Western Europe and Byzantium
circa 500 - 1000 CE

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7.1 CHRONOLOGY

410 CE Roman army abandons Britain
476 CE The general Odavacar deposes last Western Roman Emperor
496 CE The Frankish king Clovis converts to Christianity
500s CE Anglo-Saxons gradually take over Britain
533 CE Byzantine Empire conquers the Vandal kingdom in North Africa
535 – 554 CE Byzantine Empire conquers the Ostrogothic kingdom in Italy
560s CE Lombard invasions of Italy begin
580s CE The Franks cease keeping tax registers
597 CE Christian missionaries dispatched from Rome arrive in Britain
610 – 641 CE Heraclius is Byzantine emperor
636 CE Arab Muslims defeat the Byzantine army at the Battle of Yarmouk
670s CE Byzantine Empire begins to lose control of the Balkans to Avars, Bulgars, and Slavs
674 – 678 CE Arabs lay siege to Constantinople but are unsuccessful
711 CE Muslims from North Africa conquer Spain, end of the Visigothic kingdom
717 – 718 CE Arabs lay siege to Constantinople but are unsuccessful
717 CE Leo III becomes Byzantine emperor. Under his rule, the Iconoclast Controversy begins.
732 CE King Charles Martel of the Franks defeats a Muslim invasion of the kingdom at the Battle of Tours
751 CE The Byzantine city of Ravenna falls to the Lombards; Pepin the Short of the Franks deposes the last Merovingian king and becomes king of the Franks; King Pepin will later conquer Central Italy and donate it to the pope
750s CE Duke of Naples ceases to acknowledge the authority of the Byzantine emperor
770s CE Effective control of the city of Rome passes from Byzantium to the papacy
780 – 840 CE The Carolingian Renaissance
782 CE  Charlemagne crushes a Saxon rebellion
787 CE  Second Council of Nicaea authorizes the use of icons in worship
793 CE  Viking raids begin
800 CE  Charlemagne crowned Roman emperor by Pope Leo III
830 CE  Abbasid caliph Al-Mamun founds the House of Wisdom in Baghdad
843 CE  In the Treaty of Verdun, Charlemagne's three sons, Lothar, Louis, and Charles the Bald, divide his empire among themselves
843 CE  Final resolution of the Iconoclast Controversy under Empress Theodora
846 CE  Muslim raiders from Aghlabid North Africa sack the city of Rome
849 CE  Charlemagne attacks the Muslims of North Africa
850 CE  Muslim raiders from Aghlabid North Africa sack the city of Rome
870 CE  Alfred the Great defeats the Norse raiders and creates a consolidated kingdom.
899 CE  Defeated by the Pechenegs, the Magyars begin moving into Central Europe
902 CE  Otto the Great, king of East Francia, defeats the Magyars in battle
976 – 1025 CE  Basil II is Byzantine Emperor
988 CE  Vladimir, Grand Prince of Kiev, converts to Christianity

7.2 INTRODUCTION

It was Christmas day in Rome in the year 800 CE. The cavernous interior of St. Peter's Church smelled faintly of incense. Marble columns lined the open space of the nave, which was packed with the people of Rome. At the eastern end of the church, which was the most prestigious in Western Europe, King Charles of the Franks knelt before the pope. A tall man when standing, the Frankish king had an imposing presence even on his knees. He wore the dress of a Roman patrician: a tunic of multi-colored silk, embroidered trousers, and a richly embroidered cloak clasped with a golden brooch at his shoulder. As King Charles knelt, the pope placed a golden crown, set with pearls and precious stones of blue, green, and red, on the king's head. He stood to his full height of six feet and the people gathered in the church cried out, “Hail Charles, Emperor of Rome!” The inside of the church filled with cheers. For the first time in three centuries, the city of Rome had an emperor.

Outside of the church, the city of Rome itself told a different story. The great circuit of walls built in the third century by the emperor Aurelian still stood as a mighty bulwark against attackers. Much of the land within those walls, however, lay empty. Although churches of all sorts could be found throughout the city, pigs, goats, and other livestock roamed through the open fields and streets of a city retaining only the faintest echo of its earlier dominance of the whole of the Mediterranean world. Where once the Roman forum had been a bustling market, filled with merchants from as far away as India, now the crumbling columns of long-abandoned temples looked out over a broad, grassy field where shepherds grazed their flocks.
The fountains that had once given drinking water to millions of inhabitants now went unused and choked with weeds. The once great baths that had echoed with the lively conversation of thousands of bathers stood only as tumbled down piles of stone that served as quarries for the men and women who looked to repair their modest homes. The Coliseum, the great amphitheater that had rung with the cries of Rome’s bloodthirsty mobs, was now honeycombed with houses built into the tunnels that had once admitted crowds to the games in the arena.

And yet within this city of ruins, a new Rome sprouted from the ruins of the old. Just outside the city walls and across the Tiber River, St. Peter’s Basilica rose as the symbol of Peter, prince of the Apostles. The golden-domed Pantheon still stood, now a church of the Triune God rather than a temple of the gods of the old world. And, indeed, all across Western Europe, a new order had arisen on the wreck of the Roman state. Although this new order in many ways shared the universal ideals of Rome, its claims were even grander, for it rested upon the foundations of the Christian faith, which claimed the allegiance of all people. How this post-Roman world had come about is the subject to which we shall turn.

Ever since the fifteenth century, historians of Europe have referred to the period between the fall of the Western Roman Empire and the Italian Renaissance (which took place in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries) as the Middle Ages. The term has problems, but it is still useful because it demonstrates that Europe was undergoing a transitional period: it stood between, in the middle of, those times that we call “modern” (after 1500 CE) and what we call the ancient world (up to around 500 CE). This Middle Age would see a new culture grow up that combined elements of Germanic culture, Christianity, and remnants of Rome. It is to the political remnants of Rome that we first turn.

7.3 QUESTIONS TO GUIDE YOUR READING

1. How did the Germanic peoples of Western Europe relate to the former Roman territories over which they had taken control?

2. Which of Justinian’s policies had the longest-lasting effects?

3. What crises did the Byzantine Empire face during the reign of Heraclius?

4. What was a way that the Byzantine state reorganized itself to face the challenges of seventh- and eighth-century invasions?

5. Why did the Iconoclast emperors believe that using images in worship was wrong?

6. How did the Church provide a sense of legitimacy to the kings of the Franks?

7. How did the majority of people in Europe and the Byzantine Empire live in the Early Middle Ages (i.e., c. 500 to 1000 C.E.)?

8. How did East Francia and England respond to Viking attacks?
7.4 KEY TERMS

- Al-Andalus
- Alcuin of York
- Anglo-Saxons
- Avars
- Balkans
- Battle of Tours
- Body of Civil Law/Justinian Code
- Bulgars
- Byzantine Empire/Byzantium
- Capitularies
- Carolingians
- Carolingian Renaissance
- Cathedral Church
- Charlemagne
- Charles Martel
- Constantinople
- Cyrillic
- Demonetization
- Dependent farmers
- Donation of Constantine
- Eastern Orthodox
- Exarch
- Hagia Sophia
- Iconoclast Controversy
- Iconoclasts
- Iconophiles
- Idolatry
- Kievan Rus
- Lateran
- Lombards
- Macedonian Dynasty
- Magnaura
- Mayor of the Palace/Major Domo
- Merovingians
- Ostrogoths
- Papal States
- Pillage and Gift
- Pope
- Romance Languages
- Ruralization
- Rus
- Scriptorium
- Slavs
- Slavonic
- Tagmata
- Themes
- Vandals
- Vikings
- Visigoths

7.5 SUCCESSOR KINGDOMS TO THE WESTERN ROMAN EMPIRE

The Germanic peoples who had invaded the Roman Empire over the course of the fifth century had, by the early 500s, established a set of kingdoms in what had been the Western Empire. The Vandals ruled North Africa in a kingdom centered on Carthage, a kingdom whose pirates threatened the Mediterranean for nearly eighty years. The Visigoths ruled Spain in a kingdom that preserved many elements of Roman culture. In Italy, the Roman general Odavacar had es-
tablished his own kingdom in 476 before being murdered by the **Ostrogoth** king Theodoric, who established a kingdom for his people in Italy, which he ruled from 493 to his death in 526. Vandal, Visigoth, and Ostrogoth peoples all had cultures that had been heavily influenced over decades or even centuries of contact with Rome. Most of them were Christians, but, crucially, they were not Catholic Christians, who believed in the doctrine of the Trinity, that God is one God but three distinct persons of the Father, the Son (Jesus Christ), and the Holy Spirit. They were rather Arians, who believed that Jesus was lesser than God the Father (see Chapter Six). Most of their subjects, however, were Catholics.

The Catholic Church increasingly looked to the bishop of Rome for leadership. Over the fifth century, the bishop of Rome had gradually come to take on an increasing level of prestige among other bishops. Rome had been the city where Peter, whom tradition regarded as the chief of Christ’s disciples, had ended his life as a martyr. Moreover, even though the power of the Western Roman Empire crumbled over the course of the 400s, the city of Rome itself remained prestigious. As such, by the fourth and fifth centuries, the bishops of Rome were often given the title of *papa*, Latin for “father,” a term that we translate into **pope**. Gradually, the popes came to be seen as
having a role of leadership within the wider Church, although they did not have the monarchical authority that later popes would claim.

In the region of Gaul, the Franks were a Germanic people who had fought as mercenaries in the later Roman Empire and then, with the disintegration of the Western Empire, had established their own kingdom. One key reason for the Frankish kingdom’s success was that its kings received their legitimacy from the Church. In the same way that the Christian Church had endorsed the Roman Emperors since Constantine and, in return, these emperors supported the Church, the Frankish kings took up a similar relation with the Christian religion. King Clovis (r. 481 – 509) united the Franks into a kingdom, and, in 496, converted to Christianity. More importantly, he converted to the Catholic Christianity of his subjects in post-Roman Gaul. This would put the Franks in sharp contrast with the Vandals, Visigoths, and Ostrogoths, all of whom were Arians.

In none of these kingdoms, Visigothic, Ostrogothic, Frankish, or Vandal, did the Germanic peoples who ruled them seek to destroy Roman society—far from it. Rather, they sought homelands and to live as the elites of the Roman Empire had done before them. Theodoric, the king of the Ostrogoths (r. 493 – 526), had told his people to “obey Roman customs... [and] clothe [them] selves in the morals of the toga.”1 Indeed, in the generations after the end of the Western Empire in the late 400s, an urban, literate culture continued to flourish in Spain, Italy, and parts of Gaul. The Germanic peoples often took up a place as elites in the society of what had been Roman provinces, living in rural villas with large estates. Local elites shifted their allegiances from the vanished Roman Empire to their new rulers. In many ways, the situation of Western Europe was analogous to that of the successor states of the Han Dynasty such as Northern Wei, in which an invader took up a position as the society’s new warrior aristocracy (see Chapter Four).

But even though the Germanic kings of Western Europe had sought to simply rule in the place of (or along with) their Roman predecessors, many of the features that had characterized Western Europe under the Romans—populous cities; a large, literate population; a complex infrastructure of roads and aqueducts; and the complex bureaucracy of a centralized state—vanished over the course of the sixth century. Cities shrank drastically, and in those regions of Gaul north of the Loire River, they nearly all vanished in a process that we call ruralization. As Europe ruralized and elite values came to reflect warfare rather than literature, schools gradually vanished, leaving the Church as the only real institution providing education. So too did the tax-collecting apparatus of the Roman state gradually wither in the Germanic kingdoms. The Europe of 500 may have looked a lot like the Europe of 400, but the Europe of 600 was one that was poorer, more rural, and less literate.

7.6 BYZANTIUM: THE AGE OF JUSTINIAN

An observer of early sixth-century Italy would have thought that its Ostrogothic kingdom was the best poised to carry forward with a new state that, in spite of its smaller size than the Roman Empire, nevertheless had most of the same features. But the Ostrogothic kingdom would only last a few decades before meeting its violent end. That end came at the hands of the Eastern

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Roman Empire, the half of the Roman Empire that had continued after the end of the Empire in the West. We usually refer to that empire as the Byzantine Empire or Byzantium.

The inhabitants and rulers of this Empire did not call themselves Byzantines, but rather referred to themselves as Romans. Their empire, after all, was a continuation of the Roman state. Modern historians call it the Byzantine Empire in order to distinguish it from the Roman Empire that dominated the Mediterranean world from the first through fifth centuries. The Byzantine Empire or Byzantium is called such by historians because Byzantium had been an earlier name for its capital, Constantinople.

By the beginning of the sixth century, the Byzantine Army was the most lethal army to be found outside of China. In the late fifth century, the Byzantine emperors had built up an army capable of dealing with the threat of both Hunnic invaders and the Sassanids, a dynasty of aggressively expansionist kings who had seized control of Persia in the third century. Soon this army would turn against the Ostrogothic kingdom of Italy.

The man who would destroy the Ostrogothic as well as the Vandal kingdom was the emperor Justinian (r. 527 – 565). Justinian had come from the ranks not of the aristocracy of the Eastern Roman Empire, but rather from the Army. Even before the death of his uncle, the emperor Justin I (r. 518 – 527), Justinian was taking part in the rule of the Empire. Upon his accession to the imperial throne, he carried out a set of policies designed to emphasize his own greatness and that of his empire.

He did so in the domain of art and architecture, sponsoring the construction of numerous buildings both sacred and secular. The centerpiece of his building campaign was the church called Hagia Sophia, Greek for “Divine Wisdom.” His architects placed this church in the central position of the city of Constantinople, adjacent to the imperial palace. This placement was meant to demonstrate the close relationship between the Byzantine state and the Church that legitimated that state. The Hagia Sophia would be the principle church of the Eastern Empire for the next thousand years, and it would go on to inspire countless imitations.

This Church was the largest building in Europe. Its domed roof was one hundred and sixty feet in height, and, supported by four arches one hundred and twenty feet high, it seemed to float in the diffuse light that came in through its windows. The interior of the church was burnished
with gold, gems, and marble, so that observers in the church were said to have claimed that they could not tell if they were on earth or in heaven. Even a work as magnificent as the Hagia Sophia, though, showed a changed world: it was produced with mortar rather than concrete, the technology for the making of which had already been forgotten.

While Justinian’s building showed his authority and right to rule which came from his close relations with the Church, his efforts as a lawmaker showed the secular side of his authority. Under his direction, the jurist Tribonian took the previous 900 years’ worth of Roman Law and systematized it into a text known as the *Body of Civil Law* or the *Justinian Code*. This law code, based on the already-sophisticated system of Roman law, would go on to serve as the foundation of European law, and thus of much of the world’s law as well.

Although the Justinian Code was based on the previous nine centuries of gathered law, Roman Law itself had changed over the course of the fifth century with the Christianization of the Empire. By the time of Justinian’s law code, Jews had lost civil rights to the extent that the law forbade them from testifying in court against Christians. Jews would further lose civil rights in those Germanic kingdoms whose law was influenced by Roman law as well. The reason for this lack of Jewish civil rights was that many Christians blamed Jews for the execution of Jesus and also believed that Jews refused out of stubbornness to believe that Jesus had been the messiah. A Christian Empire was thus one that was often extremely unfriendly to Jews.

As Byzantine emperor (and thus Roman emperor), Justinian would have regarded his rule as universal, so he sought to re-establish the authority of the Empire in Western Europe. The emperor had other reasons as well for seeking to re-establish imperial power in the West. Both Vandal Carthage and Ostrogoth Italy were ruled by peoples who were Arians, regarded as heretics by a Catholic emperor like Justinian.

During a dispute over the throne in the Vandal kingdom, the reigning monarch was overthrown and had fled to the Eastern Empire for help and protection. This event gave Justinian his chance. In 533, he sent his commander Belisarius to the west, and, in less than a year, this able and capable general had defeated the Vandals, destroyed their kingdom, and brought North Africa back into the Roman Empire. Justinian then turned his sights on a greater prize: Italy, home of the city of Rome itself, which, although no longer under the Empire’s sway, still held a place of honor and prestige.
In 535, the Roman general Belisarius crossed into Italy to return it to the Roman Empire. Unfortunately for the peninsula's inhabitants, the Ostrogothic kingdom put up a more robust fight than had the Vandals in North Africa. It took the Byzantine army nearly two decades to destroy the Ostrogothic kingdom and return Italy to the rule of the Roman Empire. In that time, however, Italy itself was irrevocably damaged. The city of Rome had suffered through numerous sieges and sacks. By the time it was fully in the hands of Justinian’s troops, the fountains that had provided drinking water for a city of millions were choked with rubble, the aqueducts that had supplied them smashed. The great architecture of the city lay in ruins, and the population had shrunk drastically from what it had been even in the days of Theodoric (r. 493 – 526).

7.6.1 The Aftermath of Justinian

Justinian’s reconquest of Italy would prove to be short-lived. Less than a decade after restoring Italy to Roman rule, the Lombards, another Germanic people, invaded Italy. Although the city of Rome itself and the southern part of the peninsula remained under the rule
of the Byzantine Empire, much of northern and central Italy was ruled either by Lombard kings or other petty nobles.

But war was only one catastrophe to trouble Western Europe. For reasons that are poorly understood even today, the long-range trade networks across the Mediterranean Sea gradually shrank over the sixth and seventh centuries. Instead of traveling across the Mediterranean, wine, grain, and pottery were increasingly sold in local markets. Only luxury goods—always a tiny minority of most trade—remained traded over long distances.

Nor was even the heartland of Justinian’s empire safe from external threat. The emperor Heraclius (r. 610 – 641) came to power in the midst of an invasion of the Empire by the Sassanid Persians, who, under their king Khusravu (see Chapter Eight), threatened the Empire’s very existence, his armies coming within striking range of Constantinople itself. Moreover, Persian armies had seized control of Egypt and the Levant, which they would hold for over a decade. Heraclius thwarted the invasion only by launching a counter-attack into the heart of the Persian Empire that resulted, in the end, in a Byzantine victory. No sooner had the Empire repelled one threat than another appeared that would threaten the Empire with consequences far more severe.

Under the influence of the Prophet Muhammad, the tribes of the Arabian deserts had been united under first the guidance of the Prophet and then his successors, the caliphs and the religion founded by Muhammad, Islam (see Chapter Eight). Under the vigorous leadership of the first caliphs, Arab Muslim armies invaded both Sassanid Persia and the Byzantine Empire. At the Battle of Yarmouk in 636, although the Byzantines and Arabs were evenly matched, the Byzantine field army was badly beaten. In the aftermath, first Syria and Palestine and then Egypt fell from Christian Byzantine rule to the cultural and political influence of Islam.

The seventh century also saw invasions by various semi-nomadic peoples into the Balkans, the region between the Greek Peloponnese and the Danube River. Among these peoples were the Turkic Bulgars, the Avars (who historians think might have been Turkic), as well as various peoples known as Slavs. The Avars remained nomads on the plains of central Europe, but both Bulgars and Slavs settled in Balkan territories that no longer fell under the rule of the Byzantine state. Within a generation, the Empire had lost control of the Balkans as well as Egypt, territory comprising an immense source of wealth in both agriculture and trade. By the end of the seventh century, the Empire was a shadow of its former self.

Indeed, the Byzantine Empire faced many of the social and cultural challenges that Western Europe did, although continuity with the Roman state remained. In many cases, the cities of the Byzantine Empire shrank nearly as drastically as did the cities of Western Europe. Under the threat of invasion, many communities moved to smaller settlements on more easily defended hilltops. The great metropolises of Constantinople and Thessalonica remained centers of urban life and activity, but throughout much of the Empire, life became overwhelmingly rural.

Even more basic elements of a complex society, such as literacy and a cash economy, went into decline, although they did not cease. The Byzantine state issued less money and, indeed, most transactions ceased to be in cash at this time. The economy was demonetized. Even literacy rates shrank. Although churchmen and other elites would often still have an education, the days of the Roman state in which a large literate reading public would buy readily-available literature were gone. As in the west, literacy increasingly became the preserve of the religious.
7.7 PERSPECTIVES: POST-ROMAN EAST AND WEST

In many ways, the post-Roman Germanic kingdoms of Western Europe and the Byzantine Empire shared a similar fate. Both saw a sharp ruralization, that is, a decline in the number of inhabited cities and the size of those cities that were inhabited. Both saw plunges in literacy. And both saw a state that was less competent—even at tax collection. Moreover, the entire Mediterranean Sea and its environs showed a steady decline in high-volume trade across the ocean, a decline that lasted for nearly two and a half centuries. By around the year 700, almost all trade was local.

But there remained profound differences between Byzantium and the Germanic kingdoms of Western Europe. In the first place, although its reach had shrunk dramatically from the days of Augustus, the imperial state remained. Although the state collected less in taxes and issued less money than in earlier years, even in the period of the empires’ greatest crisis, it continued to mint some coins and the apparatus of the state continued to function. In Western Europe, by contrast, the Germanic kingdoms gradually lost the ability to collect taxes (except for the Visigoths in Spain). Likewise, they gradually ceased to mint gold coins. In Britain, cities had all but vanished,
with an island inhabited by peoples living in small villages, the remnants of Rome’s imperial might standing as silent ruins.

The post-Roman world stands in contrast to post-Han China. Although the imperial state collapsed as it had in Rome, in China, literacy never declined as drastically as it had done in the Roman Empire, and the apparatus of tax collection and other features of a functional state remained in the Han successor states to an extent that they did not in either Rome or Byzantium.

7.8 THE BRITISH ISLES: EUROPE’S PERIPHERY

In many of the lands that had been part of the Roman Empire, the Germanic peoples who had taken over western Europe built kingdoms. Although not as sophisticated as the Roman state, they were still recognizable as states. This situation stood in sharp contrast to Britain. To the northwest of Europe, the Roman Army had abandoned the island of Britain in 410. The urban infrastructure brought about by the Roman state began to decay almost immediately, with towns gradually emptying out as people returned to rural lifeways that had existed prior to Rome’s arrival.

