

# The Worlds of 1300

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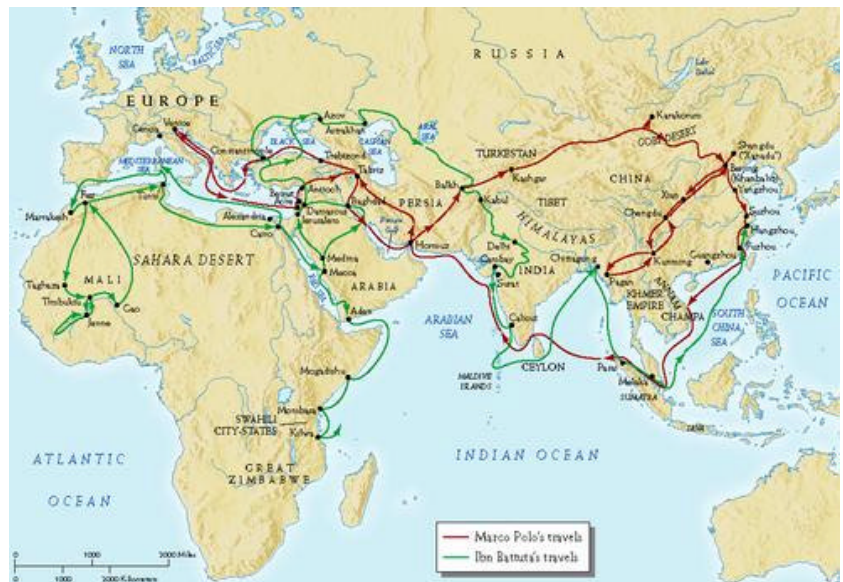
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### I. Introduction

World travelers, such as Marco Polo and Muhammad ibn Abdullah ibn Battuta, beheld great diversity as they visited distant points on the Eurasian continent in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Four large cultural systems dominated: Christian, Muslim, Indian, and Chinese.

Map 1-1: Journeys of Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta



### II. Contact and Isolation

The majority of the world's population lived in isolated communities rather than in contact. Nevertheless, population pressures pushed peoples outward, opening early ties and integration.

#### Fragmented Worlds

Within the globe's larger cultural systems could be found a wide variety of smaller subdivisions. Separated from other areas of the globe, or even from other areas in their own country, small communities developed their own dialects, cultures, and social organizations. The vast majority of the world's population lived in these narrowly defined communities. The struggle for survival meant most people did not have the resources to visit distant lands.

#### Contact and Trade Routes

Even while many remained isolated and insulated in smaller communities, Polo and Battuta also noted great interest among various people for contact with others from distant lands. Indeed, Polo and Battuta themselves nicely characterize this class. Some possessed sufficient resources, ingenuity, and opportunity to travel far and wide, crossing boundaries of all types. People in the borderlands—areas with no centralized control—facilitated contact between civilizations. Warfare could also lead to more contacts, as did camel caravans and ocean-voyaging ships. The fourteenth century was clearly a time of greater contact.

### III. Worlds Apart

Isolated from the Eurasian landmass, the scattered peoples of the Americas, Oceania, and Australia possessed little to keep them unified. Thousands of different languages divided them. Nevertheless, ties between them could still be found.

#### The Americas

Ironically, warfare helped break barriers between peoples. Men fought, not to annihilate, but for captives which, often enough, were incorporated into the victorious tribe. Trade also helped unite separated peoples, particularly when conducted as a form of tribute to a dominant tribe. Like piracy on the high seas, trade and

warfare were often hard to separate. The Incas provide a good example. Located high in the Andes, they built a huge empire by conquering weaker local tribes and incorporating them into their society.

Further north, the Aztecs did the same. Unable to produce vital goods like firewood, the Aztecs resorted to attacking neighboring tribes and trading with those farther away. Trade contributed to the rise of huge commercial cities supported by a class of merchants. A continual supply of goods contributed to distinctive class differences; the upper classes enjoyed food, clothing, and adornments restricted from the lower classes. At the bottom of the class hierarchy were the Aztec slaves: impoverished Aztecs or prisoners of war. From these ranks came the human sacrifices that all saw as necessary to keep the sun burning and ensure continual harvests. Faith and ritual dominated daily life, particularly since society depended on agriculture and thus on the nature gods. Education taught young Aztec men to be warriors. War was honorable and given the highest priority, both for its role in securing prisoners for sacrifices and in supporting trading networks.

