period?
- The details in many of the images, like the preceding funeral scene, are sometimes more elaborate than the story itself. What does this suggest about the way the story had become an important part of Japanese culture over time?

Throughout the Heian period, the court supported obscure forms of Buddhism such as Tendai (Tiantai in China) and Shingon. Shintoism retained its status as a key religious tradition (Figure 12.31), but so did these forms of Buddhism. Emperor Shomu had encouraged the spread of Buddhism by ordering a temple to be built in every province and block printings of Buddhist scriptures to be disseminated to the general populace.



FIGURE 12.31 The Itsukushima Shrine. Originally built in the twelfth century, the Itsukushima Shrine pictured here is an important Shinto symbol of the indigenous religion of Japan and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The prominence of shrines such as this shows that the religion is still a vibrant aspect of cultural life in Japan today. (credit: “The torii gate at the Itsukushima Shrine in Miyajima” by Balon Greyjoy/Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

LINK TO LEARNING

One of the key religious traditions of Japan is Shintoism. Read [this article, particularly the first section, “What is Shinto?”](#) (<https://openstax.org/l/77Shinto>) and consider why early people like the Japanese might have developed such a keen connection to nature and the environment. What other religious traditions beyond those of Japan uphold the importance of nature?

During the late eleventh century, a unique facet of Japanese government developed called *insei*, or cloistered rule, in which the emperor retired from public life to live in a monastery but continued to rule behind the scenes. Initially, at least, this practice was meant to establish a regency of sorts; that is, the cloistered emperor could direct the affairs of state until his son came of age to rule in his own right. In time, however, cloistered rule became unwieldy and prompted chaos in the Japanese state. Often there were several retired emperors at the same time, each with their own troops, who exerted (or attempted to exert) control through cloistered rule. At this time, Heian-kyo began to be called Kyoto, meaning “the capital city.”

An upsurge of violence began in the late 1150s when two families, the Taira and the Minamoto, vied for power. In 1160, the Taira were ascendant, but a generation later, in the uprising known as the Genpei War, the

Minamoto triumphed, winning the naval Battle of Dannoura in 1185. The Kamakura period of Japan's history then began and lasted until 1333. In this period, the imperial capital remained at Heian-kyo, but the warrior families, first the Minamoto and then the Hojo, were headquartered in Kamakura.

From 1180 to 1185, with the help of the **samurai**, the warrior aristocracy of Japan, Yoritomo, the heir of the Minamoto clan, successfully wiped out all rivals, even eradicating the northern branch of the Fujiwara in 1189. In 1192, he gave himself the title of **shogun**, or commander in chief. From then on, the military shogun exercised the power of state, while the emperor was little more than a figurehead. Regional lords also had samurai retainers. Samurai adhered to a strict code of behavior called *bushi*, or “way of the warrior.” One of the expected behaviors was disdain for capture, leading to ritual suicide known as *seppuku*.

DUELING VOICES

Origins and Evolution of the Samurai Class: A Historical Debate

Historians seeking to understand the changing nature of armed force and military organization in early Japan and the origin of the samurai look at the ways in which Japanese society, culture, and economy were influenced by military matters before the eighth century and how this influence prompted the emergence of a new class of warrior-administrators.

The prevailing view today is that the samurai emerged in the mid- to late-Heian period as the result of a weakened imperial system. The imperial court had modeled its administration on institutions imported from Tang China, which included a governing ideology based on Confucianism and a military establishment that depended on a peasant-conscript army. This system proved ineffective in Japan, however, resulting in an inept central government that failed amid warfare and regional rebellion beginning in the early tenth century. The subsequent breakdown in public order prompted people in the countryside to take matters into their own hands. Provincial families armed themselves to defend and advance their private interests, allowing them to reclaim land and gain influence at the Heian Court by acting as regional warlords who could impose stability and security over rebellion. By 1100, therefore, samurai organized in regional bands were emerging as a major force in Japan's military and political arenas.

Other historians argue that the Heian Court was not inept or inactive and that the growth of private regional armies was well underway by the Heian period rather than being a product of it. This development too, they believe, was a return to familial authority patterns already deeply rooted in Japanese culture. Finally, these scholars contend that the rise of provincial warrior families and emergence of the samurai class was nothing more than the outcome of their being coopted by the central imperial authority, which sought to use them to perform essential military service.

The debate surrounding the origins and evolution of the samurai class may never be resolved. With that in mind, watch the following video of [*The Evolution of Samurai through Japanese History*](https://openstax.org/l/77Samurai) (<https://openstax.org/l/77Samurai>) and then answer the questions that follow.

[View multimedia content](https://openstax.org/books/world-history-volume-1/pages/12-3-border-states-sogdiana-korea-and-japan) (<https://openstax.org/books/world-history-volume-1/pages/12-3-border-states-sogdiana-korea-and-japan>)

- According to the video, what were the origins of the samurai?
- How does this explanation fit into the discussion of the origins and development of the samurai in this feature box?
- The video talks about some of the cultural influences that led to the development of the samurai. What were they?
- What were the symbols of the samurai class? What was the preferred philosophy of the samurai?

In 1268, envoys arrived in Kamakura on behalf of some new rulers in Asia, the Mongols. Though they declared

friendly intentions, these emissaries were ignored by the court. In response the Mongols sailed to Japan and invaded in 1274, only to be repelled when a storm arose following bitter fighting ([Figure 12.32](#)). Knowing they would return, the ruling Hojo clan built several land- and sea-based fortifications to halt any future invasion. When the Mongols did reappear in 1281, there was no clear victor, but a typhoon arose and scattered the Mongol ships, convincing many that divine winds, or *kamikaze*, were being sent by the gods to protect Japan.



FIGURE 12.32 The First Mongol Invasion of Japan. This scene from an illustrated scroll called *Mōko Shūrai Ekotoba* from the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century shows the first Mongol invasion of Japan in 1274. It depicts the combatants using arrows as well as bombs. (credit: “Mōko Shūrai Ekotoba 2” by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)