At nearly the same time that the Roman Army withdrew from Britain, a group of Germanic peoples known as the Anglo-Saxons were moving into the island from the forests of Central Europe that lay to the east, across the ocean. Unlike the Franks, Visigoths, and Ostrogoths, each of whom had kingdoms, the social organization of the Anglo-Saxons was comparatively unsophisticated. They were divided up among chiefs and kings who might have only had a few hundred to a few thousand subjects each.

Over the period between about 410 and 600, the Anglo-Saxons gradually settled in and conquered much of southeastern Britain, replacing the Celtic-speaking peoples and their language. The island of Britain was one that was completely rural. All that remained of the state-building of the Romans was the ruins of abandoned cities.

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2 Although the British Isles were peripheral to global affairs and even those of Western Europe, people at the time did regard these islands as part of the world that people of the Middle East and Mediterranean regarded as “civilized” (if only as its westernmost periphery). The ninth-century Arabic writer Harun ibn Yahya said of the British that “They are the last of the lands of the Greeks, and there is no civilization beyond them,” quoted in Caitlin R. Green, “Britain, the Byzantine Empire, and the concept of an Anglo-Saxon ‘Heptarchy’: Harun ibn Yahya’s ninth-century Arabic description of Britain,” The Personal Website and Blog of Dr. Caitlin R. Green, http://www.caitlingreen.org/2016/04/heptarchy-harun-ibn-yahya.html (accessed 26 June 2016).
And yet, it would be England (called England because the name is derived from the word Anglo-Saxon) and the island of Ireland to its west that would lead to an increase of schools and literacy across Western Europe. In the fifth century, Christian missionaries traveled to Ireland and converted many of its peoples. In the early 600s, Pope Gregory the Great sent missionaries to the island of Britain. The English peoples adopted Christianity (usually under the initiative of their kings) over the course of the next several decades, which in turn led to the founding of monasteries. These monasteries would usually have attached schools so that those seeking to live as monks could have access to the texts of the Bible, the liturgy, and the writings of other churchmen. English churchmen like Benedict Biscop (c. 628 – 690) traveled south to Rome and returned to England with cartloads of books. English and Irish monks would often copy these books in their own monasteries.

Indeed, England saw not only the copying of older books, but also the composition of original literature, which was rare elsewhere in Western Europe of this time. The English churchman Bede (672 – 735) composed a history of England’s people. He wrote this history to show how the Anglo-Saxons had adopted Christianity. Within a few decades of the island’s peoples converting to Christianity, English and Irish monks were traveling to Western Europe, either to establish monasteries in lands already Christian or to serve as missionaries to those still-pagan peoples in the forests of central Europe.

7.9 BYZANTIUM: CRISIS AND RECOVERY

Although the Byzantine Empire was a remnant of the Roman state, by the eighth century it was much weaker than the Roman Empire under Augustus or even than the Eastern Empire under Justinian. After their conquest of Egypt, the forces of the caliphate had built a navy and used it to sail up and lay siege to Constantinople itself in two sieges lasting from 674 to 678 and from 717 to 718. On land, to the northwest, the Empire faced the threat of the Bulgars, Slavs, and Avars. The Avars, a nomadic people, in particular demanded that the Byzantine state pay them a hefty tribute to avoid raids. At the very moment that the Empire was in greatest need of military strength, it was a poorer empire than it had ever been.

The solution was a reorganization of the military. Instead of having a military that was paid out of a central treasury, the emperors divided the Empire up into regions called themes. Each theme would then equip and pay soldiers, using its agricultural resources to do so. Themes in coastal regions were responsible for the navy. In many ways, the theme was similar to the way that other states would raise soldiers in the absence of a strong bureaucratic apparatus. One might liken it to what we call feudalism in Zhou China, Heian Japan, and later Medieval Europe.

The greatest crisis faced by the Byzantine Empire in these years of crisis was the so-called Iconoclast Controversy. From the fourth and fifth centuries, Christians living in the Eastern Mediterranean region had used icons to aid in worship. An icon is a highly stylized painting of Christ, the Virgin Mary (his mother), or the saints. Often icons appeared in churches, with the ceiling painted with a picture of Christ or with an emblem of Christ above the entrance of a church.

Other Christians opposed this use of images. In the Old Testament (the term Christians use to refer to the Hebrew Bible), the Ten Commandments forbid the making of “graven images” and
using them in worship (Exodus 20:4-5). Certain Christians at the time believed that to make an image even of Jesus Christ and his mother violated that commandment, arguing that to paint such pictures and use them in worship was idolatry, that is, worshiping something other than God. Muslims leveled similar critiques at the Christian use of icons, claiming that it showed Christians had fallen from the correct worship of God into idolatry.

Emperor Leo III (r. 717 – 41) accepted these arguments; consequently, in his reign he began to order icons removed (or painted over) first from churches and then from monasteries as well as other places of public display. His successors took further action, ordering the destruction of icons. These acts by Leo led to nearly a century of controversy over whether the use of icons in worship was permissible to Christians. The iconophiles argued that to use a picture of Christ and the saints in worship was in line with the Christian scriptures so long as the worshiper worshiped God with the icon as a guide, while the iconoclasts proclaimed that any use of images in Christian worship was forbidden.

In general, monks and civilian elites were iconophiles, while iconoclasm was popular with the army. In Rome, which was slipping out from under the jurisdiction of the Byzantine emperors, the popes strongly rejected iconoclasm. Some historians have argued that Leo and his successors attacked icon worship for reasons other than religious convictions alone, including the fact that monks who venerated icons had built up their own power base; more importantly, in confiscating the wealth of iconophile monasteries, the emperor would be able to better fund his armed forces.

The iconophile empress Irene, ruling on behalf of her infant son Constantine V (r. 780 – 797), convoked a new church council to bring an end to the controversy. At the 787 Second Council of Nicaea, the Church decreed that icons could be used in worship. Final resolution of the Iconoclast Controversy, however, would have to wait until 843, when the empress Theodora at last overturned iconoclastic policies for good upon the death of her husband, the emperor Theophilus (r. 829 – 843). From this point forward, historians usually refer to the Greek-speaking churches
of the eastern Mediterranean and those churches following those same patterns of worship as Eastern Orthodox.\(^3\)

Although the iconoclast emperors had made enemies in the Church, they were often effective military commanders, and they managed to stabilize the frontiers with Arabs, Slavs, and Bulgars. In spite of the fact that the Byzantine armies of the eighth century would have some successes against Arabs and Slavs, it was during the eighth century that Byzantium increasingly lost control of Italy. While a Byzantine exarch, or governor, in Ravenna (in northeastern Italy) would rule the city of Rome, even these Italian territories were gradually lost. Ravenna fell to the Lombards in 751; the duke of Naples ceased to acknowledge the authority of the emperor in Constantinople in the 750s; and the popes in Rome, long the de facto governors of the city, became effectively independent from Byzantium in the 770s. The popes in particular would increasingly look to another power to secure their city: the Franks.

### 7.10 WESTERN EUROPE: THE RISE OF THE FRANKS

At the west end of the Mediterranean and in northern Europe, the kingdom of the Franks would become the dominant power of the Christian kingdoms. Justinian’s armies had destroyed the Ostrogothic kingdom in Italy in the sixth-century Gothic War. A century and a half later, in 711, Arab Muslim invaders from North Africa conquered the Visigoth kingdom in Spain and established Muslim rule. From that time on, we refer to Muslim-ruled Spain of the early Middle Ages as al-Andalus. The destruction of these two kingdoms left the Franks as the dominant power of Western Europe. They were already the premier power in northern Gaul, but as the seventh century went on, they established themselves in southern Gaul as well, gradually subordinating other Germanic peoples to their rule.

The first dynasty of Frankish kings was known as the Merovingians, so named for Merovech, a possibly legendary ancestor of Clovis, the first Christian king of the Franks. The Franks’ power grew in Western Europe for several reasons. In the first place, the Frankish monarchy had fewer civil wars than did that of the Visigoths. The Frankish kingdom did face the weakness that it was sometimes divided among a king’s sons at his death (since Germanic peoples often looked at a kingdom as the king’s personal property), with warfare resulting within the divided kingdom. Nevertheless, although the kingdom might be split by inheritance and later reunited, there existed in general a strong sense of legitimate dynastic succession. In addition, the Catholic Church provided the Frankish monarchs with a sense of legitimacy as it had since the days of Clovis.

But as the Frankish kingdom expanded, many elements of what had characterized the Roman state continued to wither. One reason for this decline was that the nature of warfare had changed in Western Europe. Soldiers were no longer paid out of a government treasury; instead, they were rewarded with lands whose surplus they would use to outfit themselves with military equipment. The soldiers thus served as a warrior aristocracy. Even those families who had been Roman elites took up

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\(^3\) Modern historians use this label for convenience. At the time, both Churches in the Greek-speaking eastern Mediterranean and those following the pope would have said that they were part of the Catholic Church (the word catholic comes from a Greek word for “universal”). The churches in the eastern Mediterranean and Eastern Europe were coming to differ enough in terms of practice, worship, and thought that we can refer to them as distinct from the Catholic Church of Western Europe.
a military lifestyle in order to prosper in the new order. In addition, the Frankish kings increasingly made use of a pillage and gift system. In a pillage and gift system, a king or other war leader rewards his loyal soldiers by granting them gifts that came from the plunder of defeated enemies. With armies financed either by pillage and gift or by the wealth of an individual aristocrat’s lands, the Frankish kingdom had little reason for maintaining taxation. Moreover, the kingdom’s great landowners who supported the monarchy had a strong interest in seeing that they were not taxed efficiently; by the 580s, the Frankish government had simply ceased to update the old Roman tax registers.

One particular role that would gain prominence among the Frankish monarchy was that of the Major Domo, or Mayor of the Palace. The Mayor of the Palace was a noble who would grant out lands and gifts on behalf of the king and who would, in many cases, command the army. Gradually, one family of these Mayors of the Palace would rise to prominence above all other noble families in the Frankish kingdom: the Carolingians.

This dominant family’s more prominent members were named Charles, which in Latin is Carolus, hence the name Carolingians. By the mid-seventh century, the Carolingians had come to hold the position of Mayor of the Palace as a hereditary one. Over the early eighth century, the Carolingian Mayors of the Palace had become the actual rulers of the Frankish realm, while the Merovingian kings had little or no actual power. The earliest significant Carolingian major domo to dominate the Carolingian court was Charles Martel (r. 715 – 741). He was an able and effective military commander who—even though he rewarded his troops with lands taken from the Church—was able to show himself a defender of the Christian religion by defeating a Muslim attack on Gaul from al-Andalus in 732 at the Battle of Tours and by defeating the Saxons, who were at this point still largely pagans living in the forests to the northeast of the Frankish kingdom, in 738. These victories over both pagan and Muslim allowed for Martel to present his family as defenders of the Church and of the Christian religion in general.

Martel’s successor, Pepin the Short (r. 741 – 68), would take the final step towards wresting power away from the Merovingians and making his family the kings of the Franks. He followed in Martel’s footsteps in using the Church to shore up his legitimacy. He wrote to Pope Zachary I (r. 741 – 752), asking whether one who exercised the power of a king should have that power, or if instead the person with the name of king should have that power. Pope Zachary answered that kingship should rest with the person exercising its power—because a king ruled the earth on behalf of God, so a king who was not properly ruling was not doing his God-given duty. Thus the last Merovingian king was deposed by the combined powers of the Carolingian Mayors of the Palace and the popes. This close cooperation between Church and crown would go on to be a defining feature of the Frankish monarchy.

The relationship between the papacy and the Carolingians not only involved the popes legitimating Pepin’s coup d’état, but also included the Carolingian monarchs providing military assistance to the popes. Shortly after Zachary’s letter allowing Pepin to seize power, Pepin marched south to Italy to give the pope military assistance against the Lombards. He took control of several cities and their surrounding hinterlands and gave these cities as a gift to the papacy. The popes would thus rule a set of territories in central Italy known as the Papal States from Pepin’s day until the mid-nineteenth century.
The greatest of the Carolingians was the figure we refer to as Charlemagne, whose name means Charles the Great. As king of the Franks, he spent nearly the entirety of his reign leading his army in battle. To the southeast, he destroyed the khanate of the Avars, the nomadic people who had lived by raiding the Byzantine Empire. To the northeast of his realm, he subjugated the Saxons of Central Europe and had them converted to Christianity—a sometimes brutal process. When the Saxons rebelled in 782, he had 4,000 men executed in one day for having returned to their old religion. To the south in Italy, Charlemagne militarily conquered the Lombard kingdom and made himself its king. The only area in which he was less successful was in his invasion of al-Andalus. Although his forces seized control of several cities and fortresses in northeastern Spain (to include places like Barcelona), he was, on the whole, less successful against Spain’s Umayyad emirs. One reason for this lack of success was that, compared to Charlemagne’s other foes, al-Andalus was organized into a sophisticated state, and so better able to resist him.

By the end of the eighth century, Charlemagne ruled nearly all of Western Europe. Indeed, he ruled more of Western Europe than anyone since the Roman emperors of four centuries before. In the winter of 800, a mob expelled Pope Leo III from Rome. Charlemagne took his troops south of the Alps and restored the pope to his position in the Lateran palace, the palace complex to the northeast of Rome where the popes both lived and conducted most of their business.

On Christmas Day in 800, Charlemagne was attending worship at St. Peter’s Church. During that ceremony, the pope placed a crown upon Charlemagne’s head and declared him to be Roman emperor. Historians are not sure whether Charlemagne had planned this coronation or had simply gone up to the pope for a blessing and was surprised by this crown. The question of who had planned this coronation is controversial because the pope’s crowning the emperor could have been interpreted to mean that the crown was the pope’s to confer.

Indeed, it was around this time that a document known as the Donation of Constantine appeared in Western Europe. This document was a forgery—to this day, scholars do not know who forged it—that claimed to have been written by the Roman emperor Constantine (see Chapter Six). According to this forged document, the emperor Constantine had been cured of leprosy by Pope Sylvester I and, in thanks,
had given the popes authority over all of the Western Empire. Although false, this document would go on to provide the popes with a claim to rule not just central Italy, but Western Europe as a whole.

Charlemagne’s coronation by the pope marked the culmination of the creation of a new society built on the wreck of the Western Roman Empire. This new society would be Christian and based on close cooperation of Church and State—although each would regard the others’ sphere of influence as separate.

Map 7.4 | Map of Carolingian Europe in 814 CE
Author: Ian Mladjov
Source: Original Work
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7.11 GLOBAL CONTEXT

Although Charlemagne possessed one of the most powerful armies in Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East, his empire was hardly a state compared to Tang China, the Abbasid Caliphate, or the Byzantine Empire. Compared to the armies of the Byzantine Emperors, the Abbasid Caliphs, and above all, the Tang emperors, Charlemagne’s army was merely a very large war band, financed not by a state with a working system of taxation and treasury, but rather by the plunder of defeated enemies. Although he issued decrees known as capitularies through
the agencies of Church and state, the realm had little in the way of either bureaucracy or infrastructure, save for the decaying network of the Roman Empire’s roads. Indeed, although Charlemagne had sought to have a canal dug between the Rhine and Danube rivers, this project failed—a fitting illustration of the gap between the ambitions of Charlemagne and the reality.

7.11.1 The Carolingian Renaissance

In those territories that had been part of the Western Roman Empire, most of the people had spoken Latin, and Latin was the language of literature. By the time of the Carolingians, Latin was starting to change into the languages that would eventually become French, Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese, languages that we call Romance because they are descended from Latin, the language of the Romans. The Bible, the liturgy, and writings of theology and on saints, however, were still in Latin, although the skill in reading and writing Latin possessed by what few people remained literate had decreased, and in a less literate society, there were fewer books of Roman literature available in Western Europe. The copying of books had gradually dwindled with literacy.

The Carolingians were known not only for their conquests and attempted revival of the Roman Empire, but also for their efforts to improve the state of learning in the Carolingian Empire, particularly with respect to the Bible, theology, and literature of Ancient Rome. They also sought to increase the number of schools and books in the realm. Historians refer to this effort as the Carolingian Renaissance. Historians call it the Carolingian Renaissance in order to distinguish it from the later Italian Renaissance, an effort by northern Italian intellectuals of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to restore teaching and learning of the literature of Ancient Greece and Rome.

Charlemagne and his successors sponsored an increase in learning by the Church in order to promote moral reform. Charlemagne, like his predecessors and successors, considered himself a defender and protector of the Christian religion. As such, he wanted to make sure that the Church was promoting a reform of morality.
Moral reform would need to start with clergy, and these clergy would need to be able to adequately read the text of the Bible and of the writings of other churchmen (and —women).

Charlemagne’s efforts would be centered on schools and centers of book production, what scholars of medieval Europe call *scriptoria* (singular *scriptorium*). He had help in that there were already many high quality schools attached to monasteries that had been founded in his empire by English and Irish monks. The main school of his empire was the school in his palace at Aachen. His palace itself was based on Roman and Byzantine architecture, as a demonstration that he possessed the same sort of legitimacy as the Roman Emperors. He then invited some of the best scholars of Western Europe to his court—including Alcuin of York (735 – 804), a monk from England—in order both to supervise his own court school and to direct the Church of the Frankish Empire to improve learning.

This improvement of learning included the establishment of new cathedral schools, schools attached to a *cathedral church* (i.e., a church where the bishop of a diocese—the basic geographic division of the Church—has his seat). These schools trained not only men and women from the church, but also the children of Frankish aristocrats, and in some cases women as well as men. As a result, an increasing number of Frankish nobles would be literate or at least would sponsor efforts by schools to further train people.

Likewise, under the guidance of Charlemagne and the Frankish church, scriptoria throughout his empire launched on a massive new effort to copy new books. Many of these books were religious in character, although Carolingian monks (and nuns) would also copy books from Ancient Rome that had been written by pagans; many of these ancient books, like the poetry of Virgil (see Chapter Six), would serve as the basis of the curriculum of Western Europe’s schools as they had since the Roman Empire. A Christian of the eighth century would believe that even works by pagans would nevertheless afford their readers education and, thus, self-improvement.

### 7.11.2 The Macedonian Renaissance

The Byzantine Empire had been that half of the Roman Empire where the language of life and culture was not Latin, but Greek. At around the same time as the Carolingians’ efforts, the Byzantine Empire also saw close cooperation of Church and State to revive the study of ancient literature and improve learning. The Byzantine Empire had suffered from a collapse of literacy, which, while not as severe as Western Europe’s, had still resulted in a much less literate population. As such, an effort similar to that of the Carolingians was necessary in the Greek-speaking Eastern Mediterranean. We call this effort the *Macedonian Renaissance* because it reached its fullest expression under a dynasty of Byzantine emperors that we call the *Macedonian Dynasty* (867 – 1056).

The efforts of the Macedonian Dynasty, however, had begun earlier. The efforts to improve the availability of books and to
increase learning began during the Iconoclast Controversy as both Iconophiles and Iconoclasts had sought to back up their positions by quoting from the Bible and the Church Fathers. Emperor Theophilus (r. 829 – 842), one of the last Iconoclast emperors, had had Leo the Mathematician found a school in the emperor’s palace in Constantinople, a palace known as the Magnaura. Like Charlemagne’s palace at Aachen, this school would go on to serve as the foundation for a revived learning among elites, only this learning was in Greek, rather than Latin.

Following the final triumph of the Iconophiles, these efforts continued with Photius, patriarch of Constantinople from 858 to 867 and then from 877 to 886, as a particular sponsor of monastic schools in the Byzantine Empire and of the copying of books in Ancient Greek, particularly works like those of Plato’s philosophy and the epic poetry of Homer.

7.11.3 Comparisons with the Abbasids

We should also note the global context of both the Carolingian and the Macedonian Renaissance. Carolingian and Macedonian Emperors were not the only ones seeking to increase the availability of ancient texts from the time of the Greeks and Romans. The Abbasid Caliphs under al-Mamun (r. 813 – 883) and his successors also sponsored the work of the House of Wisdom, whose scholars translated the philosophy of the Ancient Greeks into Arabic. Like the Christians of the Carolingian and Byzantine Empires, the Muslims of the Caliphate believed that one could learn from pagan writers even if they had not believed in the one Creator God.

7.12 DAILY LIFE IN WESTERN EUROPE AND THE BYZANTINE EMPIRES

In both Western Europe and Byzantium, the vast majority of the population was made up of farmers. In Western Europe, some of these were what we call dependent farmers, living on the lands of aristocrats and giving over much of their surplus to their landlords. But in many villages, the majority of farmers might live on their own land and even enjoy a form of self-government. Although some slavery existed—especially in zones of conflict like the Mediterranean—compared to the days when vast estates had been worked by unfree labor (see Chapter Six), the workers on the estates of the Frankish aristocracy or those free and independent farmers enjoyed greater freedom than had their Roman counterparts. But their life was precarious. Crop yields were low, at ratios of around 3:1—meaning only giving back about three times as much as was planted—and the average Carolingian farmer frequently did not get adequate calories.

So too did most of the population of the Byzantine Empire live in small villages, living at a subsistence level, and selling what rare surplus they had. Byzantium, like its Western European counterpart, was fundamentally rural.

The nobles of Western Europe were generally part of a warrior aristocracy. These aristocrats often outfitted and equipped themselves based on the wealth of their lands. Their values were those of service to their king and loyalty and bravery in battle. Nobles would often not live on their lands but follow the royal court, which would itself travel from place to place rather than having a
fixed location. Battle may have been frequent, but until Charlemagne, the scale of battle was often small, with armies numbering a few hundred at most.

Along with its warrior aristocracy, gender roles in the Frankish kingdom—like those of the Roman Empire that came before it—reflected a patriarchal society. The Christian religion generally taught that wives were to submit to their husbands, and the men who wrote much of the religious texts often thought of women in terms of weakness and temptations to sexual sin. “You,” an early Christian writer had exclaimed of women, “are the devil’s gateway...you are the first deserter of the divine law...you destroyed so easily God’s image, man...”\(^4\) The warlike values of the aristocracy meant that aristocratic women were relegated to a supporting role, to the management of the household. Both Roman and Germanic law placed women in subordination to their fathers and then, when married, to their husbands.