### Sub-Saharan Africa

Like the Americas, Africa below the Sahara Desert was divided into thousands of dialects, tribes, and communities. The term "Africa" could not even provide some common ground since the people did not consider themselves to be "African" but members of this or that tribe. Geography, climate, and disease kept large cities from developing, with a few exceptions. Most people lived in modest villages.

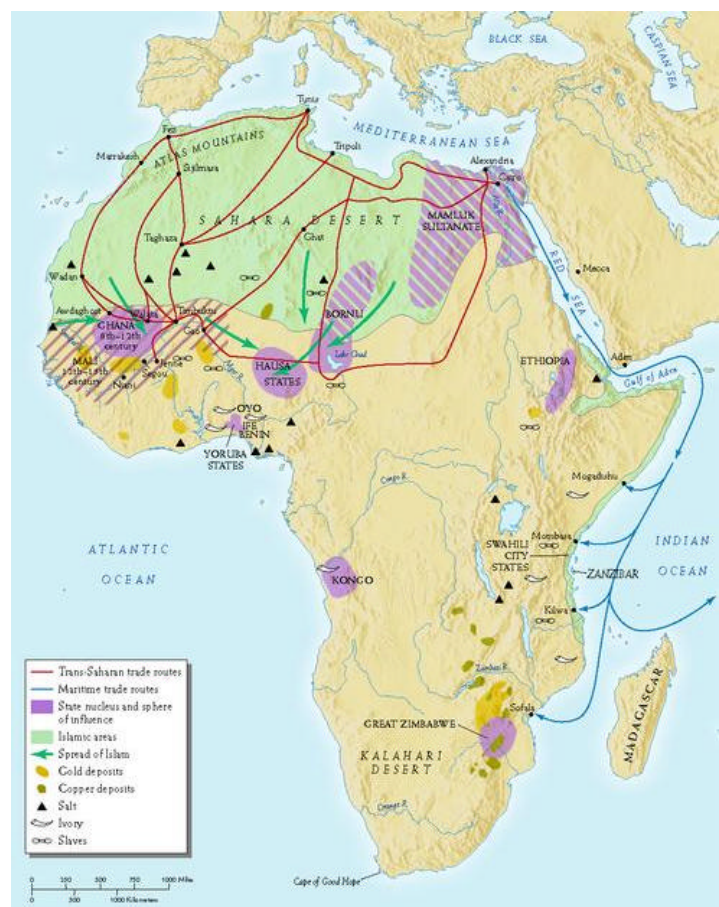
### Map 1-2: Major States and Trading Routes in Africa, 1300s

#### *Forest Dwellers:*

The rain forests of western and central Africa hosted an abundance of food plus water access to distant points, thus facilitating trade. Local "big men" competed for followers, wives, children, land, and yam stores as they moved to expand their influence, reputation, and wealth by farming and trade. Men controlled yams the most valuable produce while women cultivated the lesser crops. Men also controlled long-distance trading while women engaged in shorter distance exchanges. Women could organize themselves, but were generally subordinate to strong males. Africans believed in a host of supernatural forces and spirits that controlled human life. A high god, various good and evil beings, and ancestors composed the typical sub-Saharan African pantheon. Offerings at family shrines sought to appease these forces.

#### *Peoples of East, West, and South Africa:*

In other parts of Africa, dynastic empires appeared. Long-distance trade brought these areas into contact with the peoples of Eurasia. Along these trading routes came religious emissaries. In Ethiopia, Christianity took root by going through Egypt and the Sudan. Islam spread to East Africa and connected it to the much larger Indian Ocean trade. While their religion did not always take root, Muslim traders contributed to the rise of the Zambezi Valley in southern Africa. Muslim traders and missionaries impacted West Africa. Muslims in Ghana traded gold, salt, and slaves from Africa to the Islamic world beyond the Sahara Desert. Mali, which rose on the rubble of Ghana, was also dominated by Islamic believers and became one of the wealthiest communities in the world.