That said, women did enjoy certain rights. Although legally inferior to men in Roman Law (practiced in the Byzantine Empire and often among those peoples who were subjects of the Germanic aristocracies), a wife maintained the right to any property she brought into a marriage. Women often played a strong economic role in peasant life, and, as with their aristocratic counterparts, peasant women often managed the household even if men performed tasks such as plowing and the like. And the Church gave women a fair degree of autonomy in certain circumstances. We often read of women choosing to become nuns, to take vows of celibacy, against the desires of their families for them to marry. These women, if they framed their choices in terms of Christian devotion, could often count on institutional support in their life choices. Although monasticism was usually limited to noblewomen, women who became nuns often had access to an education. Certain noblewomen who became abbesses could even become powerful political actors in their own right, as did Gertrude of Nivelles (c. 621 – 659), abbess of the monastery of Nivelles in what is today Belgium.

**7.13 CAROLINGIAN COLLAPSE**

Charlemagne’s efforts to create a unified empire did not long outlast Charlemagne himself. His son, Louis the Pious (r. 814 – 840), succeeded him as emperor. Louis continued Charlemagne’s project of Church reform; unlike Charlemagne, who had had only one son to survive into adulthood, Louis had three. In addition, his eldest, Lothar, had already rebelled against him in the 830s. When Louis died, Lothar went to war with Louis’s other two sons, Charles the Bald and Louis the German. This civil war proved to be inconclusive, and, at the 843 Treaty of Verdun, the Carolingian Empire was divided among the brothers. Charles the Bald took the lands in the west of the Empire, which would go on to be known first as West Francia and then, eventually, France. To the East, the largely German-speaking region of Saxony and Bavaria went to Louis the German. Lothar, although he had received the title of emperor, received only northern Italy and the land between Charles’s and Louis’s kingdoms.

This division of a kingdom was not unusual for the Franks—but it meant that there would be no restoration of a unified Empire in the West, although both the king of Francia and the rulers of Central Europe would each claim to be Charlemagne’s successors.

Western Europe faced worse problems than civil war between the descendants of Charlemagne. In the centuries following the rise of the post-Roman Germanic kingdoms, Western Europe had suffered comparatively few invasions. The ninth and tenth centuries, by contrast, would be an “age of invasions.”

In the north of Europe, in the region known as Scandinavia, a people called the Norse had lived for centuries before. These were Germanic peoples, but one whose culture was not assimilated to the post-Roman world of the Carolingian west. They were still pagan and had a culture that, like that of other Germanic peoples, was quite warlike. Their population had increased; additionally, Norse kings tended to exile defeated enemies. These Norsemen would often take up raiding other peoples, and when they took up this activity, they were known as **Vikings**.

One factor that allowed Norse raids on Western Europe was an improvement in their construction of ships. Their ships were long, flexible, and also had a shallow enough draft that they did not need harbors so could be pulled up along any beach. Moreover, they were also shallow enough of draft that they could sail up rivers for hundreds of miles. What this feature of these ships meant was that Norse Vikings could strike at many different regions, often with very little warning.
Even more significant for the Norse attacks was that Western Europe in the ninth and tenth centuries was made up of weak states. The three successor kingdoms to Charlemagne’s empire were often split by civil war. Although King Charles the Bald (r. 843 – 877) enjoyed some successes against the Vikings, his realm in general was subject to frequent raids. England’s small kingdoms were particularly vulnerable. From 793, England had suffered numerous Viking raids, and these raids increased in size and scope over the ninth century. Likewise, to the west, Ireland, with its chiefs and petty kings, lacked the organization of a state necessary to deal with sustained incursions.

The result was that not only did Viking raids on the British Isles increase in scope and intensity over the ninth century, but also the Norse eventually came to take lands and settle.

To the south and west, al-Andalus suffered fewer Norse attacks than did the rest of Europe. A sophisticated, organized state with a regular army and a network of fortresses, it was able to effectively deal with raiders. The Spanish emir Abd-al Rahman II defeated a Viking raid and sent the Moroccan ambassador the severed heads of 200 Vikings to show how successful he had been in defending against them.

To the east, the Norse sailed along the rivers that stretched through the forests and steppes of the area that today makes up Russia and Ukraine. The Slavic peoples living there had a comparatively weak social organization, so in many instances they fell under Norse domination. The Norsemen Rurik and Oleg were said to have established themselves as rulers of Slavic peoples as well as the principedoms of Novgorod and Kiev, respectively, in the ninth century. These kingdoms of Slavic subjects and Norse masters became known as the Rus.

Further to the south, the Norse would often move their ships over land between rivers until finally reaching the Black Sea and thus Constantinople and Byzantium. Although on occasion a Norse raid would have great success against Byzantine forces, in general, a powerful and organized state meant that, as with al-Andalus, the Norse encountered less success.

Norse invaders were not the only threat faced by Western Europe. As the emirs of Muslim North Africa gradually broke away from the centralized rule of the Abbasid Caliphate (see Chapter Eight), these emirs, particularly those of Tunisia, what is today Algeria, and Morocco turned to
legitimate themselves by raid and plunder; this aggression was often directed at southern Francia and Italy. The Aghlabid emirs in particular not only seized control of Sicily, but also sacked the city of Rome itself in 846. North African raiders would often seize territory on the coasts of Southern Europe and raid European shipping in order to increase their own control of trade and commerce. In addition, the emirs of these North African states would use the plunder from their attacks to reward followers, in another example of the pillage and gift system.

Central Europe also faced attacks, these from the Magyars, a steppe people. The Magyars had been forced out of Southeastern Europe by another steppe people, the Pechenegs, and so from 899 on migrated into Central Europe, threatening the integrity of East Francia. As was the case with other steppe peoples, their raids on horseback targeted people in small unfortified communities, avoiding larger settlements. They eventually settled in the plains of Eastern Europe to found the state of Hungary; although they made Hungary their primary location, they nevertheless continued to raid East Francia through the first part of the tenth century.
7.13.1 An Age of Invasions in Perspective

Norse, Magyar, and Muslim attacks on Europe wrought incredible damage. Thousands died, and tens of thousands more were captured and sold into slavery in the great slave markets of North Africa and the Kievan Rus. These raids furthered the breakdown of public order in Western Europe.

But these raids had effects that also brought long-term benefits. Both Norse and Muslim pirates traded just as much as they raided. Indeed, even the plunder of churches and selling of the gold and silver helped create new trade networks in both the North Sea and Mediterranean. These new trade networks, especially where the Norse had established settlements in places like Ireland, gradually brought about an increase in economic activity.

All told, we should remember this “age of invasions” in terms both of its human cost and of the economic growth it brought about.

7.13.2 New States in Response to Invasions

In response to the invasions that Europe faced, newer, stronger states came into being in the British Isles and in Central Europe. In England, Norse invasions had destroyed all but one of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. The only remaining kingdom was Wessex. Its king, Alfred the Great (r. 871 – 899), was able to stop Norse incursions by raising an army and navy financed by a kingdom-wide tax. This tax, known as the geld, was also used to finance the construction of a network of fortresses along the frontier of those parts of England still controlled by the Norse. This new system of tax collection would eventually mean that England, a small island on the periphery, would eventually have the most sophisticated bureaucracy in Western Europe (although we must note that in comparison with a Middle Eastern or East Asian state, this bureaucracy would be considered rudimentary and primitive).

Likewise, in Central Europe, the kings of East Francia, the region made up of those Saxon territories the Carolingians had conquered in the eighth century as well as various peoples to the south and east, gradually built a kingdom capable of dealing with Magyar invaders. Henry the Fowler (r. 919 – 936) took control of East Francia after the end of the Carolingian Dynasty. He was succeeded by Otto the Great (r. 936 – 973), whose creation of a state was partially the result of luck: his territory contained large silver mines that allowed him to finance an army. This army was able to decisively defeat the Magyar raiders and also allow these kings to expand their power to the east, subjugating the Slavic peoples living in the forests of Eastern Europe.

7.14 THE TENTH-CENTURY CHURCH

As a result of endemic chaos in Western Europe, the Church suffered as well. The moral and intellectual quality of bishops and abbots declined sharply, as church establishments fell under the domination of warlords. These warlords would often appoint members of their families or personal allies to positions of leadership in the Church, appointments based not on any competence or sense of dedication to duty, but rather on ties of loyalty. This was the case even in Rome, when families of Roman nobles fought over the papacy. Between 872 and 965, twenty-four popes were assassinated in office.
For Byzantium, however, the ninth and tenth centuries represented a time of recovery and expansion. In the first place, the height of the Macedonian Renaissance took place in the later ninth and tenth centuries, resulting in a growth of learning among both clergy and lay elites. This growth of learning took place against the backdrop of military success by the emperors of the Macedonian Dynasty (867 – 1056). The first emperor of this dynasty, Basil I (r. 867 – 886), a soldier and servant of the emperor, had come from a peasant background. He seized control of the Empire when he murdered the reigning emperor and took the position for himself.

Basil was an effective emperor. To the east, as the Abbasid Caliphate broke down, he inflicted several defeats on the Arab emirs on the border, pushing the frontiers of the Empire further east. Although unsuccessful in fighting to maintain control of Sicily, he re-established Byzantine control over most of southern Italy.

It was under the Macedonian emperors that the Eastern Orthodox culture of the Byzantines spread north beyond the borders of the Empire. In 864, the Bulgar khan, whose predecessors had been building a state of their own, converted to Christianity and was baptized. This conversion allowed the Bulgar state to be legitimated by the Church in the same manner as had the Byzantine Empire and the kingdoms of Western Europe.

In the ninth century, Cyril and Methodius, missionaries from the city of Thessalonica, preached Orthodox Christianity to the Slavic peoples of Eastern Europe and devised the alphabet that we today call Cyrillic in order to write the Bible and liturgy in their own language, Slavonic. By bringing Orthodox Christianity to the Slavic peoples, the Byzantines brought them into the culture of the Byzantines.

Subsequent emperors maintained this record of successes. John Tzimisces (r. 969 – 976) established Byzantine control over most of Syria. Basil II (r. 976 – 1025) achieved further successes, crushing and annexing the Bulgar state that had grown up in the lands south of the Danube and further subordinating the Armenian kingdoms to the Byzantine emperor. By the end of his reign, the Byzantine territory encompassed about a fourth of what had been the Roman Empire at its height under Augustus.

Basil II had further diplomatic triumphs. He allied with the princes of the Kievan Rus, a state that had grown up in Eastern Europe
along the rivers between the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea. The Rus was a people group made up of a largely Slavic population, with rulers who were ethnically Norse and who had established themselves as rulers of both Slavic and Turkic subjects when they sailed down the rivers of Eastern Europe from their Scandinavian homeland. This was a hybrid culture already, combining Norse and Slavic. An alliance with the Byzantine Empire also brought Greek elements into the cultural mix. In 988, Kievan Grand Prince Vladimir (r. 980 – 1015) was baptized into the Christian religion and became a close ally of Basil II, sealing the alliance by marrying Basil’s sister, Anna. The elite culture of the Rus would come to reflect both Greek, Slavic, Norse, and also Turkic elements. Alllying with these people had brought Basil II to the height of the Byzantine state’s power.

Despite its successes during the reign of the Macedonian emperors, the Byzantine state faced weaknesses. The theme system had gradually broken down. Increasingly, soldiers came not from the themes, but from the ranks of professional mercenaries, to include those made up of Norsemen. The
soldiers of the themes received less training and served mainly as a militia that would back up the core of a professional army, known as the Tagmata. Whether this smaller tagmata would be up to the task of defending an empire the size of Byzantium would remain to be seen.

7.16 CONCLUSION AND GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

In many ways, the period between 500 and 1000 was as transitional for Western Europe and Byzantium as it was for East Asia and the Middle East and North Africa. Just as the Han State had fragmented politically in the third century and given rise to smaller states ruled by warrior aristocracies, so too had Rome fragmented into its eastern half and a series of Germanic kingdoms, themselves ruled by warrior aristocracies. Just as Mahayana Buddhism had arrived in post-Han China, so too had Christianity become the dominant faith of the Roman Empire and its successors.

And yet, these similarities in the end are superficial. All of China’s successor states maintained a continuity of bureaucracy and literacy to an extent that Western Europe did not. Moreover, although Mahayana Buddhism would become a key element of East Asian culture, it would never
come to enjoy a monopoly of power that Christianity enjoyed in Western Europe and Byzantium and that Islam enjoyed in Spain, the Middle East, and North Africa. The less exclusivist nature of Mahayana Buddhism would mean that it would always be one set of practices among many.

And the greatest difference is that China eventually saw a return to a unified empire under the Sui and then Tang Dynasties. In spite of Charlemagne’s efforts to create a new Empire in the west, the story of Western Europe would be one of competing states rather than an empire claiming universal authority.

### 7.17 WORKS CONSULTED AND FURTHER READING


### 7.18 LINKS TO PRIMARY SOURCES

Fordham University’s Internet Medieval Sourcebook contains a wide variety of primary source documents from the Middle Ages (that is, 500 to 1500) hosted by Fordham University. From the main page one can find links based on period and category.

The Internet Medieval Sourcebook

http://legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/sbook.asp

Georgetown University’s The Labyrinth likewise contains a large selection of links to both primary sources and art and art historical materials. Some of the pages have succumbed to “link rot” due to the relative age of the site, but it remains one of the best collections of primary source material available online for free.

The Labyrinth

https://blogs.commons.georgetown.edu/labyrinth
8.1 CHRONOLOGY

- 632 – 661 CE: Rashidun Caliphs
- 661 – 750 CE: Umayyad Caliphate
- 750 – 1258 CE: Abbasid Caliphate
- 909 – 1171 CE: Fatimid Caliphate
- 1096 – 1487 CE: Crusades
- 1171 – 1250 CE: Ayubid Sultanate
- 1250 – 1517 CE: Mamluk Sultanate

8.2 INTRODUCTION

An inveterate adventurer and renowned intellectual, Ibn Khaldun was born into a family of ascendant Andalusian Arabs who had immigrated to North Africa. There, present day Tunisia, he received a traditional Islamic education until his parents died from the plague. At the time of their deaths, he was just seventeen years old. On his own, the young and resourceful Ibn Khaldun exploited personal relationships to secure an administrative position at court and thus began a career as an itinerant statesman. Time and time again, Ibn Khaldun landed in prison for his role in conspiracies against various ruling dynasties, only to be released by their heirs. Envoys and grandees recognized his remarkable intelligence and the value of his council. His reputation preceded him, and many dignitaries openly entreated him to join their court. Serving various dynasties, Ibn Khaldun held many important offices, like diplomat, court advisor, and prime minister. But he eventually grew weary of the hazards of palace intrigue and sought instead a more reclusive lifestyle.

Ibn Khaldun retired to the safety of a Berber tribe in Algeria, where he composed *al-Muqaddimah*, or *Prolegomenon*, an outstanding work of sociology and historiography. Published in 1377, he theorized in *al-Muqaddimah* that tribal *‘asabiyah*, roughly translated as “social soli-
darity,” is often accompanied by a novel religious ideology that helps a previously marginalized group of people, usually from the desert, rise up and conquer the city folk. Once ensconced in power, these desert peoples evolved into a grand civilization, but ‘asabiyah contained within it destructive elements that could precipitate their collapse. Known for this Cyclical Theory of History, Ibn Khaldun posited that, seduced by the wiles of urban culture, the dominant group would over time become soft and enter into a period of decay, until a new group of desert peoples conquered them, when the process would begin anew. This theory applies to the development of Islamic history discussed throughout this chapter.

8.3 QUESTIONS TO GUIDE YOUR READING

1. How does geography play a role in Islamic history?

2. Why were the concepts defined by muruwah so important to the early development of Islam?

3. What are the Five Pillars of Islam, and why are they important to the religion?

4. What were the five roles that the Prophet Muhammad played in Medina?

5. What factors led to the rapid expansion of Islam?

6. How did the Umayyads come to power following the Rashidun caliphs?

7. How do you account for the rise of the splits in the Islamic community, like the rise of the Kharijis and Shi’a?

8. Describe the transition from the Umayyads to the ‘Abbasids. Compare and contrast the two caliphates.

9. The Fatimids marked the end to the High Caliphate. How did Egypt gain its autonomy from the ‘Abbasids? How did the Fatimids take over Egypt?

10. How did the Crusaders gain a foothold in the Middle East? What did it take for Salah al-Din to push them out?

11. What led to the establishment of the Mamluk Sultanate? How did the Mamluk Sultanate go into decline?

12. Does North African history move in cycles of birth, renewal, expansion and decadence? Ibn Khaldoun says that nomads come from the frontiers, desert, and periphery, settle down, and within 120 years, become decadent and collapse. Do you agree?
8.4 KEY TERMS

- ‘Abd Allah al-Mahdi
- Abdul Malik
- Abu al-‘Abbas al-Saffah, Caliph
- Abu Bakr, Caliph
- Ahmad Ibn Tulun
- ‘A’isha
- Al-Azhar
- Al-Hakim
- ‘Ali, Caliph
- al-Ma’mun
- Al-Mansur, Caliph
- Al-Mu’izz
- Al-Muqaddimah
- Alexios Komnenos, Emperor
- Alids
- Amsar
- Ansar
- Asabiyyah
- Aybak
- Battle of Ajnadayn
- Battle of Badr
- Battle of Karbala
- Battle of Manzikert
- Battle of Marj Rahit
- Battle of Qadisiya
- Battle of Siffin
- Battle of the Camel
- Battle of the Trench
- Battle of Uhud
- Battle of Yarmuk
- Baybars
- Bayt al-Hikmah
- Cyclical Theory of History
- Hadith
- Hajj
- Harun al-Rashid, Caliph
- Hijra
- Husayn
- Ibn Khaldun
- ibn Zubayr
- Isma’ilis
- Jihad
- Jizya
- Ka’ba
- Kharanj
- Kharijis
- Majlis
- Mamluks
- Marwan, Caliph
- Mawali
- Mu’awiya, Caliph
- Mu’tazila
- Muhajirun
- Muhammad ad-Darazi
- Muruwah
- People of the Book
- Quran
- Qutuz
- Ramadan
- Salah al-Din
- Salat
- Sawm
8.5 GEOGRAPHY OF THE MIDDLE EAST

Academics have not reached a consensus on the geographical boundaries of the Middle East. However, for the purposes of this chapter, this region will encompass the broadly defined areas known as Persia, Mesopotamia, the Levant, Asia Minor, and the Arabian Peninsula. The Middle East straddles three continents, including Asia, Africa, and Europe. The geography of the area promoted cultural diffusion by facilitating the spread of peoples, ideas, and goods along overland and maritime trade routes. In an area generally characterized by its aridity, climate has influenced settlement patterns. Larger settlements are found in river valleys and well-watered areas along the littoral. In these areas, we see the development and spread of productive agriculture.

8.6 RISE OF ISLAM

Legend traces the Arabs back to Isma’il, the son of Abraham and his Egyptian maid, Haga, a link that would later help to legitimate Islam by connecting it to the Hebrew tradition. In reality, Arabs inhabited the pre-Islamic Arabian Peninsula and shared socio-linguistic commonalities with such other Semitic-speaking peoples in the area as the Hebrews, Assyrians, Arameans, and even the Amhara of Ethiopia. Most of the population of Arabia prior to the rise of Islam resided in the south of the peninsula, in modern day Yemen, where they practiced terraced agriculture and herded ruminants in a relatively small area.

Farther to the north of Yemen, along the highland spine of western Arabia and up against the littoral of the Red Sea, was the Hijaz, a prominent cultural and economic region. Situated in this remote fastness was the dusty city of Mecca, the holiest place in the peninsula and the location
of the **Ka'ba**, or “cube,” which contained many of the traditional Arabian religious images, including many Christian icons. So important was the Ka'ba to the religion of polytheistic tribes of Arabia that they negotiated a truce lasting one month every year that allowed for safe pilgrimage to the shrine.

The Hijaz was the most arable part of the Arabian Peninsula north of Yemen and distinguished by irrigated agriculture that supported fruit trees and essential grains. Local traders exported a range of Hijazi agricultural products to Syria in the north in return for imperative imports like textiles and olive oil so the region benefited from robust trade. Regional commerce depended on the security of trade, and piracy on the Red Sea threatened to disrupt business. Under these conditions, merchants diverted their trade overland. Many goods journeyed up the Red Sea Rift from Yemen on their way to the eastern Mediterranean. Caravans of camels carried these goods, as well as Hijazi exports, to the Levant. Most of the caravans stopped in Mecca, the halfway point up the spine of the peninsula, thus their commerce brought much needed wealth and tax revenue to the city.

The Arabs first domesticated the camel, probably sometime between 3000 and 1000 BCE. Caravan operators eventually availed themselves of these useful dromedaries because they were so adept at crossing the region’s massive deserts. Capable of drinking 100 liters of water in mere minutes, they could endure days of travel without needing to replenish themselves again. Moreover, camels instinctively remembered the locations

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*Figure 8.1 | The Mountains of the Hijaz*
Author: User "Salem1990"
Source: Wikimedia Commons
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*Map 8.2 | Map of the Hijaz Region of Arabia*
Author: User "TUBS"
Source: Wikimedia Commons
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Life in the Arabian Peninsula centered around the tribe, which usually consisted of a group of relatives who claimed a shared ancestry. Tribal traditions found meaning in the poetic concept of *muruwah*, which represented the notion of the ideal tribal man. This uniquely Arabian brand of chivalry focused on bravery, patience, persistence in revenge, generosity, hospitality, and protection of the poor and weak. In the absence of formal government, tribes offered physical security to its individual members. Tribes mitigated violence and theft through the shared understanding that retribution for such acts would follow swiftly. Tribes also organized to compete over increasingly

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**Map 8.3 | The Tribes of Arabia** | Notice the Quraysh tribe of Mecca.  
Author: User "Slackerlwastudent"  
Source: Wikimedia Commons  
License: Public Domain

of important, life-sustaining oases. So important were these beasts of burden that the tribes that controlled the camels controlled the trade. And the Quraysh Tribe of Mecca commanded many of the camels in the Hijaz region; therefore, they commanded much of the trade.
scarce resources, as they had a responsibility to provide for the economic needs of their individual members. Nevertheless, tribal traditions had been breaking down prior to the rise of Islam; no longer were the dominant members of society adhering to the principles set forth in *muruwah*.

Into this evolving cultural milieu Muhammad (c.570 – 632) was born in the city of Mecca. Muhammad’s father, ‘Abdallah, was a member of the Hashimite Clan, a less prosperous branch of the Quraysh Tribe. ‘Abdullah died just prior to his son’s birth, and Muhammad’s mother passed away when he was just six years old. Orphaned at such a young age, his tribe intervened to ensure Muhammad’s survival. His uncle, Abu Thalib, the leader of the Hashimite Clan and an important member of the Quraysh Tribe, eventually took custody of the young boy. These early privations influenced Muhammad’s later desire to take care of those who could not care for themselves.

In his youth, Muhammad found employment in the regional caravan trade as a dependable herder and driver of camels. During this period, he cultivated a reputation of an empathetic and honest man, one who earned the respect of many Meccans. His upright character soon attracted the attention of a wealthy merchant known as Khadija who hired Muhammad to manage her caravans. Once Muhammad proved his reliability, Khadija, who was fifteen years older than Muhammad, proposed to him, and they married. This marriage afforded Muhammad a financial security that allowed him to begin meditating on religion in the abstract.

Muhammad had been concerned about the direction society had recently been taking and that the concepts defined by *muruwah* were no longer being upheld. He believed that some of the most influential members of society, namely the merchant elite of the Quraysh Tribe, were no longer respecting their traditional responsibilities to the weaker members of society because of their own greed. He thought that the People of the Book, specifically, Christians and Jews, might have a better answer for the ills afflicting Meccan society. Muhammad had contact with the Christians and Jews of the peninsula and even traveled to Christian Syria while working in the caravan trade. In this context, the Angel Gabriel appeared to Muhammad at a cave nearby to Mecca in 610, during the holy month of Ramadan. The Angel Gabriel instructed him to “recite,” and then he spoke the divine word of God. His revelations became the *Quran*.

At first, Muhammad displayed the very human reactions of fear and distrust to the apparition of the Angel Gabriel. He also expressed embarrassment because he did not want to be associated with the pagan diviners of the region. Fortunately, his wife Khadija had a cousin who was a *hanif*, someone who was neither a Christian nor a Jew, but who believed in a vague concept of a monotheistic god. Her cousin trusted the veracity of Muhammad’s revelations. So with trepidation, Muhammad eventually accepted his role as God’s vehicle. His wife became the first convert to Islam, with Abu Thalib’s son ‘Ali converting soon afterwards.

### 8.6.1 The Religion of Islam

As a religion of the Abrahamic faith, Islam holds much in common with Judaism and Christianity. Islam grew out of the Judeo-Christian tradition, a link which helped to legitimize the new religion. In fact, Muslims believe in the same God, or Allah in Arabic, as the Jewish and Christian God. Although Muslims trust that the People of the Book had received the word of
God, they believe that it had become distorted over time, so God sent the Angel Gabriel to deliver His word to Muhammad, the Seal of the Prophets, or Khatam an-Nabiyyin, for Muslims believe that he represented God’s final word to man. Muhammad never claimed to be founding a new religion, rather he served as the last in a long line of God’s messengers, beginning with the Hebrew prophets, and including Jesus. His revelations, therefore, represent the pure, unadulterated version of God’s message. The Prophet’s followers memorized the revelations and ultimately recorded them in a book called the Quran. Together with the Quran, the Hadith, traditions of Muhammad used to illustrate a concept, and the Sunna, the teachings of the Prophet not found in the Quran, helped guide and inform Muslims on proper behavior. And with that knowledge came great responsibility, as God held His people to a high standard of behavior, based on their obedience, or submission to His will. In fact, the word Islam means submission in Arabic, and a Muslim is one who submits (to God).

Derived from a Hadith, the Five Pillars of Islam are essential, obligatory actions that serve as the foundation of the faith. The first pillar, known as the witness, or shahada, is a profession of faith, in which believers declare that “There is no God but God, and Muhammad is His messenger.” Prayer, also called salat, is the second pillar of Islam. Islam expects faithful Muslims to pray five times a day, kneeling towards Mecca, at dawn, noon, afternoon, sunset, and evening. One should perform ritual ablutions prior to their prayers in order to approach God as being symbolically clean and...
The third pillar is almsgiving, or zakat in Arabic. Islam requires Muslims to contribute a proportion of their wealth to the upkeep of the Islamic community. This proportion, or tithe, accorded with the size of one’s wealth; therefore, the rich should expect to contribute more than the poor. Fasting, or sawm, is the fourth pillar of Islam and takes place during Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar. For the duration of Ramadan, believers consume neither food nor drink from dawn to dusk. This practice is meant to remind them of what it is like to be poor and go hungry. The fifth and final pillar of Islam is pilgrimage, or hajj. Islam expects all able-bodied Muslims to make a journey to Mecca at least once in their lifetime. All five pillars combine to unite the Islamic community.

8.7 THE EXPANSION OF ISLAM

The Prophet Muhammad started publically preaching his strict brand of monotheism in the year 613, by reciting the Quran, quickly convincing some of the commoners of Mecca to believe in him. Most of his early converts belonged to groups of people who had failed to achieve any significant social mobility, which, of course, included many of the poor. His followers memorized his recitations and message that called for the powerful to take care of the weak, a message that resonated with many of these economically and socially marginalized. Islam served as a binding force, replacing tribal solidarity, or 'asabiyah.

Muhammad’s message challenged the Umayyad Clan’s leadership of society. The most powerful branch of the Quraysh Tribe, the Umayyads had been enriching themselves from the lucrative caravan trade while, at the same time, ignoring the privations of the needy. Prodding his tribal brethren, Muhammad had also spoken out against the traditional pagan gods. Tribal tradition dictated that the polytheistic Arabs of the peninsula worship their tribal gods; they also believed in jinns, or nature spirits. As custodians of the Ka’ba, which contained all of these traditional Arabian religious images, the Umayyad Clan augmented their income by collecting revenue from the traditional pilgrimage to Mecca.

The political implications were clear. The Muslims threatened to disrupt a delicate equilibrium. The Prophet’s message jeopardized the social and economic standing of the elite members of society, who accused the Muslims of serving as agents of unwelcome change. Tensions grew, and conflict spilled into the streets of Mecca, dragging the two respective camps into the fray. The more that Muhammad’s followers grew in number, the more opposition they encountered from the Umayyad Clan. To avoid this conflict, some Muslims fled to the Kingdom of Aksum, located in Ethiopia, at this stage in the early history of Islam, where they received protection from Muhammad’s enemies under the Christian King Armah. Indeed, the first Muslims went by the name of muhajirun, meaning “emigrants,” for they would soon be forced to leave Mecca under pain of severe Umayyad persecution.

During this period, Muhammad’s wife Khadija died in 619. With her death, Muhammad lost his source of emotional support and fell into depression, thus enduring a personal crisis. That same year, the Prophet’s uncle Abu Thalib passed away. Already bereaved, Muhammad further suffered the loss of his personal protector in the Quraysh Tribe. Now cut off from the tribal leadership and accused
of stirring sectarian tension, Muhammad was on his own and vulnerable to Umayyad harassment in Mecca. While Muhammad endured harsh reprisals from the Umayyads for his public preaching, a conflict was boiling in Yathrib, later called Medina, a trade city located a few days to the north of Mecca. Some individuals from Medina had traveled to Mecca in 620, where they heard the Prophet preach and soon adopted Islam. Impressed by his reputation as an honest man, the leaders of Medina invited Muhammad to their city in 622 to act as a mediator of tribal fighting over a shared oasis. As opposition in Mecca had become too intense for Muhammad and his followers to remain there, they migrated to Medina in 622, a seminal event known as the hijra that marks the first year of the Islamic calendar. The Prophet rapidly converted many of the city’s inhabitants to Islam. These new Muslims came to be identified as the ansar, meaning “helpers.” Together with the muhajirun, the ansar helped the Prophet institutionalize the religion of Islam and develop an umma, or community of believers, that would dominate the social and political life of Medina.

Muhammad assumed five different roles in Medina. First and foremost, he was the Prophet of Islam; therefore, he was the religious leader of the community. Second, he acted as the political leader of the umma. Because his followers agreed with him politically, they agreed with him religiously as well. Third, Muhammad served as a judicial leader, using the Quran as the basis of law. Fourth, the Prophet functioned as a legislator, working with the majlis, or council of elders, to enact laws. He therefore governed his capital, Medina, with no separation of church and state. Finally, Muhammad was a military leader who ensured that statehood would prevail for the Muslims.

A major concern of Muhammad’s leadership was to determine how the Muslims could contribute to the Medinan economy. He received a revelation during this period that suggested the Muslims should raid the caravans coming north out of Mecca. (Qur’an 22:39) In 624, the Medinans engaged a caravan of Meccans along a popular trade route bypassing Medina. In the ensuing Battle of Badr, named after a nearby oasis, 300 Muslims defeated nearly 1000 Meccans and seized their caravan. They considered their signal victory a sign from God that he was on their side. Their success enhanced Muhammad’s prestige and that of the Islamic community among the Arab tribes in the peninsula.
Unwilling to cede control of the lucrative caravan trade to the upstart Muslims of Medina, the Umayyads confronted the Muslims in 625 in the **Battle of Uhud**, which referred to a local mountain. Foot soldiers in the vanguard of the Muslim forces led their defense. Meanwhile, a group of ambitious archers, ignoring the Prophet’s command to remain stationary, joined the battle. Their imprudent action let the Meccan cavalry strike the unprotected flank of Muhammad’s warriors. The Meccans failed to capitalize on their victory, however, and were unable to take Medina, a failure that leads some historians to consider the battle an ultimate success for the Muslims.

In 627, the Umayyads of Mecca and the Muslims of Medina met in a final confrontation in what became known as the **Battle of the Trench**, or *khandaq* in Arabic; this battle ended in another triumph for the Muslims. In preparation for a foreseeable Umayyad attack, a Persian engineer named Salman had suggested that the Medinans build defensive works around the city. So the Muslims survived the Meccan assault by entrenching themselves behind a near-impregnable barrier. In 628, the Umayyads finally realized that they were unable to vanquish the Muslims so sent a delegation of Meccans to sue for peace. The resulting **Treaty of Hudaybiyyah** symbolized their desire to extricate themselves from a losing situation, as Mecca ultimately compromised so their merchant elite would not lose any more trade to the Medinans. The treaty provided for an official tolerance of Islam and for the Muslims to return to Mecca the following year, free from persecution.

In 630, two years before his death, the Prophet Muhammad advanced on the city of Mecca with an army of some 10,000 Muslims. Encountering only limited resistance, the army of Muslims took control of the city, an act that symbolized the idea of Islamic expansion. Muhammad cleansed the Ka’ba of its purported 360 religious images and dedicated it to God. The prestige of the Muslims extended with their victory over the Meccans. As tribes learned of this triumph, they soon followed the lead of the winners, both politically and re-
ligiously, sending delegations to forge alliances with the Prophet. By the time that Muhammad passed away, most of Arabia had converted to Islam. The religion provided the Muslims of the peninsula with a new ‘asabiyah, or social solidarity, endowing the movement with a unity of purpose.

In the absence of the Prophet, Muslim leaders had to develop a body of law to deal with important legal questions. Over time, Sharia law became a legal system in which Islamic principles provided an accepted means to regulate all features of daily life, including, but not limited to, economics, politics, family life, and society. Sharia law is based on the Quran, Hadith, precedent, and interpretation. In fact, the capacity for various interpretations of the law has led to the development of several schools of Islamic jurisprudence.

8.8 THE RASHIDUN CALIPHS

Muhammad did not formally appoint a successor, or khalifa in Arabic, and no clear replacement arose to lead the Muslim community forward at the time of his death. In fact, the umma divided into three groups, with each willing to appoint their own successor to the Prophet. Emerging as a vocal leader at this critical juncture, ‘Umar, one of Muhammad’s closest companions, convinced the majlis, or elders of the community, to elect Abu Bakr by consensus as a compromise candidate. Abu Bakr had been Muhammad’s closest friend; Muhammad’s marriage of political alliance to ‘A’isha, Abu Bakr’s daughter, further solidified their relationship.

The election of Abu Bakr (632 – 634) brought much-needed stability and an almost democratic form of government to Islam. As caliph, Abu Bakr held together the converts to Islam by deploying the forces at his disposal, thus cementing his authority among the Arabian tribes. He prevented any rebellious Muslim tribes from reverting to the worship of their traditional tribal gods, as they were wont to do. Abu Bakr died in 634, two years after the Prophet Muhammad had died.

The majlis chose ‘Umar (634 – 644), a close friend of Abu Bakr, to be the next caliph. ‘Umar had been the military power behind Abu Bakr. A dynamic and uncompromising leader, ‘Umar recognized the necessity of expansion northward to achieve various ends. First, he sought to subdue the security threat of raiding nomads, many of which remained a law unto themselves. Second,
in his struggle to contain discontent, he used the cohesive element of *jihad* to unite the Muslim community against unbelievers and expand God’s dominion. (The Arabic term of *jihad* actually refers to a “struggle,” usually against spiritual impurity, often known as “greater *jihad*,” and is associated with fulfilling God’s objectives here on earth. The “lesser *jihad*,” alternatively, is a physical struggle against the unbelievers of the *Dar al-Harb*, or Abode of War, until it is absorbed into the *Dar al-Islam*, or Abode of Islam, where believers were free to practice their faith as members of the predominant faith. Of note is the fact that Muhammad did not consider *jihad* important enough to make one of the pillars of Islam.) Third, ‘Umar understood the importance of plunder for the nascent caliphate. Troops received four-fifths of the loot from conquest; the remainder of the revenue went to him to be dispersed amongst the neediest members in the Islamic community.

‘Umar directed the full might of Islam northward against the Eastern Roman Empire, sometimes referred to as the Byzantine Empire. In 634, their first encounter took place in southern Palestine. The ensuing **Battle of Ajnadayn** was a decisive victory for the Muslims and a major loss for Emperor Heraclius. Two years later, an outnumbered Muslim army defeated the Eastern Roman Empire yet again at the **Battle of Yarmouk**, located on the eponymous river, somewhere between Damascus and Jerusalem. In both instances, the Byzantines relied on their slow, heavy cavalry, whereas the Arabs capitalized on their light armor and their superior mobility. The Muslims realized that they could not just charge the East Roman lines; they showed their tactical superiority by flanking the Byzantines and executing a successful rearguard action instead. These victories opened up greater Syria to Muslim conquest. Antioch, Aleppo, and Jerusalem fell to

![Map 8.7 | Map of Muslim and Byzantine Troop Movements, 635-636 CE](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_8.7%20%28p.308%29.png)
the Muslims not long thereafter. ‘Umar appointed Mu'awiya, a member of the Meccan Umayyad aristocracy to govern Syria at his behest.

Once he dealt with the increasingly vulnerable Byzantines in the Levant, ‘Umar directed his army to the east against the Sasanian Empire of Persia. In 636, fighting along the banks of the Euphrates River, a smaller Arab force triumphed over the Persians, at the Battle of Qadisiya. After successive days of exhaustive combat, the Muslims took advantage of environmental conditions and their light cavalry’s mobility when they chased a dust storm and took the Sasanids by surprise.

To save their empire, the Persians mounted a failed counterattack. In 642, Umar’s army eventually defeated the forces of the Sasanian Emperor Yazdagird III at the Battle of Nahavand, situated deep in Iran’s Zagros Mountains. Yazdagird fled to the east as a fugitive, and, in 651, met his death at the hands of a local miller who killed the emperor in order to rob him of his belongings.

In 639, General ‘Amr petitioned ‘Umar for permission to invade Egypt and eventually persuaded the caliph that he could easily take Egypt so gained his reluctant consent. In 641, he received a message from ‘Umar recalling his forces. The general ignored the order and seized Egypt with just a few hundred soldiers. With promises of toleration, ‘Amr convinced the Egyptian Coptic majority to
side with him against the Greek Orthodox ruling minority, whose Patriarch Cyrus had been actively persecuting the Copts as followers of a Christian heresy that failed to recognize the Holy Trinity.

Clearly outnumbered Muslim armies thus successfully defeated two long-standing empires in the span of just a few decades. Several explanations help us understand the rapid expansion of Islam during this period. One concept, termed the vacuum theory, posits that the Byzantine and Persian empires had been severely weakened from near-continuous fighting, dating back decades prior to the rise of Islam, so they both suffered from the fatigue of war. Islam, therefore, occupied the vacuum of political power resulting from the collapse of these two exhausted empires.

The success of Muslim military strategy offers a second explanation. While Byzantine forces adopted a defensive stance on the battlefield, the Arabs employed more aggressive tactics, making use of their mobile light cavalry against their enemies’ heavily armored armies. Once victorious, the Arabs populated garrison cities on the frontier, called amsar, with Muslims. These military settlements provided security, served as logistical loci, and discouraged Muslim troops from mingling with the locals. The caliphs thereby prevented their warriors being assimilated into the communities of the conquered while also preventing soldiers from disturbing the peace. Fustat in Egypt, as well as Kufa and Basra in Iraq, were the largest of the amsar. From bases like these, the Arabs could expand and consolidate their hold over the frontier.

Religion also provided an impetus for the expansion of Islam. Fearing that internal tribal divisions threatened the early Islamic state, ‘Umar united the Muslims through their common Islamic theology and faced them against a common enemy. Dedicated to the expansion of Islam, Muslims used the concept of jihad as a way to unify the umma, or Islamic community, against a foreign foe. Faith motivated the troops, who were zealous and determined to fight.

Simple economics also served as a primary motivating factor in the expansion of Islam. For one, Muslim rulers applied the jizya, an annual tax levied on non-Muslims, to newly-conquered lands. The money derived from conquest functioned as a driving force in the growth of the caliphate. With the expectation of material reward, soldiers could earn money for their service. While the practice of dividing the spoils of war amongst the soldiers continued under ‘Umar, he also started offering salaries to his troops, determining salaries according to the length of service.

The Muslims further exploited the internal divisions of targeted societies, as exemplified in Egypt, where the Coptic Christian majority, together with a large Jewish minority in Alexandria, had suffered under the rule of an oppressive Greek Orthodox Christian minority but gained autonomy and toleration within an Islamic state. And in Syria, another monophysite Christian minority called the Syrian Orthodox Church, or Jacobites, collaborated with the Muslims and hastened the collapse of the Byzantines. All these factors led the early Islamic state to expand exponentially.

In 644, an Iranian captive from the Persian campaign stabbed ‘Umar to death. His successor, ‘Uthman (644 – 656), was an elderly man from the Umayyad Clan who won a contentious election over ‘Ali. ‘Ali possessed all of the ‘Alid bona fides. ‘Ali was not only son of Muhammad’s early protector, Abu Thalib; he was also the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law. He had married Muhammad’s daughter Fatima; together, they had two sons, Hasan and Husayn. ‘Ali had also earned a well-deserved reputation as a virtuous Muslim. One of the first converts to Islam, he had
Figure 8.5 | Family Tree of the Prophet Muhammad
Author: User “Basilio”
Source: Wikimedia Commons
License: CC BY-SA 3.0

The direct lineage is marked in bold.
*Indicates that the marriage order is disputed
†The Rightly Guided Caliphs or The Righteous Caliphs
journeyed with Muhammad on most of his expeditions and fought against the Meccans. Finally, ‘Ali also served as a valued advisor to the early caliphs on questions of dogma.

Two factions formed in the wake of questions over ‘Uthman’s succession, thus initiating the development of a division within Islam. One faction was a group of ‘Alids who believed that ‘Ali should inherit the mantle of Islam and referred to traditions suggesting that Muhammad had proclaimed to the faithful that ‘Ali should be his successor. The amsar followed the ‘Alids and later adopted the Shi’a appellation. The other faction, the Umayyads contended that the method of appointing successors should be by consensus, as was done with the first caliphs. Mostly based in Mecca, they later identified as Sunnis. Over time, these factional differences became increasingly difficult to bridge.

Although ‘Uthman, one of the Prophet’s first converts, was a pious Muslim, he was a corrupt administrator. He displayed nepotistic tendencies that gave precedence to the Meccan elite, a practice that diverged from ‘Umar’s policies of favoring soldiers who had been the first to respond to the call to action. ‘Umar’s beneficiaries had usually originated from lesser tribes, those too weak to constitute a coherent threat to the establishment; by contrast, ‘Uthman’s appointees were members of the Meccan elite who generally pursued policies benefiting the Umayyad merchants of Mecca.

Government also began to disintegrate under ‘Uthman’s rule, as opposition and instability plagued his tenure as caliph. He managed to offend three separate groups of Muslims. The first of these were the older, pious Muslims, who hailed from Medina. They resented how the hated Umayyads had taken over the same umma that they had previously persecuted and had once tried to destroy. Second were the Quran reciters. When ‘Uthman commissioned and authorized a single official version of the holy text, an act for which he received many accolades, the Quran reciters lost the opportunity for gainful employment. Third were a disgruntled contingent of ‘Alids who called for ‘Uthman to resign and advocated the election of ‘Ali. Their discontent culminated in 656, when resentful devotees of ‘Ali from Egypt broke into ‘Uthman’s home in Medina and assassinated him, purportedly while he was reading the Quran. They then hastily arranged for the election of ‘Ali as ‘Uthman’s successor.