## **IV. The Four Major Cultural Areas of Eurasia**

Identifying how major civilizations viewed themselves can help us understand how history unfolded.

### The House of Islam

A shared religious identity bound Islam's immense diversity into a community of *dar al-Islam* (the house of Islam). Seventh-century Islamic warriors quickly expanded the territory of Islam. As conquests mounted, however, Islam became more and more diverse. Arab dominance gave way to sharing power with other groups who had joined the ranks. The core of Islam, in Central Asia, included the main religious centers of Mecca,



Medina, Jerusalem, Baghdad, and Cairo. Beyond the core, through the energies of merchants and traders, Islam spread to parts of Africa, India, and Indonesia. These looked to the core as particularly holy.

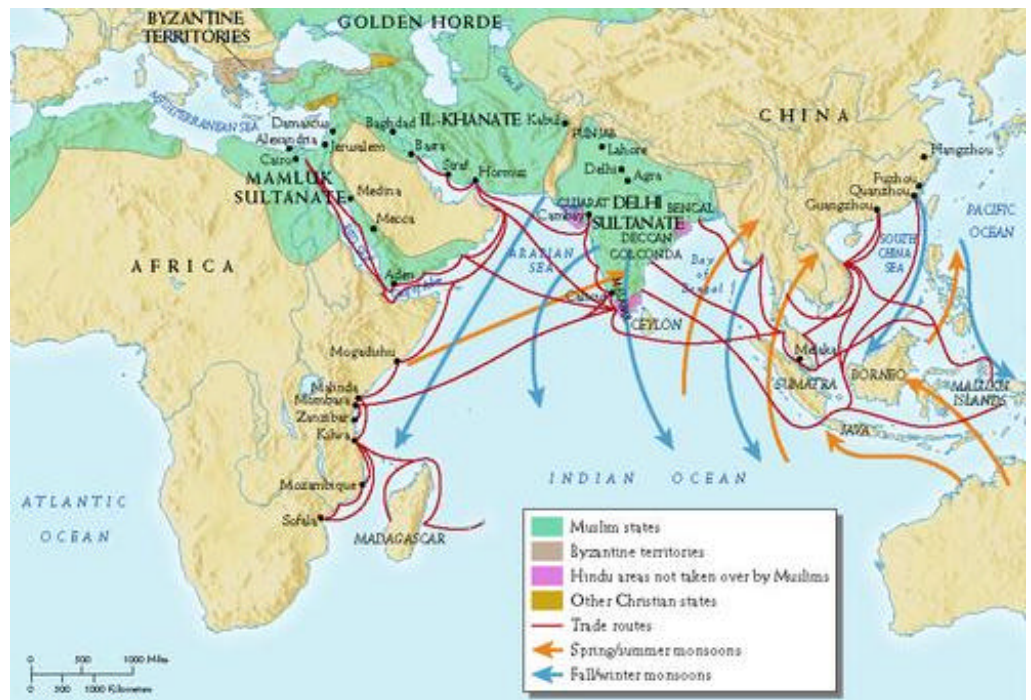
#### Map 1-3: The Islamic World and Trade, 1335

##### *The Muslim Faith:*

Commitment to the teachings of Muhammad (in the Quran), the law of Islam (*sharia*), and the sayings of the prophet and early followers (*hadith*) unified Muslims across the globe. Common features and commitments to the mosque, the five pillars of faith and behavior, and the Sufi brotherhoods cemented this identity.

##### *Sunni-Shiite Schism:*

Despite its unity, however, conflict and division did arise. Arguments over succession to the Prophet Muhammad divided Islam between the minority Shiite and majority Sunni communities. Another split developed with the rise of popular Sufism, which stressed inner spirituality, feeling, and brotherhood as opposed to hierarchical orders.



##### *Agriculture and Trade:*

Most Muslims farmed in small villages, maintaining rather low status and simple existences. Merchants, on the other hand, enjoyed favored status, both in the *Quran* and in Islam's vast opportunities. Trading and transport technology, such as credit organizations, shipping, and camel use, allowed merchants to span great distances and rise to prominence in Islamic society. Trade tied the Islamic world together by linking major trading centers. In the thirteenth century, Cairo emerged as Islam's preeminent city through its dominance of the Nile trade. With a population of 500,000, it hosted Turkish Mamluks, Arabic speaking commoners, as well as separate Christian, Jewish, and Greek quarters. Enormous markets brought huge varieties of goods into the city.