Thrice rejected by the majlis in favor of the first three caliphs, ‘Ali (656 – 661) reluctantly accepted the position of leader of the Islamic community. His selection represented a victory for the faction of legitimists disappointed in the earlier choice of ‘Uthman. ‘Ali assumed the role of caliph amid high expectations, for he was a pious and generous man. Yet the caliphate suffered under his rule. During this time of instability, he constantly had to suppress revolts. For example, tensions between the supporters of ‘Ali and the family of ‘Uthman eventually erupted into the first civil war in Islam. In 656, at the Battle of the Camel, ‘Ali engaged the combined forces of the Prophet’s favored wife, ‘A’isha, and her associates, Talha and Zubayr, who were both relatives of ‘Uthman. Because ‘Ali had failed to bring the dead caliph’s assassins to justice; these three together demanded satisfaction for his death.

The conspirators challenged ‘Ali near the garrison city of Basra, in southern Iraq, before he had the chance to move the caliphate from Medina to the sympathetic military settlement of Kufa. A first, diplomacy seemed to prevail, as ‘Ali sought to avoid bloodshed by negotiating. He succeeded in convincing the three to lay down their arms; however, a group later known as
Kharijis conspired to undermine their reconciliation and set fire to the tents in both camps in the dead of the night. Pandemonium ensued. Because of this single impetuous action, both parties thought the other side had flouted the agreement, committing a violation of trust. During the ensuing battle, ‘A’isha was pushed into the middle of the fray on the back of a camel, as was Arab custom. The supporters who rallied to her side were cut down, and ‘Ali emerged victorious from a very bloody battle. The repercussions of his victory reverberated across the Islamic world, as older Muslim men castigated ‘A’isha for her part in the conflict and suggested that women should not play a role in public life.

This threat was not the only one ‘Ali faced, for he also had to contend with Mu’awiya, ‘Uthman’s cousin and former governor of Syria. Conspicuously absent from ‘Ali’s new administration, Mu’awiya refused to pay homage to ‘Ali and asserted his own independence in Syria. He also echoed the accusations of ‘A’isha, Talha, and Zubayr, as members of Mu’awiya’s Umayyad Clan had expressed dismay about the quick election of ‘Ali, and questions still lingered over the new caliph’s part in ‘Uthman’s death. ‘Ali’s failure to act against ‘Uthman’s assassins proved his culpability, Mu’awiya and the Umayyads, and Mu’awiya asserted the traditional Arab custom of exacting revenge on one’s enemies.

His conflict with ‘Ali culminated in 657 when they met at the Battle of Siffin, on the Euphrates River in northern Syria. After months of clashes, ‘Ali agreed to arbitration with Mu’awiya. Still preferring negotiation over bloodshed, ‘Ali had been of the opinion that Muslims should never take up arms against fellow Muslims. His willingness to negotiate with Mu’awiya, however, caused some of Ali’s own soldiers to defect and adopt the appellation of Kharijis, from kharaja, meaning “to depart.” The first sect in Islam, they departed from Ali because they believed that “judgement belongs to God alone” (Quran 6:57); they saw ‘Ali’s willingness to negotiate with Mu’awiya as somehow reducing the role of God in determining a successor. In lieu of arbitration, they thought that God would determine the rightful successor by influencing the outcome on the field of battle.

Figure 8.6 | ‘Ali and ‘A’isha at the Battle of the Camel
Author: Unknown
Source: Wikimedia Commons
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8.9 THE UMAYYAD CALIPHATE

In 661, ‘Ali suffered the same fate as his predecessor when a Khariji stabbed him to death. And, just like with ‘Uthman, the murder of ‘Ali took place during prayers. ‘Ali’s death represented a deep loss for his followers, who saw him as an advocate of an egalitarian version of Islam and a believer in a just and righteous government. His martyrdom came to be regarded as a sacrifice in the service of God and prompted his supporters to pattern themselves after their champion, who, they insisted, had developed spiritual gifts that remained virtually unattainable for others.

The ‘Alids encouraged ‘Ali’s oldest son, Hasan, to succeed his father; however, Mu’awiya threatened the Prophet’s grandson with continued warfare and convinced him to renounce his claim to the caliphate. Mu’awiya promised Hasan that he would not appoint an heir so that election of future caliphs would return to the majlis. Handsomely compensated by Mu’awiya, Hassan subsequently retired to Mecca and took up religion. He remained there until his death in
669. With this major obstacle removed, Mu‘awiya became the fifth caliph, ending the period of the four rightly guided caliphs, also known as the Rashidun Caliphate.

Mu‘awiya (661 – 680) founded the Umayyad Caliphate; the tribal ‘asabiyah of his Umayyad Clan contributed to their ascendance. And once ensconced in power, the Umayyad Caliphate ended the election of caliphs by consensus and established instead a hereditary principle of succession. Mu‘awiya established the caliphate to Damascus, where he previously served as ‘Uthman’s governor. In Syria, Mu‘awiya reformed the bureaucracy by eventually centralizing it. Unable to rely on the Arab tribal system or peninsula traditions to administer to an ever expanding empire, he depended on related Greek merchant families for administrators and adopted the existing administrative machinery of Byzantines, including their imperial customs and bureaucratic practices.

Mu‘awiya had received much recognition for his unfaltering determination to seek retribution for ‘Uthman’s death; however, he had squandered much of that good will in harassing ‘Ali. As anti-Umayyad sentiment increased, the rift that existed between the Sunnis and Shi‘a continued to expand, for recalcitrant ‘Alids continued to harbor resentment against the Umayyads. They remembered when the ruling aristocracy of Mecca had opposed Muhammad and the Muslim community. In fact, Mu‘awiya himself had fought against Muhammad until the Treaty of Hudaybiyyah, only to reverse course, convert to Islam, and become the Prophet’s secretary.
Unlike the two caliphs who preceded him, Mu'awiya died peacefully in bed. Prior to his death, he designated his son **Yazid** (680 – 683) as his successor, thus violating his agreement with Hasan. Most notable for his well-deserved reputation as a fierce fighter, Yazid was also known for generally dissolute behavior that offended the religious sensibilities of many pious Muslims. Once ensconced as caliph, Yazid failed to secure an oath of allegiance from **Husayn**, brother of Hasan, one of the most important of Muslim leaders. Their rivalry escalated into a full-scale civil war.

A direct descendent of the Prophet Muhammad and the younger son of the Caliph ‘Ali, Husayn rejected the deal that his brother had negotiated, instead pursuing his own claim to the rightful leadership of the Islamic community. His ‘Alid supporters loathed the Umayyads and believed that the caliph must be closely related to the Prophet. Husayn’s refusal to recognize Yazid as the next caliph and their subsequent conflict culminated in 680 at the Battle of Karbala, located to the west of present day Baghdad. Yazid dispatched a military detachment to Iraq and overwhelmed Husayn’s small band of armed followers so that many of Husayn’s own men deserted him in his hour of need. The Shi’a perceived this seminal event as a turning point in their history.

Much like the loss of ‘Ali, the death of Husayn shocked the incipient Shi’a community, many of whom suffered from intense guilt for failing to assist his little band. Increasing numbers of Shi’a became profoundly affected by his martyrdom, interpreting it as a sacrifice in the best interests of their community; over time, a passion narrative developed that commemorated his last hours. Through this commemoration of the Battle of Karbala on Ashura, the tenth day of the month of Muharram, they remember the terrible suffering and his untimely death and strive to experience an existential intimacy with their martyr.

Yazid had inherited an empire punctuated by civil war and rebellion. Another principle figure among those in revolt was **Ibn Zubayr**, grandson of Caliph Abu Bakr. Following the death of Mu’awiya, Ibn Zubayr had sworn allegiance to Husayn. He remained in Mecca, where he stood in opposition to the Umayyads. The general unpopularity of the Umayyads advanced his cause, and many Muslims considered him the rightful caliph. Indeed, much of his support came from Muslims who rejected the idea of hereditary succession and sought a return to the election of caliphs by consensus.
Yazid invaded the Hijaz in order to put an end to ibn Zubayr’s rebellion, but the caliph’s abrupt death in 683 halted the campaign. Marwan (684 – 685) followed his cousin Yazid but was not universally recognized as caliph, for many considered ibn Zubayr the legitimate successor. To garner support, Marwan exploited latent tribal animosities that existed between his Kalb Tribe, also known as the Yemen, and the Qays Tribe, who supported ibn Zubayr. At the Battle of Marj Rahit in 684, Marwan’s Kalb forces defeated the Qays, allowing him to consolidate Umayyad control over Syria and Egypt, thus shrinking ibn Zubayr’s rule down to Iraq and the Hijaz. Not until 691 did Abdul Malik (685 – 705), heir to Marwan, recover Iraq from ibn Zubayr. In the process, he also had to pacify Khariji and Shi’a areas. Abdul Malik then dispatched
General Hajjaj to the Hijaz. A brutal military leader, Hajjaj laid siege to the holy city of Mecca in 692 in order to secure the submission of ibn Zubayr’s men. He then beheaded ibn Zubayr and crucified his body. Abdul Malik rewarded the brutal general for his loyal service with the governorship of Iraq, where his ruthless reputation persisted.

Once he had assumed the throne, Abdul Malik promoted the Arabization of the caliphate. He rejected the use of Greek, Persian, Coptic, or Aramaic in government, decreeing that all bureaucracy had to be only in Arabic. Non-Arab administrators had to learn Arabic in order to keep their government jobs. Their integration did not lead to the complete Arabization of Umayyad society that Abdul Malik envisioned, however, and the spread of Arabic was not as great as the spread of Islam.

Many Muslims continued to speak Berber, Turkish, Kurdish, and Persian. Although a separate process, Arabization only accompanied Islamization.

Abdul Malik also sought to Islamize the caliphate. First, he discontinued the earlier Byzantine coinage and created the first Islamic currency. Then he instituted a tax code based on the principles of Islam. Caliphs levied an additional tax on non-Muslims, known as the jizya, as was customary in Islam. Christians and Jews in conquered lands also paid a property tax called kharaj. By converting to Islam, one could avoid paying the jizya and kharaj altogether. Most important for ordinary citizens was the fact that Muslims bore lower tax rates than non-Muslims. As one could imagine, the thrust for conversion became primarily economic. Although the process of Islamization was relatively peaceful and gradual, Islam did become the dominant religion of the region. And the parallel processes of Arabization and Islamization helped to reestablish centralized rule after the second civil war.
Not all of Abdul Malik’s reforms adhered to the egalitarian principles set forth in Islam. Arab tribal elites did not want to recognize the mawali, non-Arab Muslims, as social equals, so did not afford them the same rights as Arab Muslims. However, the emerging power and influence of the mawali was apparent. They had become the intellectual elite of society and were the bureaucrats and commercial leaders of the umma. Nevertheless, they faced social discrimination. For example, Umayyad caliphs taxed the mawali as if they were non-Muslims. This inequitable practice became a social problem for the Umayyads, for it stood in stark relief against the values of justice and equality that had originally compelled them to convert.

An extremely devout and pious man, the Caliph ‘Umar II (r. 717 – 720) upended the Umayyad moral order. He considered it immoral to show prejudice against the mawali and to favor the Arabs, so he attempted to resolve the lingering hostilities of the mawali by advocating the equality of all Muslims. ‘Umar II declared an end to the practice of taxing the mawali like the Christians and Jews. His advisors warned him against this change because it precipitated numerous conversions of non-Muslims, so he decreased military expenditures to compensate for an expected drop in revenue. His reforms might have ended the official discrimination against the mawali, but they alienated the Umayyad privileged class, who paid a servant to poison ‘Umar II to death in 720.

8.10 THE ‘ABBASID CALIPHATE

For many Muslims, ‘Umar II’s reforms had come too late. The Umayyads had already managed to alienate three important groups of Muslims, Kharijis, the mawali, and the Shi’a, whose combined power and influence were coopted by the ‘Abbasids and threatened the internal security of the caliphate. Kharijis eschewed disputes over lineage and advocated a more egalitarian brand of Islam than the Sunni Umayyads. They believed that any Muslim could be the rightful heir to the mantle of the Prophet, so long as that person rigorously adhered to the examples set forth in the Sunna. Kharijis thought that caliphs who diverged from the Prophet’s example should be overthrown, as evidenced by their assassination of the Caliph ‘Ali. Second, Umayyad authorities had enacted punitive measures against the mawali, mostly Persians, but also Kurds and Turks. They treated them like second-class citizens, no different than the People of the Book. Finally, it angered most of the Shi’a that
the Umayyads could not trace their ancestry to the Prophet Muhammad. They also blamed the Umayyads for the death of their martyr Husayn. The ‘Abbasids collaborated with these disaffected groups to incite unrest and rebellion. They particularly cultivated Shi’a anti-Umayyad sentiment, emphasizing their own connection to the Prophet; indeed, the ‘Abbasids traced their ancestry to Muhammad’s uncle ‘Abbas and the Hashimite Clan. They also vaguely promised to adopt Shi’a Islam once in power. Together, these three groups formed a constituency that campaigned on behalf of the ‘Abbasids.

A secretive family, ‘Abbasids bided their time until the opportune moment to rebel against the Umayyad Caliphate. In 743, the ‘Abbasids began their revolution in remote Khorasan, a region in eastern Persia, just as the Umayyads were contending with not only revolts but also the inopportune death of the Caliph Hisham. In that moment of Umayyad disorder, the ‘Abbasids dispatched Abu Muslim, a Persian general, to Khorasan to start the revolution. Abu Muslim’s early victories against the Umayyads allowed Abu al-‘Abbas, leader of the ‘Abbasid dynasty, to enter the sympathetic city of Kufa in 748. Together, Abu Muslim and Abu al-‘Abbas, who adopted the honorific of as-Saffah, or “the generous,” confronted the Umayyad Caliph Marwan II in 750, at the Battle of the Zab, in modern day Iraq. Sensing defeat, Marwan II fled, but his pursuers eventually caught and killed him in Egypt. As-Saffah captured the Umayyad capital of Damascus shortly thereafter. The ‘Abbasids attempted to eliminate the entire house of the Umayyads so that not one remained
to come forth and rise up against them, but one, ‘Abd al-Rahman, escaped eminent death and fled to Egypt. The only member of the family to abscond from certain demise, ‘Abd al-Rahman fled across North Africa to Spain, where he recreated a Spanish Muslim dynasty in a parallel fashion to the Umayyad dynasty in Syria. Under the Umayyads, Spain became the wealthiest and most developed part of Europe (see Chapter Seven). In fact, it was through Islamic Spain that ancient Greek learning entered Europe.

The change from the Umayyad’s Arab tribal aristocracy to a more egalitarian government, one based on the doctrines of Islam, under the ‘Abbasids, corresponds to Ibn Khaldun’s Cyclical Theory of History. The ‘Abbasids officially advocated Sunni orthodoxy and severed their relationship of convenience with the Shi’a. They even went so far as to assassinate many Shi’a leaders, whom they regarded as potential threats to their rule. To escape ‘Abbasid persecution and find safety and security, many Shi’a scattered to the edges of the empire. While the Shi’a might have been disappointed with the ‘Abbasids for refusing to advocate Shi’a Islam, most Muslims welcomed the ‘Abbasid’s arrival. They had justified their revolt against the corrupt Umayyads because the latter had digressed from the core principles of Islam. As standard bearers of the Prophet’s own family, the ‘Abbasids were publicly pious, even digging wells and providing protection along hajj routes.

**Caliph al-Mansur** (754 – 775) abandoned the Umayyad capital of Damascus and moved the caliphate close to the old Persian capital of Ctesiphon. Construction of the new city of Baghdad began in 762. Situated at the confluence of the Tigris and Diyala rivers, it boasted a prime location that provided access to the sea with enough distance from the coast to offer safety from pirates. Modeled after circular Persian cities, Baghdad rapidly escaped its confines and expanded into its environs. Quickly eclipsing Chang’an, it became the largest city in the world, with over half a million inhabitants. In effect, Baghdad became a public works project, employing 100,000 citizens and stimulating the economy. Al-Mansur’s newly-founded city proudly displayed lavish ‘Abbasid family residences and grandiose public buildings. It even had working sewers, which dumped raw sewage into the nearby canals and rivers.

Prominently featured in *One Thousand and One Nights*, **Harun al-Rashid** (789 – 809) represented the climax of ‘Abbasid rulers; as such, he improved upon the work his predecessors had begun. For example, Harun furthered Baghdad’s development into a major economic center by encouraging trade along the Silk Road and through the waters of the Indian Ocean. He also made marginal agricultural land more productive, taking advantage of technological advances in irrigation to cultivate borrowed crops like rice, cotton, and sugar from India, as well as citrus fruits from China.

Harun al-Rashid’s reign coincided with the so-called Golden Age of Islam when Baghdad developed into a preeminent city of scholarship. He began construction of the **Bayt al-Hikmah** (House of Wisdom), the foremost intellectual center in the Islamic world. The complex boasted of several schools, astronomical observatories, and even a giant library, where scholars translated scientific and philosophical works from neighboring civilizations, including works from Persian, Hindi, Chinese, and Greek.

As a result of this move from Damascus to Baghdad, Persia increasingly influenced the Islamic world, with a synthesis of Arab and Persian culture beginning under the ‘Abbasids. For instance,
the Persian Sibawayh (d. c. 793) responded to the need for non-Arab Muslims to understand the Quran by systematizing the first Arabic grammar, titled *al-Kitab*. The greatest poet of the period, Abu Nuwas (d. c. 813), was of mixed parentage, Arab and Iranian. The avant-garde themes of his poems often emphasized dissolute behavior. Although ibn Ishaq (d.768), a historian of sorts, was born in Medina, he relocated to Baghdad, where he too came under the influence of Persian culture. At the behest of Caliph al-Mansur, he composed the first authoritative biography of the Prophet Muhammad. Another important Persian scholar, al-Tabari (d. 923) wrote the *History of Prophets and Kings*, a great resource on early Islamic history.

Inheritors of Sasanian court traditions that emphasized ceremony, the ‘Abbasids slowly distanced themselves from their subjects. The harem embodied this spatial separation. A forbidden place, the caliph’s family made the harem their personal residence. Caliphs controlled the empire through family, solidifying political alliances by marrying many powerful women.
The harem bestowed power to women, and they played an important role in influencing ‘Abbasid politics, particularly in terms of questions over succession. In the late ‘Abbasid period, various women selected and trained the successors. Young men who were to rule resided in the harem, and much scheming over which son the caliph preferred occurred there. The mother of the caliph, however, dominated internal politics of the space. Harun’s mother played a significant role in his reign, for example. The second most powerful woman in the household was the mother of the heir apparent. She could be any woman, even a concubine, for young, beautiful women were highly sought after at a time when the harem became more important under the ‘Abbasids.

Riven apart by palace intrigue, the ‘Abbasid Caliphate eventually succumbed to internecine warfare. In fact, Harun al-Rashid himself divided the caliphate when he designated his eldest son, al-Amin, as his heir, for he had already bequeathed the province of Khorasan to his younger son, al-Ma’mun. Upon their father’s death in 809, al-Amin demanded his brother’s territory and obeisance. Of course, al-Ma’mun refused, and a catastrophic civil war ensued. In 812, al-Ma’mun’s army, under the command of his Persian general, Tahir, laid siege to Baghdad. Tahir caught al-Amin attempting to escape from the city and decapitated him. Al-Ma’mun succeeded his brother as caliph, but remained in Merv, his former capital. He ultimately relocated to Baghdad in 819, by which time, years of sporadic violence and lawlessness had severely damaged the city.

Al-Ma’mun (r.813 – 833) continued his father’s tradition of sponsoring scholarship. He completed the Bayt al-Hikmah that his father had begun. He also expressed a love for philosophical and theological debate and encouraged the Islamic doctrine known as the Mu’tazila, a rationalist formulation of Islam that stressed free will over divine predestination. Influenced by Aristotelian thought, the Mu’tazila attempted to solve the theological question of evil. It asserted that human reason alone could inform proper behavior. Condemned as a heresy for incorporating extra Islamic patterns of thought into their belief system, many Muslims concluded that the Mu’tazila’s rationalism exceeded the holy doctrines of Islam.

The ‘Abbasids began their long, slow decline under al-Ma’mun, who was the first caliph to confer greater freedom upon his emirs, or provincial governors, initiating a process of decentralization that eventually unleashed uncontrollable centrifugal forces. This process began when
al-Ma’mun first awarded his general Tahir with the governorship of Khorasan, where Tahir raised his own revenue and directed his own affairs. The Tahirid dynasty dominated the politics of the region, resisting Abbasid attempts to restrain them. From Khorasan, Tahir’s family represented an existential threat to the caliphate.

Internal problems continued under al-Mu’tasim (833 – 842), the successor to al-Ma’mun, who replaced undependable tribal armies with mamluks. The mamluks played an increasingly important role in the fate of the caliphate. They were part of an elite slave system that imported young boys from various backgrounds, though usually Turkic, and trained them in the military arts. Because the enslavement of Muslims was not permitted in Islam, caliphs obtained slaves by raiding outside of the Islamic world or by trading for them. Indoc­trinated at a young age, mamluks remained loyal to their leaders, serving as their personal bodyguard. Once emancipated, however, they entered into a contractual relationship with their former masters and benefited from certain property and marriage rights. Although often portrayed as slaves in the popular imagination, mamluks actually formed a proud caste of soldiers who considered themselves superior to the rest of society. As the elite bodyguards to the caliph, they supplanted the traditional ethnic hierarchy of the ‘Abbasids, a shift which led to much class conflict often resulting in unrest and civil disturbances. In order to remove the mamluks from the volatile situation in Baghdad, the caliph moved the capital to Samarra, some 60 miles to the north, a measure that only delayed the inevitable, as subsequent caliphs could not control the rising tensions that resulted in social instability and contributed to the decentralization and fragmentation of the empire.