##### *Family Life:*

Islamic society rested on the bedrock of the patriarchal family. Men dominated women, children, and slaves. Poorer men had one wife, who worked in the fields. Wealthier men could have more wives and could afford to keep them veiled from the outside world. Despite its various divisions, the world of Islam remained quite unified, perhaps because differences on the inside could not compare next to those between the Islamic world and Eurasia's other major cultural worlds.

#### The Mosaic of India

The most distinctive feature of the Indian subcontinent is its generous mixing of various cultures. As in the case of "Africa," the term "India" was unknown to the inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent but came from the outside. Indians were divided into a host of different religions, ethnic groups, dialects, and polities. Hindu beliefs drew from a variety of sources and traditions.

##### *Hinduism, the Caste System, and Diversity:*

Above all, the dominance of the priestly Brahmins and the caste system unified Hinduism. Conceptions of relative purity and pollution divided the castes. Brahmins, the priests, were considered the most pure, while warriors, merchants, and laborers/peasants were seen as increasingly less pure. Outcasts were polluted and not worthy of any caste. The castes later subdivided into *jati*. Elaborate rituals governed contact between the castes, allowing higher caste members to cleanse themselves after contact with lower caste members. For the higher castes, ideals of purity in women required that they be isolated from the world and restricted to the domestic sphere. Lower-class women, already somewhat impure, could labor outside the home. A patriarchal order dominated. Religious life for the Brahmins involved studying and writing about religious spiritual texts,

such as the *Upanishads*. Lower castes, on the other hand, followed popular cults that promised spiritual attainment for ordinary mortals. Challenged by these cults, Brahmins added forms of devotion to their creed and incorporated locally popular guardian spirits into their pantheon in order to win popular support. This blending and adoption characterized life in India. Politically, India was divided into a host of regional polities. Merchants brought new commodities, craftsmen, and ideas to the mix. Given India's prime location, it became a vital crossroads within the Indian Ocean trade.

#### *Turkish Invasions:*

In 1206, Muslim Turks invaded the subcontinent and established the Delhi Sultanate. Committed to a single religious idea and one God, the new leaders found India frighteningly chaotic and instituted laws and systems that discriminated against Hindus. Hindu resentment, naturally, rose. With time, however, some Hindu leaders converted to Islam while some Muslims took Hindu wives and adopted local customs. Tolerance eventually replaced prejudice as a fusion of the two cultures ensued. With time, Islam itself became part of the mosaic of India – impacting both India and the broader Islamic world.

#### The Domain of Christendom

The name "Christendom," a predecessor to the term "Europe," covered a vast territory and population that, like Islam, showed signs of both unity and division.



Map 1-4: Europe in 1300

#### *Divisions within Christendom:*

The Christian world was split between Rome in the west and Constantinople in the east, or between the Western Church and its pope and the Orthodox Church and its patriarch. Although both believed in the fundamental teachings of Jesus Christ, doctrinal disagreements kept the two sides at odds. Besides this grand rift, smaller fractures between Christendom's numerous kingdoms, minority religions (Jews, Muslims, and pagans), and secular authorities kept it divided. Political ambitions, such as those of the Holy Roman Empire, meant popes had to compete in the political realm as well as govern the spiritual well-being of fellow believers.

#### *Religious Traditions and Challenges:*

Despite divisions and disagreements, there was still unity among Christians. Paganism was largely defeated by the thirteenth century. Catholic clergy unified culture by teaching a common creed to all and overseeing requisite sacraments. Latin, the language of the church, provided a common means of communication between the elites of the Christian world. Gothic cathedrals identified the servants of the church as possessing higher status than commoners. People were kept in their place. Women had a role in the church hierarchy but remained restricted. Unorthodox activists, who challenged church hierarchy and emphasized spirituality at an individual level, did not have much influence beyond their local areas.

#### *The Feudal System:*

Others also challenged the power of the church. A powerful class of knights could even challenge the power of nobles and kings. Kings rewarded loyal vassals with land, the people on it, and the fruits of their labor. These "lords" then protected the king by fighting for him. Common peasants, or serfs, did all the work in exchange for protection from invaders (like the Vikings). This development of feudalism meant that each landholding had its own lord, laws, and customs, making the unification of large states or the whole of Christendom very difficult. Division also arose among the social classes, which were separated between hereditary landowning elites and common merchants, artisans, or peasants. Upward mobility was extremely rare, leaving a huge gap between elites and commoners.

### *Everyday Life:*

Peasant life was bleak. Local goods might be traded, but no extensive network of trade cities arose as in Islam. Towns did begin to develop but suffered under prohibitive death rates. Merchants dominated, followed by small businessmen, craftsmen, and unskilled laborers. Women could be found at all levels, but composed more than their share of the underclass. Towns near trading networks, such as those of Italy and Belgium, prospered. Most Europeans, however, saw few luxuries and struggled to clothe, feed, and house themselves and their families.

### *Expansion and Conquest:*

Divisions did not prevent Europeans from conquering and expanding their influence. Germanic knights conquered parts of eastern Europe while crusaders continued to push into the Holy Land. Contact with Muslims there opened European eyes to the wonders beyond Europe. Nevertheless, general European understanding of the larger world remained quite limited.

### The Middle Kingdom

Chinese called their country "the Middle Kingdom," yet in the thirteenth century it was divided into two dynasties: the Jin in the north and the Song in the south. Jurchen "barbarians" had invaded from Manchuria and taken the northern half of the Song away. Mongol invaders, also from the north, crushed the Jin and eventually the Southern Song as well. Despite these traumas, China remained the most developed and wealthy of Eurasia's cultural communities.

### *Everyday Life:*

Success rested on the backs of China's peasant class. Unlike peasants elsewhere, China's rural laborers could own land and buy or sell as they liked, thus dividing the country into small family producers. Women worked in the fields and in the silk industry by raising silkworms and spinning thread. Agricultural duties were set aside for various religious or community festivals as well as for family celebrations. Family was very important to the Chinese. Viewing marriage as a union of families more than a union of individuals, parents arranged marriages. If they could afford it, poor men generally had one wife, while elites had multiple concubines.

Map 1-5: The Jin and Southern Song Empires

### *Commerce and Cities:*

Commercial activity in China ~~the~~ most active and highly developed in the world ~~linked~~ countryside and cities like nowhere else. Iron and steel production flourished while river and road transportation allowed travel all over the empire. Enormous cities dominated China's urban sector. Hangzhou had over one million inhabitants and thousands of shops, restaurants, offices, and institutions. As elsewhere, clothing, food, and housing distinguished the wealthy and powerful from the poorer classes of society. Nevertheless, even the poorer portions of Hangzhou's population enjoyed access to chicken, pork, salted fish, and rice. Elites had access to the finest silks and foods.

### *The Bureaucratic Tradition:*

Chinese elites gained wealth through commerce or the examination system. Any male of good standing could take the exam, which was based on the Chinese classics. Since success could usher an individual into the ranks of the official class, great efforts were made to prevent cheating. Success brought status, wealth, and a charmed career track ~~the~~ right to serve in the emperor's bureaucracy. Since China's officials all came through the same system, they shared a common identity and commitment to the empire. That cohesion kept China unified.

### *Confucian Ideals:*

Confucianism shaped the lives of these elites. Based on the teachings of Confucius (sixth century b.c.e.), Confucianism admonished its followers to cultivate virtue through education. According to the master, if society's most virtuous members ruled with exemplary moral behavior, the common people would follow. Each person had certain social obligations, depending on their social status and role. The emperor employed Confucianism to keep the empire orderly and officials in line. Confucianism also restricted him, however, since behavior deemed nonvirtuous would draw criticism from the Confucian-trained officials. This provided the Chinese system with an important check on the emperor's power and balance between the court and the





bureaucracy. Women were barred from politics. As elsewhere, elite women were expected to remain in the home overseeing domestic concerns. Footbinding and expectations of chastity further restrained them, although they enjoyed more rights than later Chinese women.