The transition from tribal armies to mamluks had profound repercussions for the ‘Abbasids. Mamluks like Ahmad ibn Tulun (835 – 884), a slave from Circassia, most exemplified this pattern of decentralization and fragmentation that had disastrous consequences for the ‘Abbasid Caliphate. He had been sent by the ‘Abbasids to Egypt in order to restructure and strengthen it on their behalf. An intellectual and religious person, ibn Tulun founded schools, hospitals, and mosques in Egypt, the most famous being

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**Figure 8.15 | Mamluk Lancers on Horseback**

Author: Nick Michael  
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the eponymous ibn Tulun Mosque. However, he saw weakness back in Baghdad, as the ‘Abbasids suffered from instability, including palace intrigue, disorderly *mamluks*, and revolts like the Zanj Rebellion, a slave rebellion that threatened the fate of the caliphate. The ‘Abbasids could not control ibn Tulun, and, as the caliphate broke down, he managed to secure almost complete autonomy from Baghdad. By the end of his reign, he was so independent that he kept his own tax revenue and raised his own *mamluk* army, for he, too, depended militarily and politically on his loyal *mamluks* to stay in power.

Ibn Tulun’s autonomy in Egypt portended the decline of the ‘Abbasids, whose real authority came to an end in 945. The Buyids, an Iranian dynasty, overthrew the ‘Abbasids and relegated them to the status of mere religious figureheads; the caliphate continued in name only. Following the collapse of the Abbasids, the centralization and political unity of the lands formerly under their control broke down; however, economic, cultural, and religious unity remained.

8.11 THE FATIMID CALIPHATE

While Egypt grew increasingly independent of Baghdad under the Tulunids, the rule of the ‘Abbasids over their broad empire generally declined. From this vacuum of power, the Fatimids (910 – 1171) emerged. Members of the Isma’ili sect of Shi’a Islam, the Fatimids traced their genealogy
to the relationship between Fatima, the Prophet’s daughter, and ‘Ali. Isma‘ilis believe that the divinely ordained spiritual leadership of the Islamic community, or caliphate, descended from ‘Ali down to Isma‘il, the son of Jafar al-Sadiq. They refused to recognize the legitimacy of the ‘Abbasids and sought to convert the masses of Sunnis to their own schismatic brand of Islam. To do so, Isma‘ili missionaries spread out to the far flung fringes of the empire and preached a religious revolution. These emissaries achieved their greatest success in the North African Maghreb.

‘Abd Allah al-Mahdi, founder of the Fatimids, proclaimed himself the mahdi, the precursor to the final judgement, representing an ideology that compelled people to change. Hounded by ‘Abbasid agents of persecution who sought to uphold Sunni orthodoxy, he fled from his family’s homeland in Syria and, disguised as an ordinary merchant, traveled westward through the Maghreb to Sijilmasa, where he went into hiding. In 909, local Isma‘ili missionaries rescued him from Sijilmasa. By 920, he had consolidated power and made his capital at Mahdiya, located in present day Tunisia. As the mahdi and a catalyst for change, he converted tribal troops and inspired them to fight on his behalf. ‘Abd Allah al-Mahdi endowed the Fatimids with a new ‘asabiyah, providing them with the unity of purpose necessary to defeat the ‘Abbasids in North Africa. Within forty years, ‘Abd Allah al-Mahdi had conquered the whole of Northwest Africa. He aimed his expansion at Egypt but failed to seize it. His grandson, al-Mu‘izz, however, succeeded in this aim.

Al-Mu‘izz (953 – 975) used a combination of mamluk and tribal armies to capture Egypt in 969. Rather than contend with older, possibly rebellious cities like Alexandria, al-Mu‘izz founded Cairo, the City of the Conqueror. He developed Cairo into the preeminent cultural and economic center of the Islamic world, taking over from a Baghdad in decline. Al-Mu‘izz established al-Azhar, the largest and most famous mosque in Egypt, which also served as a religious center that focused on the theological development of Shi‘a Islam. Once in power, the Fatimids changed the official state religion of Egypt from Sunni orthodoxy to Shi‘a heterodoxy, though the majority of the population in Egypt remained Sunni Muslims.

Al-Hakim (991 – 1021) ascended to the throne of his father, al-‘Aziz, at the age of eleven. As a young man, he quickly displayed a pattern of unpredictable behavior. Just four years after taking command of the empire, he had his regent, the eunuch Barjawan, murdered. Additionally, al-Hakim earned a place in infamy by targeting Christians and Jews, worsening the generally amiable relations with the People of the Book that the Fatimids had previously enjoyed. For
instance, in 1004, al-Hakim prohibited Christians from celebrating Epiphany and Easter. He also forbade the use of wine, a prohibition which caused religious difficulties for Christians and Jews alike. In 1005, al-Hakim decreed the Law of Differentiation, requiring all of the People of the Book to prominently display religious icons indicating their particular religious adherence. In 1009, he became infuriated by some of the Orthodox Church’s religious practices and consequently razed the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in response. A few years later, he ordered the destruction of thousands of churches and synagogues in Palestine. Al-Hakim even made Western pilgrimage to the Holy Land difficult. During this period, pilgrimages to Palestine had been increasing, and many pilgrims returned home complaining of Muslim treatment of Christians in the Holy Land. His behavior towards Christians elicited a strong Western reaction, for Europeans used his conduct as a way to encourage support for the Crusades.

Around the year 1010, Muhammad ad-Darazi, an Isma‘ili preacher, began teaching that al-Hakim was a manifestation of God. Ad-Darazi believed that universal rationality was made incarnate in the person of Adam and then passed down through the prophets to the family of ‘Ali and his descendants, including the Fatimids. His doctrines eventually spread to the Levant, where these ideas found reception amongst the Druze, a cognate of Darazi, although they viewed Ad-Darazi as a heretic. A follower of Isma‘ilism, al-Hakim did not want to be associated with ad-Darazi and his teachings, so he had the preacher executed in 1018.

Al-Hakim continued his tendency to display erratic behavior when he walked out into the desert in 1021 and never returned. While his disappearance has remained a mystery for the ages, those who worshiped the caliph believe that he went into Occultation, later to return as the messianic mahdi.
8.12 THE CRUSADES

In 1071, the Great Seljuq Empire, under the leadership of Alp Arslan, defeated the Byzantines at the Battle of Manzikert, near Lake Van, taking the Eastern Roman Emperor, Romanus I, prisoner in the process. This defeat was crushing for the Byzantines, allowing waves of Turkmen ghazis, or raiders, to press deep into the heartland of Anatolia, eventually establishing the Sultanate of Rum, with its capital at Nicaea. A series of weak emperors succeeded Romanus I with Alexios Komnenos (1081 – 1108) eventually ascending to the throne ten years later. As the new emperor, he made peace with the Seljuqs of Rum, and the two states eventually adopted cordial relations. They began to trade with each other and even lent one another military support when needed. Alexius needed this military support in order to secure his borders from groups of Turkic marauders. To that end, he appealed to Pope Urban II (1088 – 1099) for help recruiting mercenary soldiers, namely Frankish knights. An effective cavalry, the Frankish knights had earned an impressive reputation for how they acquitted themselves on the battlefield.

Meanwhile, European leaders had been searching for creative ways of expelling society’s troublemakers and were not averse to sending their soldiers abroad, for the region was suffering from overpopulation and endemic violence. They believed that it was better for the martial groups in their society to fight against the Muslims than amongst themselves. In this way, the Crusades externalized continental violence and promoted European peace.

In 1095, Urban II launched the first crusade from Clermont, a city in southern France. He had benefited from recent church reforms, renewed religious fervor, and a concomitant increase in papal power. While traveling through France, he made an argument for the recovery of the Holy Land: because it belonged to Jesus, it should be controlled by his followers. He also appealed to the greatness of the Franks, promising potential pilgrims a land flowing with milk, honey, and riches. And he offered them well-designed spiritual rewards. For example, salvation applied to those who died on campaign, and anyone who invested in a crusade secured themselves a place in heaven.

The Crusades started in 1096 and were part of a larger process whereby Muslims ceded territory to non-Muslims, sometimes permanently. Provoked by al-Hakim’s treatment of Christians in the Holy Land, as well as the Turkic invasion of Anatolia, Europeans commenced several centuries’ worth of armed crusades against the Muslim states of the eastern Mediterranean and North Africa. Save for the first crusade, in which the Christians established the Crusader states of Edessa, Antioch, Tripoli, and the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem, all of their campaigns ended in disaster. In fact, they were either looting expeditions or responses to the loss of Crusader states to Muslims. The success that the Latin knights did enjoy related to not only the political fragmentation of the Seljuqs in the eastern Mediterranean, but also the general disinterest of the Fatimid Caliphate in Egypt, which had been dealing with both the repercussions of a religious schism and the consequences of famine and plague. Slow to respond to the challenge posed by the Christians, the Fatimids watched the Crusaders from afar with indifference.

The Muslim counterattack eventually came under the direction of Salah al-Din (Saladin) (d. 1193), a unifier of various Muslim factions in the eastern Mediterranean. An ethnic Kurd, he hailed
from a family of soldiers of fortune in the employ of the Zengid Dynasty’s Nur al-Din, a vassal of the Seljuq Turks. Salah al-Din set off in his twenties to fight battles for his uncle, Shirkuh, a Zengid general. A dynamic leader and tactician, he helped his uncle dispatch with the Fatimid opposition in Egypt and solidified Nur al-Din’s rule there. His uncle dying soon thereafter, Salah al-Din eventually became the vizier, or senior minister, to Nur al-Din in 1169. For five years, Salah al-Din ruled Egypt on behalf of Nur al-Din. Then Nur al-Din died in Damascus in 1174, leaving no clear successor.

### 8.12.1 The Ayyubid Sultanate

In the absence of a formal heir to Nur al-Din, Salah al-Din established the Ayyubid Dynasty (1171 – 1260), named after his father, Ayyub, a provincial governor for the Zengid Dynasty, a family of Oghuz Turks who served as vassals of the Seljuq Empire. Once in power, Salah al-Din established a Sunni government and insisted that the mosque of al-Azhar preach his brand of Islam. He used the concept of *jihad* to unify the Middle East under the banner of Islam in order to defeat the
Christians, but he did not principally direct jihad towards them. A champion of Sunni Islam, he believed that his religion was being threatened mainly from within by the Shi’a. Like most of their predecessors, the Ayyubids also benefited from tribal ‘asabiyah, or dynastic consensus. Ayyubid ‘asabiyah included a Kurdish heritage, as well as a strong desire to return to Sunni orthodoxy. It was as champions of Sunni Islam that they purposely recruited leading Muslim scholars from abroad, ultimately culminating in Egypt becoming the preeminent state in the Islamic world.

Initially, Salah al-Din displayed no particular interest in the Crusader states. He had clashed with the Crusaders, and King Baldwin IV of Jerusalem; also, Raynald de Chântillon even had handed him a rare defeat at the Battle of Montgisard in 1177. But the Crusaders ultimately brokered an armistice with Salah al-Din. Eventually, Raynald broke their truce when he started attacking Muslim pilgrims and trade caravans in the 1180s. Ensuing skirmishes between the forces of Salah al-Din and Guy de Lusignan, the new King of Jerusalem, presaged a forthcoming battle. In 1187, the two sides met near Tiberias, in modern day Israel. Salah al-Din intentionally attacked the fortress of Tiberius in order to lure the Crusaders away from their well-watered stronghold. His plan worked, and the Christians quickly ran out of water. On the night before the battle, Salah al-Din set brush fires to exacerbate their thirst. He coerced the parched Latin Knights down through the Horns of Hattin towards the cool waters of Lake Tiberius. Salah al-Din bottlenecked the Crusader forces, with the double hill of Hattin acting as a choke point.
The Battle of Hattin represented a smashing victory for Salah al-Din and a major loss for the Crusaders. Tradition dictated that Salah al-Din hold most of the leaders for ransom. Unlike the Crusaders, he treated the defenders of cities with understanding. He showed tolerance of minorities, and even established a committee to partition Jerusalem amongst all the interested religious groups. In this way, he proved his moral superiority to the Crusaders.

With most of their important leaders either killed in battle or captured, no unified Christian leadership remained to fight against Salah al-Din. Deprived of the backbone of their organization, the Crusaders were left with only a few defenseless fortresses along the coast. Salah al-Din pressed his advantage. Increasingly isolated and relying on ever dwindling numbers of Latin Christians willing to remain permanently in the Holy Land, the Latin Crusaders were eventually expelled from the region in 1291.

Although Salah al-Din had maintained direct control over Egypt, he intentionally distributed control over wide swaths of the empire to loyal vassals and family members, whose governance became increasingly autonomous from Cairo. Salah al-Din’s sons and grandsons, who did not have the same ability as their forefather, had trouble managing an increasingly decentralized empire. Widespread mamluk factionalism and family disputes over the control of territory contributed to the weakening of the sultanate. In this vacuum of power, the mamluks came to the fore.

8.13 THE MAMLUK SULTANATE

The year was 1249, and Louis IX’s seventh crusade had just gotten underway when as-Salih, the last Ayyubid ruler, took to his deathbed. Under the eminent threat of a Crusader invasion, as-Salih’s wife, Shajar al-Durr, a Turkish concubine, agreed to take over the reins of government until her son, Turanshah, could assert himself. But he had never truly gained the trust of his father, and a cabal of mamluks loyal to as-Salih murdered Turanshah. They then raised Shajar al-Durr to the throne. Her rule resulted in much controversy and suffered from many internal problems. According to tradition, she sought recognition as sultana from the figurehead ‘Abbasid Caliph, but he refused to pay homage to her. The mamluks responded by installing into power one of their own, a certain Aybak. He married Shajar al-Durr, and she abdicated the throne. The most powerful mamluk in Egypt, Aybak placated some of the opposition to Shajar al-Durr’s rule and also dealt with Louis IX’s crusade to Egypt. While mamluks did not possess a tribal ‘asabiyah in the traditional sense, they did constitute a proud caste of elite warriors who had an exaggerated sense of group solidarity. As a social group, their former status as slaves provided them with enough group cohesion to overthrow the Ayyubids.

Shajar al-Durr remained unsatisfied in her new role, however. In fact, she saw herself as another Cleopatra and wanted to rule in her own right. She also feared the consequences of Aybak’s potential marriage alliance with the daughter of the Ayyubid Emir of Mosul. In 1257, Shajar al-Durr had Aybak strangled and claimed that he had died a natural death. However, Qutuz, a leading mamluk, did not believe her story. Under duress, her servants confessed to the murder. Qutuz arrested Shajar al-Durr and imprisoned her in the Red Tower. Not long thereafter, Aybak’s fifteen year old son, al-Mansur ‘Ali, had Shajar al-Durr stripped and beaten to death. He
reigned as sultan for two years until Qutuz deposed him, as he thought the sultanate needed a strong and capable ruler to deal with the looming Mongol threat.

The Mamluk Sultanate appeared to be on a collision course with Hulagu’s Ilkhanate, one of Mongol Empire’s four khanates, whose forces were advancing through the Mamluk-held Levant. Then in the summer of 1260, the Great Khan Möngke died and Hulagu returned home with the bulk of his forces to participate in the required khuriltai, or Mongol assembly, perhaps expecting
to be elected the next Great Khan. Hulagu left his general Kitbuqa behind with a smaller army to fight the Mamluks. In July of that year, a confrontation took place at Ayn Jalut, near Lake Tiberias. During the ensuing battle, the Mamluk General Baybars drew out the Mongols with a feigned retreat. Hiding behind a hill, Aybak’s mamluk heavy cavalrymen ambushed the unsuspecting Mongols and defeated them in close combat, securing a rare victory over the Mongols. The Mamluks captured and executed Kitbuqa, and forced the remnants of the Mongol forces to retreat.

Just days after their signal victory over the Mongols, Baybars (1260 – 1277) murdered Qutuz, continuing a pattern of rule in which only the strongest Mamluk rulers could survive. Too clever to be deposed, Baybars developed a strong military oligarchy that rested on the iqta’ system, a centralized system of land tenure based on money that, by the thirteenth century, had been perfected in Egypt. Under the iqta’ system, individual mamluks received a percentage of profit from the sale of crops for their upkeep. Baybars owned all of the land, so mamluks only received the right to collect taxes from the land, a right akin to usufruct in feudal Europe.

Baybars relocated the ‘Abbasid Caliph from Baghdad to Cairo in order to present a veneer of legitimacy to mamluk rule. Since the Ptolemys, Egypt had been ruled by foreigners. In fact, the only impact native-born Egyptians had was in religion. The Mamluk Sultanate practiced Sunni Islam and emphasized Sufism. Sufis believed that traditional, orthodox Islam lacked compassion, and their Sufism helped conversion efforts because of its emphasis on love and making a closer connection to God, as opposed to a strict adherence to the dictates of the Quran. Sufis desired something more from religion and emphasized integrating the reality of God into man. Sufis thought that they could achieve a union with God based on love, a notion that contrasted sharply with the general perception of orthodox Islam which denied believers a direct experience to God because Muhammad represented the Seal of the Prophets and all understanding of God came through the prophet. They set up new religious schools to pass on this Sufism. These madrasa consisted of a complex, with a mosque, school, hospital, and water supply for each community.

The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries witnessed the decline of the Mamluk Empire. Several internal and external factors help explain their decline. Domestically, the Black Death ravaged Egypt for years. In fact, it continued in North Africa longer than it did in Europe. This plague caused economic disruption in the sultanate. With fewer people available, labor, or human capital, became much more expensive. Further, plague-related inflation destabilized the economy, as the value of goods and services also rose. The mamluks responded to inflationary pressures by increasing taxes, but their revenue from those taxes actually decreased. This decrease made it difficult for the mamluks to maintain their irrigation networks and, without irrigation, agricultural productivity decreased.

Externally, plague was not the only cause of inflation. Columbus’s discovery of the New World began a process in which gold began filtering through Europe and into North Africa. Egypt’s weak economy could not absorb this massive influx of money, thus causing more inflation. New trade routes, like the one pioneered by Vasco de Gama, offered Europeans direct sea routes to Asia. No longer was Egypt the middleman for long-distance trade between Europe and Asia, thereby losing out on valuable revenue from tariffs. The profits from commerce transferred to the ascending states of Portugal and Spain. The decline of the Mamluks set the stage for the rise of the Ottomans.
8.14 CONCLUSION

A contemporary historian who served the Mamluk Sultanate, Ibn Khaldun astutely recognized the applicability of his Cyclical Theory of History to the evolution of Islamic history during the period covered in this chapter. By the eighth century, Islam became the predominant social and political unifier of the Middle East. And for the next nine hundred years, various caliphates used family and religion as tools to rule the region. However, these caliphates faced religiously-inspired revolts that challenged their authority. Quelling these revolts weakened the regimes, often leading to greater decentralization and the fragmentation of empires. Into these vacuums of power, new families armed with tribal ‘asabiyah and a novel religious ideology came forth to supplant a once dominant group who had succumbed to the wiles of civilization and whose influence gradually waned in the face of insurgent desert peoples.

8.15 WORKS CONSULTED AND FURTHER READING


8.16 LINKS TO PRIMARY SOURCES

Ancient Accounts of Arabia 430 BCE – 550 CE
https://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/arabia1.asp

Ibn Ishaq (d. c. 773 CE): Selections from the Life of Muhammad
https://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/muhmadi-sira.asp

The Prophet Muhammad: Last Sermon
https://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/muhm-sermon.asp

Muhammad Speaks of Allah
Muhammad’s Call
Muhammad is the Messenger of God
Muhammad Proclaims the Prescriptions of Islam
  http://www.mircea-eliade.com/from-primitives-to-zen/122.html
The Sunnah, (traditions of the Prophet Muhammad), excerpts
  https://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/sunnah-horne.asp
Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058 – 1111 CE): The Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife
  https://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/alghazali.asp
The Battle of Badr, 624 CE
Al-Baladhuri: The Battle of The Yarmuk (636 CE) and After
  https://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/yarmuk.asp
Accounts of the Arab Conquest of Egypt, 642 CE
  https://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/642Egypt-conq2.asp
Yakut: Baghdad under the Abbasids, c. 1000 CE
  https://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/1000baghdad.asp
  https://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/masoudi.asp
The Seven Voyages of Sinbad the Sailor story from the Thousand and One Nights
  http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/lang1k1/tale15.htm
Ibn Rushd (Averroës) (1126 – 1198 CE): Religion & Philosophy, c. 1190 CE.
  https://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/1190averroes.asp
Firdausi: The Epic of Kings, c. 1000 CE
  http://classics.mit.edu/Ferdowsi/kings.html
Sa’di (1184 – 1292 CE): Gulistan, 1258 CE
  http://classics.mit.edu/Sadi/gulistan.html
## 9.1 CHRONOLOGY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>200,000 – 100,000 BP</td>
<td>First behaviorally modern human emerged in Africa (Before Present)</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 7000 BCE</td>
<td>Beginnings of the Agricultural Revolution in Africa</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 3000 BCE – 1500 CE</td>
<td>The Bantu expansions</td>
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<tr>
<td>900s BCE</td>
<td>Rule of Queen Makeda (Ethiopia)</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 800 BCE – 300 CE</td>
<td>Kingdom of Da’amat (Ethiopia)</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 250 BCE</td>
<td>Founding of Djenne-Jeno, one of Africa’s first cities (Western Sudan)</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 100 – 950 CE</td>
<td>The Empire of Aksum</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 300 CE</td>
<td>Ghana emerged as a state (Western Sudan)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 325 – 350 CE</td>
<td>The rule of King Ezana (Aksum/Ethiopia)</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 800 CE</td>
<td>Ghana became an empire (Western Sudan)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1000 – 1500 CE</td>
<td>Height of Swahili society (East Africa)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1200 – 1450 CE</td>
<td>Height of Great Zimbabwe (southern Africa/ Zimbabwe Plateau)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1235 CE</td>
<td>Sundiata Keita founded the Mali Empire (Western Sudan)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1324 – 1325 CE</td>
<td>Mansa Musa performed the hajj (Western Sudan)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Early 1400s CE</td>
<td>Portuguese began to explore the Atlantic coast of West Africa; beginnings of the Age of Exploration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1460s CE</td>
<td>Sunni Ali built the Songhai Empire (Western Sudan)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1493 – 1528 CE</td>
<td>Askia the Great ruled during the Golden Age of the Songhai Empire (Western Sudan)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early 1500s CE</td>
<td>The Portuguese built a Trading Post Empire in the Indian Ocean (East Africa)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1591 CE</td>
<td>Moroccans invaded the Songhai Empire (Western Sudan)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1699 CE</td>
<td>The Omanis (allied with some Swahili rulers) seized Swahili city-states from the Portuguese (East Africa)</td>
</tr>
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CHAPTER 9: AFRICAN HISTORY TO 1500

9.2 INTRODUCTION

Adventurously sailing the Indian Ocean in the early 1500s CE, Duarte Barbosa, a Portuguese naval officer, was confident that he was helping to forge a new, enduring era of Portuguese dominance. As he passed through several Swahili city-states on the East African coast, Barbosa noted the brisk trade and the riches of these African settlements where he saw a “great plenty of gold” that would serve Portuguese interests.¹ In his mind, God had destined these stashes of gold for the Portuguese and the local Swahili rulers acted unwisely and arrogantly to defend themselves. In the conflict that followed, the Portuguese plundered the Swahili city-states, burning buildings and enslaving African men and women. Barbosa boasted that when the Portuguese looted the settlements, they slaughtered many people and took a “great spoil of gold and silver and goods.”² Barbosa’s description highlights the violence of Portuguese conquest and also his expectation that he and his countrymen were creating a new Portuguese empire that would make a lasting mark in East Africa and the wider Indian Ocean world. However, less than 100 years later, Portuguese influences were noticeably absent in most of East Africa and their power in the Indian Ocean was fading rapidly. Barbosa, himself, had traveled with his brother-in-law, Ferdinand Magellan, and met an untimely end (in his early 40s) in the Philippines.