## V. Borderlands near China

The Chinese believed themselves to be the center of all civilization. The further one traveled from China, the less civilized and the more barbaric society became. Those closer to China, such as Korea and Vietnam, engaged in tributary relations with the Middle Kingdom and were considered to be semi-civilized by the Chinese.

### Japan

Japan was generally considered by the Chinese to be part of this semi-civilized group. Japan in the thirteenth century was governed by a weak military government and passive imperial court headed by the emperor. The rest of Japan was divided between various warlords (*daimyo*) who competed with each other in a feudal system. Many cultural and political systems had been borrowed from China (writing system, Confucian government, Buddhism), but Japan retained a strong sense of identity even if it could not challenge China's dominance.

Map 1-6: The Spice Islands in Southeast Asia



### Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia was one of the most important of these border regions. Divided by seas, forests, and mountains, the region defied attempts to unify it. Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Islam all competed for followers and influence. In the place of a strong political regime, Southeast Asia was dominated by a vast array of small local traders operating from dozens of local ports. Location meant traders could access luxury goods from East Africa, Arabia, India, and China. Spice trade from its own islands meant Southeast Asia enjoyed particular favor in the world's trading networks. Trading opportunities attracted traders from all ports around the Indian Ocean, causing the cultural diversity of the region to expand greatly.

## VI. Mongol Conquests and Connections

The border area of the steppes, between China and western Eurasia, hosted peoples that had a huge impact on adjacent cultural communities. Nomads, living out of tents (or yurts) and subsisting on their herds, struggled to eke out an existence under harsh conditions. Most excelled at horsemanship and archery, two skills vital for survival on the steppes and necessary to carry out successful raids against sedentary communities.

### The Coming of the Mongols

The Mongols engineered the most successful string of raids in history. They began in 1206 under the leadership of Chinggis Khan, who, after years of warfare, unified the Mongol tribes and struck south into China and west into Persia. Later Mongol rulers extended Mongol control from the Pacific Ocean to the Adriatic Sea.

Mongols hunted and herded for their livelihood. They moved with the seasons in search of pasturage for their animals. Skilled horsemen and archers, Mongol men were expected to fight to support the tribe. Men took many wives, indeed as many as they could afford. Women cared for the livestock, and children but could also ride into battle and fight with the men. Mongols employed many tactics in war, including spying, bribery, and propaganda.

Most nomads fought each other for the right to prime grazing lands or against established communities to restore depleted supplies of iron, salt, and other goods. Mongol raids under Chinggis, however, involved something longer lasting. Mongols absorbed people they conquered to augment their ranks. Chinggis also established his house as permanent head of the Mongols. The Mongols did not rely on any large cities but lived off the countryside. Nevertheless, since all men fought, their army boasted over 200,000 fighting men, more men than all but the largest of the world's cities.

To help govern their new conquests, particularly China, Mongols employed other conquered peoples from Central Asia and further west. Playing peoples off each other, the Mongols created elites loyal to the Mongol overlords. They also established a system of communication, like the U.S. pony express system much later, and conducted massive censuses to support their tax system. In spite of these efforts, however, the Mongol empire spanned more territory than could be governed by one regime. As a result, it was divided into four parts, or khanates. Under Kubilai Khan, who headed the khanate in China, the Southern Song empire and Korea were overrun. Attacks on Japan, however, were thwarted by typhoons that sank his armadas.

Map 1-7: The Mongol Empires, 1280



### The Mongol Legacy

The Mongols, although powerful, did not hold their empire long. Nevertheless, they left an extraordinary legacy. Many societies were extinguished by the edge of the Mongol sword. However, the Mongols also greatly stimulated trade between east and west as well as the movement of peoples all over the Eurasian continent. In China, the Mongols greatly repressed the Chinese yet also introduced Western architectural structures, medicine, and religion into China. They also stimulated the growth of Tibetan Buddhism and Daoism.

In the west, the Mongol conquests opened the way for gunpowder and printing to arrive from China. Mongol invitations also gave Europeans, such as Marco Polo, their first experience with the grandeur and splendor of the east. The Mongols stimulated trade by breaking down barriers between cultural centers and eliminating middlemen, thus reducing transportation costs and making trade safer. In short, the drive to trade and the systems supporting it remained long after the Mongols retreated back to Mongolia.