Writing about the coast of East Africa, Barbosa paid little heed to the hundreds of years of Swahili history that preceded his visit. Therefore, his narrative gives us minimal information about Swahili civilization. This chapter will fill in some of the silences in the written historical record as it describes Africa’s major contributions to World History.

Since information readily available in the U.S. tends to focus on issues like drought, famine, and war, Americans have many common misconceptions about Africa. In addition to associating Africa with extreme hardships, a plethora of western-made TV shows focus on wildlife and the rainforests. However, these popular images don’t give an accurate portrayal of the everyday experiences of most Africans or tell us much about the history of the continent.

One of the main points glossed over by these popular images is that the African continent is large and diverse. Africa is the second largest continent in the world. Today, it has over 50 independent countries. You can also find just about every imaginable environment, from savannahs, rainforests, and deserts, to glaciers and snow-capped mountains in Africa. Its over 1,000 languages (or about one-third of the world’s languages) also demonstrate the continent’s diversity. Africa is home to more than a billion people, who are living, working, and raising their families.
Historically, Africans faced significant environmental challenges that limited population growth. There are exceptions, but overall, African soils are poor and rainfall has been unpredictable. Soils are comparatively unfertile, due in part to the geologic age of the continent. Also, the more temperate climates in a number of regions slows the decomposition of organic materials in the soil, meaning that the soil in many regions has few minerals and nutrients. The areas that are exceptions, such as the highlands of Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Burundi, have seen much higher population concentrations. Rainfall also tends to be concentrated in just two or three months a year, while disease has been yet another challenge.

Considering the past 5,000 years of African history, malaria, yellow fever, and trypanosomiasis (also known as sleeping sickness) have made the biggest impacts on population growth and settlement patterns. Even today, all three diseases affect the continent. Both malaria and yellow fever are spread to people by mosquitoes. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), despite preventative measures and great efforts to extend the availability of treatments, malaria was responsible for almost 600,000 deaths in 2013. Children in Africa account for most of the fatalities, and the WHO estimates that currently one African child dies from malaria every minute of every day.4 Those who have suffered through malaria multiple times as adults will attest that malaria, with the exception of its most virulent strains like *Plasmodium falciparum*, is usually more of a nuisance than an emergency for healthy adults. It causes symptoms like headaches, fever, and chills. Even though it does not usually constitute a medical emergency for adults, malaria does decrease productivity and has significant treatment costs. On the other hand, yellow fever has a high mortality rate—about 50%—even amongst healthy adult populations.5 While malaria and yellow fever have historically taken the

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largest toll on human populations, one of the main effects of **trypanosomiasis** (or sleeping sickness) has been to limit the practicality of keeping certain types of livestock in Africa. Horses and many breeds of cattle are especially susceptible to trypanosomiasis, which is spread by the tsetse fly and can lead to either chronic illness, characterized by weight loss, fever, anemia, cardiac lesions, and other symptoms in animals, or to a more immediate death. Until the past fifty years or so, in many parts of the continent, these noteworthy challenges with disease, alongside the low fertility of the soils and the unpredictable rainfalls, were significant constraints on human population growth. Environmental challenges and disease also affected settlement patterns as, for example, people avoided more forested and wetter areas because of the prevalence of mosquitoes. Additionally, Africans continuously adapted their herding and farming techniques to overcome these challenges.

**9.3 QUESTIONS TO GUIDE YOUR READING**

1. Describe the environments of Africa.

2. Which environmental challenges and diseases have historically limited population growth in Africa?

3. Discuss the methodological challenges of studying Ancient and Medieval African History.

4. Identify commonly used terms that are potentially problematic for scholars of Africa. Explain why these terms are potentially problematic.

5. What was distinctive about the agriculture of the Ethiopian Highlands?

6. Explain the legend of Queen Makeda and King Solomon and why it remains significant for Ethiopians.

7. How were the states in this region shaped by trade and inter-cultural relationships?

8. Describe the spread of Christianity into Aksum.

9. What characteristics were shared by the Western Sudanic States?

10. How did the location of the Western Sudanic states have an impact on their history?

11. Describe the relationship between the Western Sudanic States and the Islamic World.

12. How did nineteenth century European scholars depict the Bantu Migration? What factors influenced their view?

13. How have post-colonial scholars challenged nineteenth century depictions of the Bantu Migration?
14. How did the ruling classes of Great Zimbabwe generate wealth and demonstrate their elite status?

15. How are oral traditions, such as the one recounted here about Kilwa Kisiwani, important to Swahili identity?

16. Describe the urban style of Swahili city-states.

17. Compare the trans-Atlantic and Indian Ocean slave trades.

18. How did the Portuguese impact the East African coast?

### 9.4 KEY TERMS

- African diaspora
- Aksum
- Bantu expansions
- Bantu Migration
- Catalan Atlas
- Ghana
- Great Zimbabwe
- griots
- Indian Ocean World
- *Kebra Nagast*
- Kingdom of Da’amat
- King Ezana
- malaria
- Mali Empire
- mansa
- Mansa Musa
- monsoon winds
- Queen Mekeda
- Sahel
- Songhai Empire
- stelae
- Sundiata Keita
- Swahili city-states
- syncretism
- Timbuktu
- Trading Post Empire
- tribe
- trypanosomiasis
- Western Sudan
- yellow fever
- Zanj Rebellion

### 9.5 WRITING THE HISTORY OF ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL AFRICA

Scholars of Africa, particularly those working in the last two generations, have employed all sorts of methods to describe the ancient African past. They have necessarily been on the forefront of methodological innovation because of the limited availability of written primary sources, meaning sources recorded by ancient Africans themselves. Therefore, scholars have turned to a wide range of materials to complement the available written records.
Before about 1800 CE, many African societies kept their records orally, as opposed to in written form. These societies have rich, complex histories that some past historians, relying primarily on written records, ignored when they studied the African continent.

The professionalization of the study of history in the West (meaning primarily in Europe and the United States), which entailed the transition from writing about the past out of personal interest to writing about the past as a profession with established methodologies, mainly occurred in the 1800s. European and American views of Africans during that era were generally derogatory and prejudiced. These nineteenth century professional scholars tended to portray Africans as primitive, meaning unchanged from time immemorial. Western methodologies, with their reliance on written sources, backed up European views of Africans as unchanged. Two general results of the nineteenth century scholarship in the West were the assumptions that Africa, which was commonly referred to as “the dark continent,” lacked a history prior to European arrival on the continent and that any urban developments or complex state structures in Africa were the achievements of outsiders. For example, as you will see in this chapter, there were nineteenth century European scholars who credited people from Yemen with building the Axum trading empire and attributed the archaeological findings at Great Zimbabwe to Phoenicians. Especially since the 1960s, there has been a strong movement to reclaim these (and other) developments as African. As part of this effort, scholars employ new methodologies, including the study of oral sources, archaeology, climate change, linguistics (the study of languages), and paleoarchaobotany (the study of ancient plant materials), to gain more accurate, multi-faceted information about the African past.

Perhaps most contested and also potentially the most revealing are the available oral sources. Many ancient African societies had special people tasked with orally transmitting official histories and preserved traditions. For example, griots in parts of West Africa memorized chronologies, cultural traditions, and legal precedence to advise kings and state leaders. Griots also traveled and performed theater and praise-songs throughout empires to spread cultural values and communicate news from governments. Griots held honored places in their societies, reflecting their importance to both rulers and people’s everyday lives. Locally produced proverbs and oral teachings also played vital roles in many ancient African societies. Additionally, African communities honored older generations for their knowledge of the past, leading Amadou Hampate Ba, a famous author from Mali, to write, “In Africa, when an old man dies, it’s a library burning.” These examples are just some of the ways that ancient peoples used oral traditions. Since the 1960s, scholars of Africa have recognized the importance of studying these oral sources as they convey a great deal of information about the past. Using oral sources is not without its challenges, but their inclusion has broadened the scholarly understanding of African societies.

### 9.5.1 Terminology

Especially due to nineteenth-century tendencies to portray Africans as inferior, current scholars of Africa have a whole host of stereotypes to correct. One of the main stereotypes they
encounter is the common perception that African societies are timeless, that they have not changed in hundreds or thousands of years. The movie *The Gods Must Be Crazy* encapsulates this stereotype. *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (1980) is a fictional account that follows the San people in the Kalahari Desert in southern Africa. The movie portrays the San as untouched by and unaware of the modern world until one member of their community finds a Coke bottle discarded from an airplane. In the movie, adventure ensues.

Movies, television shows, and other media often show us an Africa that is rural, a landscape dominated by wild animals, and a continent isolated from the rest of the modern world. However, these images do not accurately represent the continent in either our present time or the past. In 2010, one-third of Africa’s population lived in cities, and it is likely that one-half of Africa’s population will be urban dwelling by 2030.\(^7\) Lagos (Nigeria) is Africa’s largest city south of the Sahara Desert, with population experts estimating that it is home to 21 million people. With this estimate, Lagos is on a par size-wise with cities like Beijing, Cairo, and Mexico City. Urbanization on this scale is a fairly recent phenomena. However, this chapter will introduce you to some Medieval cities, including the famous city of Timbuktu, to discuss African urban cultures. We will also explore the trade routes that connected Africa to much of the world, emphasizing that Africa has been connected to the Arabian Peninsula, Asia, and Europe for millenia.

Even if we do not intend it to, some of the language that we use on an everyday basis can perpetuate assumptions that Africa is isolated or behind the rest of the world. One example of a potentially problematic term is “tribe.” As African historian Christopher Ehret has pointed out, the use of “tribe” in reference to Africans often carries the underlying judgement that the people who are “tribal” are exotic, wild, backwards, and potentially dangerous. In common usage, “tribesmen” are not modern citizens of nation-states, but instead remnants of the past. To highlight the descriminatory use of the term, Ehret asks us to consider why African wars are often referred to as “tribal” wars instead of as the civil wars they actually are, and,

...Why is Shaka, the famous nineteenth-century ruler, called the king of the Zulu “tribe” when he was actually the king of a centralized and military powerful state? Why are Africans in “traditional” dress said to be engaging in “tribal” dancing, when Europeans garbed similarly in the clothes of an earlier time are said to be performing “folk” dances?\(^8\)

Ehret makes the case that the way that we commonly use “tribe” perpetuates a lot of the negative stereotypes Europeans had of Africa in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, many historians question the idea that African “tribes” even existed prior to European colonization of the continent one hundred and fifty years ago. Instead, scholars discuss much more fluid, adaptive, or inclusive ethnic identities and suggest that nineteenth century Europeans tried to harden divisions and create “tribes” to suit their own administrative purposes. Dismissing Africans as “tribal” also allowed European to legitimize the trans-Atlantic slave trade (in the fifteenth through nineteenth centuries) and colonization of the continent (in the nineteenth

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century). Today, people often fall back on “tribe” and “tribal” instead of trying to understand the complexities of African politics and social organization.

There are a handful of other terms that modern scholars scrutinize to show that they are based on similar prejudices. Two such terms are “stateless society” and “bushman.” Many written sources from the nineteenth century produced by Europeans did not recognize the existence of states in Africa that had more democratic, less centralized, or less hierarchical leadership structures. These written sources assumed that all states had kings or other centralized authority figures. They denied the existence of states organized in other ways. Some African societies were centralized under the rule of monarchs, but others used, for example, councils of elders, had more decentralized, egalitarian systems, or relied on age-sets to mobilize labor and manage government affairs. These latter examples had functioning governmental structures, but nineteenth century Europeans usually did not recognize these alternative forms of state organization and claimed that Africans were incapable of ruling themselves without European intervention. The use of the phrase “stateless society” was one way that Europeans claimed to be more advanced and thus destined to colonize Africa in the nineteenth century.

According to this same nineteenth-century ideology, the “bushmen” and “pygmies” of Africa were hopelessly behind and isolated from modern times. The San people featured in The Gods Must Be Crazy are an example of a society sometimes referred to as “bushman.” Scholars now consider “bushmen” and “pygmy” to be derogatory when used in reference to Africans because of the history of the terms. Over the past two hundred years, the terms have been coupled with assumptions of a lack of historical development, isolationism, and a lack of participation in modern economies. These assumptions do not reflect the reality of hunter-gathering societies. Instead, scholars have shown that hunter-gathering societies have long been in regular contact with pastoralists and people living in agriculturally-based societies in Africa. Most people, who in the past would have been labeled bushmen or pygmies, prefer to be referred to by their linguistic or ethnic identities in order to avoid the stigmas attached to these terms and to avoid being lumped in with people with whom they share very little. If we understand how words like tribe, stateless societies, and bushmen have been used in the past, then we can avoid perpetuating some of the problematic stereotypes about Africa.

Overall, as you read this chapter, keep in mind that Africa has been a continent of innovation and change since the first behaviorally modern humans emerged there between 200,000 and 100,000 years ago. Africans were some of the first farmers and some of the first iron-workers. Africans developed their own artistic traditions (see Figure 9.2, Map 9.3, Figure 9.3) and unique state structures. With such a big, diverse continent to consider, this chapter examines four civilizations (states of larger scale and complexity) to show major changes impacting the continent. Each of these states was also connected to the rest of the world. The chapter starts with ancient Ethiopia in Northeast Africa (300 to 700 CE) and moves to the Western Sudanic Empires in the Sahel of West Africa (800 to 1591 CE). In the second half, it discusses Great Zimbabwe (1200 to 1450 CE) and, finally, the Swahili states in East Africa (1000 to 1500 CE).
9.6 AKSUM AND ETHIOPIA

Aksum, which was at its most powerful in the fourth through sixth centuries CE, was located in what are today Ethiopia, Eritrea, and parts of Sudan. At its high point, Aksum extended its influence beyond Africa into parts of the southern Arabian Peninsula as shown on the map below. Aksum was a great trading empire, with its own coinage, its own language, and its own distinctive Christian church. If you are familiar with accounts of the Queen of Sheba, you know pieces of the story that Ethiopians use to explain the origins of the Ethiopian Solomonic Dynasty and their possession of the Ark of the Covenant. (Visit the following link to view a map of the Kingdom of Aksum: http://www.earlheinrich.com/Ancient%20Nubia/Aksum_Empr-Map-72dpi.jpg. The capital of the kingdom was the city of Aksum and its most important port was Adulis. You can see that the kingdom stretched into the Sudan and Yemen at its height in the sixth century.)

Unlike some other regions in Africa, Ethiopia had very fertile, volcanic soils that supported large populations. Climatic variation found at the different elevations throughout Ethiopia also encouraged agricultural diversification and trade. Around 7000 BCE, there was population growth in the region that corresponded with the Agricultural Revolution. While some domesticated animals and crops were introduced from Northeast Africa and the Fertile Crescent, Ethiopians...
domesticated other crops themselves. Most notably, Ethiopians domesticated teff, a grass, and nsete, known as the “false banana,” that they ground to make bread and porridge. We also have Ethiopians to thank for coffee! Since the Neolithic Revolution, Ethiopia stands out for its agricultural productivity and innovation, both of which sustained large populations in the region.

The **Kebra Nagast** (“The Glory of Kings”), a 700 year old text that is sacred for Ethiopian Christians and Rastafarians, traces the origins of the Ethiopian royal family back to the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon of Jerusalem. The **Kebra Nagast** identifies the Queen of Sheba as an Ethiopian ruler known locally as **Queen Mekeda**. According to the text, in approximately 950 BCE, the newly enthroned Queen Mekeda traveled to study with Jerusalem’s well-known king, King Solomon. Queen Mekeda wanted a capable mentor for leadership advice and spiritual guidance. Charmed by her, King Solomon played these roles and Queen Mekeda, flattered by his attentions, was a hardworking tutee who eventually converted to Judaism. As their lessons continued, King Solomon planned the seduction of Queen Mekeda, which, as described in the text, occurred when Solomon tricked and cornered her. Their sexual union produced a child, Menelik I, to whom Queen Mekeda gave birth on her journey home to Ethiopia.

As time passed, King Solomon remained haunted by a dream that Menelik was his rightful successor and was delighted when his son, as an adult, returned to Jerusalem. According to the **Kebra Nagast**, King Solomon intended for Menelik to follow him as the next king of Jerusalem, but Menelik refused and instead returned to Ethiopia. In an unexpected twist, when leaving Jerusalem, part of Menelik’s entourage stole the Ark of the Covenant, which held the Ten Commandments. When King Solomon discovered the theft, he sent soldiers to recapture the Ark of the Covenant. However according to the **Kebra Nagast**, God helped Menelik and his men evade capture by lifting them up over the Red Sea. In the end, Menelik and the Ark of the Covenant made it safely to Ethiopia. For Ethiopian Christians, the **Kebra Nagast** partially explains the formation of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (the Tawahedo Church). Through today, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church claims possession of the Ark of the Covenant, which it says is housed in the Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion in Aksum, Ethiopia.

According to the **Kebra Nagast**, early Ethiopian rulers were descendants of King Solomon through Menelik I. More than two thousand years after King Solomon’s rule, a thirteenth century Ethiopian king, Yekuno Amlak (r. 1270 – 1285 CE), reclaimed this legacy by tracing his origins back to King Solomon and Queen Mekeda. He founded what became known as the Solomonic Dynasty, which ruled Ethiopia for about 500 years from 1270 to 1769 CE. Members of...
Ethiopia’s royal family continued to claim descent from King Solomon up through the last Ethiopian emperor, Haile Selassie, who was overthrown in 1974. Therefore, the link back to King Solomon and Queen Mekeda is part of Ethiopian religious beliefs and has also legitimized claims to political power.

From the era of the rule of Queen Mekeda in about the tenth century BCE and Yekuno Amlak’s revival of the Solomonic Dynasty in the thirteenth century CE, the largest kingdoms in Ethiopia were Da’amat and Aksum. The Kingdom of Da’amat was the first to emerge in northern Ethiopia in about the tenth century BCE. In the 1960s and 1970s, archaeologists excavating the Kingdom of Da’amat unearthed evidence of the region’s role in trade and its connections to Southern Arabia. Archeological finds show that, by the seventh century BCE, ivory, tortoiseshell, rhino horn, gold, silver, and slaves were brought from interior regions of Africa and traded through Da’amat for imported cloth, tools, metals, and jewelry. Inscriptions, imagery, architectural styles, and even overlaps in historical traditions (such as those associated with the Queen of Sheba) also suggest close connections between the Kingdom of Da’amat and Saba (Yemen) in Southern Arabia. For example, the Kingdom of Da’amat used religious symbols in its monumental architecture, including the disc and
crescent, also found in Southern Arabia. The oldest standing building in Ethiopia, the Temple at Yeha (c. 700 BCE), had an altar with these symbols. Up until several decades ago, some scholars used evidence of these connections to argue that people from Saba founded the civilization at Da’amat. Now, in line with the trend to reclaim African civilizations, very vocal scholars push us to acknowledge the African origins of the Kingdom of Da’amat and view it as a precursor to the trading empire of Aksum.

The Kingdom of Da’amat weakened in the fourth century BCE as Red Sea trade became more important than some of the previous northern overland routes. It gave way to the state of Aksum, with its important cities of Adulis and Aksum. Adulis, positioned on the coast, rose in prominence and grew wealthy. It served as a safe harbor for ships traveling from Southeast Asia. The growing capital city in the interior, Aksum, was a stopover point for land-based trade routes into the Sudan and especially Sub-Saharan Africa. Ivory, slaves, tools, spices, gold, silver jewelry, copper, and iron were eventually traded through the capital city of Aksum to the coast. The state of Aksum began minting its own gold and silver coins in the third century CE, demonstrating how important long-distance trade was to its economy.

In addition to its role in inter-regional trade, Aksum was also known for its early conversion to Christianity. Ethiopian tradition traces the establishment of Christianity in the region back to two shipwrecked Syrians. One of the Syrians, Frumentius, was particularly influential because he became the first bishop of Ethiopia in 303 CE and guided the king of Aksum, **King Ezana** (r. 325 – 350 CE),
in his conversion to Christianity. Some of the coins minted in Aksum actually attest to King Ezana’s conversion as the coins from the first half of Ezana’s reign have the disc and crescent symbols of earlier Ethiopian rulers, while coins from the later decades of Ezana’s reign have a Christian cross. As bishop, Frumentius also encouraged Christian merchants to settle in Aksum. About a century later, Christianity in Ethiopia grew further as the state offered refuge to Christians fleeing persecution due to doctrinal disputes within the Church. Nine priests, breaking with the Church in Jerusalem, settled in Ethiopia and founded the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. They maintained ties with the Coptic Church in Egypt and developed a distinct liturgy using Ge’ez, the local language. Members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church also incorporated local beliefs, such as the legendary connection to King Solomon, into their religious traditions.

The ruling family, coastal elites, and military leaders amassed significant wealth during the height of Aksumite power. Like the Aksumite kings before him, Ezana amassed wealth by collecting tribute from surrounding states and taxing trade. Aksum and its surrounding states were agriculturally productive with fertile soils and effective irrigation systems. Their agricultural productivity meant that the work of peasants and the wealth generated through foreign trade supported the ruling classes and elites. Building a powerful military, King Ezana expanded the empire and claimed control over most of Ethiopia, Nubia, and Saba (Yemen). He also used his assets to showcase his power with, for example, “conquest stones” that commemorated his victories. In addition to celebrating Ezana’s military strength and commitment to ruling fairly, the “conquest stones” also proclaimed that God had ordained his reign. The stones impart Ezana’s edicts and Christian beliefs. One section reads:

\[
\text{[...]} \text{The Lord of Heaven strengthens my dominion!}
\]
\[
\text{And as he now has conquered my enemy, (so)}
\]
\[
\text{May he conquer for me, where I (but) go! As}
\]
\[
\text{he now has given me victory and has over-}
\]
\[
\text{thrown my enemies. (So will I rule) in right and justice, doing no}
\]
\[
\text{wrong to the peoples. And I placed}
\]
\[
\text{The throne, which I have set up, and the Earth}
\]
\[
\text{which bears it, in the protection of the Lord}
\]
\[
\text{of Heaven, who has made me king...}^{9}
\]

Ezana is known to us because of archaeological findings, including the aforementioned conquest stones. He and other Aksumite kings also famously commissioned the construction of stelae (singular: stele). Stelae were tall rectangular pillars with rounded tops set up to mark the underground grave sites of Aksum’s royalty and elite. The most ornate stelae were elaborately carved into a marble-like material with faux doors at the bottom and multiple stories, as indicated by windows etched into each level. They have been described as “ancient skyscrapers,” with the

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largest being one hundred and eight feet tall. Most stelae have fallen in the over 1700 years since their construction, but several do remain standing. One stele even caused international uproar as the Italians took it during their occupation of Ethiopia at the onset of the Second World War and just recently returned it at great expense.

The stelae demonstrate the wealth of Aksum’s ruling classes and links between the ruling generations. Unfortunately, the graves marked by the stelae have been cleared out by tomb robbers in the intervening years. However, small remnants of glass, pottery, furniture, beads, bangles, earrings, ivory carvings, and objects gilded in gold attest to the wealth buried with affluent Aksumites. These artifacts also show the availability of trade goods brought from long distances. Furthermore, the architecture of the stelae is suggestive of connections back to earlier kingdoms. For example, the rounded top of the stelae is reminiscent of the disc symbol found in the region as far back as the Kingdom of Da’amat. Ezana was the first Christian king in the region; however, the architecture that he commissioned maintained ties to Aksum’s pre-Christian past.

Aksum’s power began to wane at the end of the sixth century CE. First, the Persian Empire interrupted Aksum’s trade with parts of southern Arabia in the late sixth century. Then, Muslims increasingly dominated trade along the Red Sea coast and the most profitable trade routes shifted from the Red Sea to the Persian Gulf. In response, Aksum shrank as Ethiopia’s Christian rulers turned away from coastal trade and became more dependent on the tribute they collected from agriculturally productive regions to their south.

As Muslims in coastal areas became more powerful and Christian rulers shifted their attentions away from the coast, the relationship between Ethiopian Muslims and Christians remained complex. In the seventh century CE, one king of Aksum, al-Najashi Ashama Ibn Abjar, gave sanctuary to some of the first followers of Islam before he himself converted. In subsequent years, Muslims traders and Christian elites oftentimes cooperated. For example from the tenth through fourteenth centuries, Muslims set up trading settlements in the interior that facilitated the
conspicuous consumption of Christian elites who desired imported goods. However, there were also periods of conflict, especially after Muslims unified to form the Adal Sultanate in the fourteenth century. The Adal Sultanate militarily extended its influence over much of the region and for several centuries supported a thriving, multi-ethnic state. In the sixteenth century, Ethiopian Christians allied with the Portuguese to fight against the Adal Sultanate. After the fall of the Adal Sultanate, Ethiopian Christians rejected Portuguese attempts to convert them to Catholicism and forced Portuguese missionaries out of the region in 1633 CE.

9.7 THE WESTERN SUDANIC STATES

Who comes to mind as the richest person ever? Many economists and historians propose a person who might surprise you: Mansa Musa. Mansa Musa was an emperor in the Western Sudan during the Middle Ages. He was so rich that the people of his own time could not even fathom his wealth. Unable to put a dollar amount on Mansa Musa’s bewilderingly large fortune, Rudolph Ware, a current professor at the University of Michigan, instructs us to “imagine as much gold as you think a human being could possess and double it...”10 Other sources estimate that, adjusted for inflation, Mansa Musa was worth $400 billion.11 How did Mansa Musa become so wealthy? Like the other Western Sudanic rulers, he controlled much of the world’s access to gold during a period when gold was in very high demand.

Map 9.4 shows the large area in West Africa commonly referred to as the Western Sudan. The Western Sudan does not correspond with a modern-day African country; instead, it is a region. Arabic-speaking travelers gave the region its name, calling it bilad-al-Sudan or the “Land of Blacks.” The Western Sudan encompasses the Sahel and some of its surrounding grasslands from the Atlantic coast in the east through Lake Chad in the west. The Sahel, which in Arabic means “the shore,” is a transition zone between the Sahara Desert to its north and the more forested regions to its south. Much of the Sahel is grassland savannah. Straddling regions with different climates, the people of the Western Sudan developed productive agriculture, trade networks, and an urban culture. The architecture of the Western Sudanic states stands out for its use of mud (adobe) to construct its monumental buildings, such as the Great Mosque in Djenne (Figure

11 “Musa’s Money,” BBC. http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02f9r6g
From roughly 800 to 1600 CE, the people of this region organized and supported—sometimes under duress—the large states that dominated the Western Sudan. Three of the best known of these states became the empires of Ghana (800 – 1070s CE), Mali (1230s – 1430s CE), and Songhai (1460s – 1591 CE).

The leaders of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai came to dominate the region because they controlled access to West African gold. An increase in the demand for West African gold corresponded with the rise of these empires. The spread of Islam and rise of new states along the North African coast and in Europe gave the biggest boost to the demand for gold. Monarchs in Europe and North Africa wanted West African gold to mint coins. To meet the demand, Berber traders used newly introduced camels to carry gold north across the desert. Then, they loaded up their camels with big slabs of salt to return south. The people in many parts of West Africa considered salt a valuable commodity due to their distance from the ocean and the time required to extract salt from plant, animal, and other resources. While the demands for gold and salt drove the trade, weapons, manufactured goods, slaves, textiles, and manuscripts also passed through the desert. With the flow of all of these goods, the Western Sudanic states emerged at the nexus of the trans-Saharan trade routes.

The North African Berber traders crossing the Sahara Desert were early converts to Islam, and they introduced Islam to market towns of the Western Sudanic states. With continuing trade, the region’s connections with Northeast Africa and the Middle East grew through the Middle Ages. Growing urban areas, like Timbuktu, attracted Muslim scholars. In later centuries, the kings of Mali and Songhai deliberately fostered these connections with the larger Islamic World due to their religious beliefs and, sometimes, to enhance their status and secure their positions. For example, Askia Muhammad, the king of Songhai from 1495 to 1528, successfully sought recognition as the “caliph of Sudan” from Egyptian rulers. The new title brought him prestige within the Islamic world and Africa. Therefore, trans-Saharan trade brought Islam to the Western Sudan, and many of the kings of Mali and Songhai cultivated their relationships with Muslims in Northeast Africa and the Middle East. As a result, Islam influenced the culture and lifestyle, particularly of urban residents, in the Western Sudan.

### 9.7.1 Ghana

We associate the first powerful empire, Ghana (800 – 1070s CE), with people who spoke the Soninke language and lived in the area between the Niger and Senegal Rivers—parts of
present day Mauritania and Mali. In this region, agricultural productivity supported labor specialization, urban areas, and eventually state formation. From as early as 300 BCE, the region’s farmers used iron tools to grow an abundance of crops. Archaeological evidence found at Djenne-Jeno, one of the earliest urban areas in the Western Sudan, which has been dated to approximately 250 BCE, suggests that people had access to plenty of rice, millet, and vegetables. Iron technologies also allowed craftsmen to make iron spears and swords so people could protect themselves. Probably for defense purposes, Soninke speakers began joining together to form the ancient state of Ghana around 300 CE. Then, as the populations continued to grow, the state expanded its territory.

Even before Ghana was a state with a clearly defined centralized administration, Soninke speakers had been involved in extensive systems of trade using the region’s complex river systems. They often acted as middlemen, trading in fish from the rivers, meat from herders, and grains from farmers. After 300 CE, Ghanian leadership began collecting tributary payments from neighboring chiefdoms. In the centuries that followed, Ghana’s leaders used their ability to tax trade to build an empire. By 800 CE, they had consolidated their control over trade, their authority over urban areas, and their reign over tributary states.

Especially in the minds of the Arab scholars chronicling the history of this period, the gold trade defined Ghana. They heard about the large caravans with hundreds of camels passing through the Sahara Desert on their way to and from Ghana. To build their fortunes, the Ghanian kings taxed trade goods twice. They taxed gold when it was initially brought from the forested regions in the south to their market towns and again right as the Berber traders departed for the north. News of Ghana’s wealth spread to the extent that Medieval Arab scholars who had never even traveled to Africa wrote about the Ghanian kings. In one manuscript, Al-Bakri, an eleventh century geographer based in Muslim Spain, described how a Ghanian king was adorned in gold and guarded by dogs wearing gold and silver collars. According to Al-Bakri, the king demonstrated his power having his subjects “fall on their knees and sprinkle dust on their
The kings shored up their power through their ostentatious displays of gold and their monopoly over trade. Al-Bakri recognized the centrality of gold to the finances of the Ghanian kings. According to him, the kings claimed all of the gold nuggets for themselves, leaving only gold dust for everyone else. By this time, the Ghanian kings had also used their wealth to build strong armies, with archers and calvary, to collect tribute and carry out the empire’s expansion.

Al-Bakri’s depiction of Ghana’s capital city, Koumbi Saleh, also evidences the introduction of Islam to the region. He described two separate sites within the capital city, Koumbi-Saleh. To trade their wares, the merchants used one site, which was clearly Muslim with mosques, while the king lived in a royal palace six miles away. The separation between the sites and lack of mosques near the royal palace suggest that Islam had primarily impacted the market towns; the leadership and masses of Ghana did not convert.

### 9.7.2 The Mali Empire

Due to attacks from the Muslim Almoravids from the North, issues with overgrazing, and internal rebellions, Ghana declined in the eleventh century, opening up an opportunity for the rise of Mali. The origins of the Mali Empire (see Map 9.7) are associated with the king Sundiata Keita (c. 1217 – 1255 CE). An epic, recounted orally by griots for centuries and written down in various forms in the twentieth century, relates the story of Sundiata’s rise. One version written by Guinean D. T. Niani in 1960 follows Sundiata as he overcomes a number of challenges, like being unable to walk until he is seven years old, being banished by a cruel stepmother, and facing tests given by witches. With loyal followers and the attributes of a born leader, Sundiata overcomes these and other challenges in the epic to found the new empire. Under Sundiata, some of Mali’s leadership converted to Islam; however, even with conversion, they maintained important pre-Islamic traditions. The epic demonstrates the prevalence of syncretism or the blending of religious beliefs and practices in West Africa. For instance, the epic traces Sundiata’s background back to Bilali Bounama, one of the early followers of the Muslim prophet Muhammad, and the powerful pre-Islamic, local

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clans of the lion and the buffalo. According to oral tradition, Sundiata’s ability to draw from both Muslim and traditional African sources of strength allows him to overcome adversity and defeat his less worthy opponents.

Like Sundiata, most of the subsequent kings of Mali combined Muslim and local religious traditions. For example, they often completed the “Fifth Pillar” of Islam by performing the hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca required of all able Muslims. In the meanwhile, they continued to use pre-Islamic amulets, maintain their animistic beliefs, and consider pre-Islamic sacred sites to be important. Similarly, when they converted, the people living within Mali’s cities and those involved in trans-Saharan trade also blended Muslim and traditional beliefs and practices.

Sundiata built the Mali Empire in the thirteenth century and the empire reached its height under Mansa Musa (c. 1280 – 1337 CE), in the early fourteenth century. Through diplomacy and military victories, Sundiata swayed surrounding leaders to relinquish their titles to him. Thus, Sundiata established a sizeable empire with tributary states and became the 


Figure 9.9 | The Great Mosque in Djenne | The Great Mosque in Djenne demonstrates the regional architectural style of the Western Sudan. The original structure was likely built in the thirteenth century. The current mosque was rebuilt in the early twentieth century. The wooden scaffolding gives the structure support and also helps men replaster the exterior, which they do every year. The exterior of the mosque is plastered in mud (adobe).

Author: User “Ruud Zwart”
Source: Wikimedia Commons
License: CC BY-SA 3.0
in Cairo that the price of gold dropped by 25%. Likewise, reportedly after he passed through Alexandria, the value of gold in the city stayed low for a decade. Mansa Musa’s impressive display in Northeast Africa and the Middle East boosted Mali’s standing in the Islamic World. After his return to Mali, Mansa Musa further cultivated Islamic connections by building new mosques and schools. He hosted Muslim scholars and made cities, including Timbuktu, Djenne, and Gao, into centers of learning. Mansa Musa also encouraged the use of Arabic, and the libraries, especially of Timbuktu, became repositories of Islamic manuscripts. The Catalán Atlas (Figure 9.10) demonstrates Mansa Musa’s preeminence. Commissioned by Charles V of France, the 1375 map shows Mansa Musa ruling his empire. He sits atop a gold throne, wearing a gold crown, carrying a gold sceptre, and gauging (or perhaps admiring) a gold nugget. Awash in gold in the Catalán Atlas, Mansa Musa paid for his various projects by collecting tribute from surrounding states and taxing trans-Saharan and inter-regional trade.

Several factors, such as weak leadership, foreign invasions, and rebellions within the tributary states, led to the decline of Mali after Mansa Musa’s death. The empire got increasingly smaller through the early fifteenth century. With the decline of Mali, leaders in one of its breakaway tributary states, Songhai (alternatively spelled Songhay), expanded militarily and encroached on Mali’s territory. By the late 1460s when
he captured Timbuktu, Songhai’s leader Sunni Ali had begun to build a new empire, the Songhai Empire, through military conquest.

9.7.3 Songhai

The Songhai Empire is most closely associated with the Sorko people who lived alongside the Niger River, southeast of Gao. By about 800 CE, the Sorko had created their own state, Songhai, trading along the river and building a military that used war canoes. With the growth of trans-Saharan trade and eventually the discovery of new gold fields, the Sorko and other ethnic groups in the area established market towns in Songhai. Most of the people who moved to these market towns converted to Islam by the eleventh century. In the early fourteenth century, the Mali Empire collected tribute from Gao, though other parts of the Songhai state remained independent. Using his military to pick off pieces of Mali in its waning years, Sunni Ali built the Songhai state into an empire in the 1460s.

During its Golden Age, the Songhai Empire was ruled by Askia Mohammad I (r. 1493 – 1528). Referred to as Askia the Great, Askia Mohammad I was a devout Muslim, who centralized the empire’s administration, encouraged agriculture, and further expanded the state. Askia rose to power as the general-in-chief of the army of Gao. He won a military victory over Sunni Ali’s son to found a new dynasty, the Askia dynasty. As a devout Muslim, Askia went on the hajj to Mecca from 1496 – 1497. The pilgrimage brought him international recognition and reinforced his claims to power especially because the Sharif of Mecca bestowed Askia with the title “the Caliph of the Sudan.” Upon his return, Askia used Islam to validate attacks on neighboring states, like the Mossi in 1498. He also rebuilt Islamic centers. Leo Africanus, originally from Granada (Spain), traveled through Timbuktu in 1526 and wrote,

[…] There are in Timbuktu numerous judges, teachers, and priests, all properly appointed by the king. He greatly honors learning. Many hand-written books imported from Barbary [the coastal regions of North Africa] are also sold. There is more profit made from this commerce than from all other merchandise.13

Under Askia, Timbuktu, Djenne, and Gao, once again, beckoned scholars and people with commercial aspirations. Taxing gold remained an important source of revenue for the king, but trade expanded to incorporate items such as manuscripts, kola nuts, prisoners of war (who were sold as slaves), horses, and cowry shells (which were used as an internal currency). Additionally, to centralize his administration, Askia appointed loyal Muslim governors to new provinces, replacing hereditary rulers. After his death, Askia’s sons, particularly his last son, Askia Dawud (r. 1549 – 1582 CE) continued to generate wealth by taxing trans-Saharan trade. Like their father, they also tended to invest in Songhai’s Islamic centers. For example, during the reign of Dawud, there were approximately one hundred and fifty Islamic schools operating in Timbuktu. Askia Dawud’s death in 1582 saw the reemergence of power struggles amongst competing rulers and rebellions within

13 Leo Africanus: Description of Timbuktu. From The Description of Africa (1526). http://public.wsu.edu/~brians/world_civ/worldcivreader/world_civ_reader_2/leo_africanus.html
tributary states, signaling the end of the Golden Age of Songhai.

Then, the biggest blow to the crumbling Songhai Empire came from the invasion by Morocco in 1591. The Moroccan army used new technology, muzzle-loading firearms, to defeat the Songhai troops. The Songhai state limped along until 1737, but after 1591, it was no longer a unified empire with control over numerous tributary states. For almost 1,000 years, large empires had dominated the Sahel. The leaders of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai, each in turn, taxed trans-Saharan trade and grew powerful. They built their empires with urban centers, strong militaries, and numerous tributary states. However, the Moroccan invasion eroded their power. Furthermore, the Age of Exploration, begun by the Portuguese in their progress down the West Africa coast in the fifteenth century, redirected trade. Trans-Saharan trade diminished and was largely replaced by trade up and down the Atlantic coast of West Africa.

9.8 THE SPREAD OF AGRICULTURE AND GREAT ZIMBABWE

Most of the languages indigenous to Africa belong to one of the major language groups shown in Map 9.9. Over the past several decades, historians of Africa have started to pay more attention to these language groups. They use comparisons of core vocabulary words in related languages to examine the spread of ancient technologies and the interaction between peoples. Using linguistics (the study of languages), historians corroborate information found in other sources, like oral traditions of dynastic origins and archaeological findings.

Today’s scholars are not the first ones to notice linguistic similarities on the continent. During European colonization one hundred and fifty years ago, anthropologists grouped Africans into “tribes” based on presumed physical, cultural, and linguistic similarities. Involved in this classification, anthropologists and others noticed striking similarities amongst the languages spoken by about 400 different ethnic groups in the southern and eastern third of the continent. They found that people in most of Sub-Saharan Africa spoke languages that used the root –ntu to refer to person, with the prefix ba- added in the plural. Combining the root and the plural prefix, nineteenth-century colonial anthropologists referred to people in these communities as Bantu and later traced Bantu languages back to a root, a mother language spoken in parts of Cameroon.
and Nigeria. To explain the similarities in the languages, European scholars hypothesized that about 2,000 years ago there was a Bantu Migration, a massive departure of thousands of Bantu speakers from the Bantu homeland. As they described, Bantu-speakers imposed iron technology and traditions of agriculture on the peoples they encountered in eastern and southern Africa. Influenced by their own conceptions of colonization, nineteenth century anthropologists portrayed the Bantu Migration as a rapid conquest of Sub-Saharan hunter-gatherer societies by the technologically advanced, Iron Age Bantu speakers.

Since the 1990s, historians of Africa have used linguistics to reject some pieces of the nineteenth-century description of the Bantu Migration. Referring instead to Bantu expansions, they generally agree that the movement of Bantu speakers was more of a slow diffusion of languages and technologies that lasted about 4500 years, from roughly 3000 BCE to 1500 CE. Bantu speakers took multiple routes, and sometimes their movement occurred on the scale of a single family, as opposed to a mass of thousands. From the linguistic evidence, historians also suspect that both Bantu speakers and those they settled amongst contributed ideas and technologies; there was mutual “teaching and learning from one another.”

The current view of the Bantu expansions is much more complex as it recognizes give and take between Bantu newcomers and indigenous populations. For example, some indigenous populations rejected Bantu languages, while others repackaged Bantu technologies incorporating their own innovations. There was no Bantu migratory conquest of indigenous communities. Instead, the study of linguistics seems to confirm that Bantu languages, iron-working, and agriculture slowly spread through eastern and southern Africa in the early centuries CE.

These corrections are important because they allow scholars to much more accurately discuss state formation in southern Africa. In the colonial era, European scholars sometimes jumped to misleading conclusions when they encountered evidence of early African states. For example,

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in 1871 when the German geographer Carl Maunch saw the ruins of an impressive civilization, Great Zimbabwe, he concluded that people from Yemen must have built the grand structures. Biased by nineteenth-century racism, Maunch assumed that Africans were incapable of statehood and the skilled masonry techniques evident at Great Zimbabwe. Subsequent Europeans reached similar conclusions upon viewing the site, attributing the civilization to Phoenecians and Arabs. Some white supremacists in southern Africa clung onto this fabricated history of Great Zimbabwe’s foreign origins until the early 1990s.

In the meantime, a number of scholars had confirmed the African origins of Great Zimbabwe. Archaeologists showed that Great Zimbabwe had features, like stone masonry and rituals involving cattle, found in nearby African kingdoms. Historians used oral tradition and linguistics to track African state formation in the region and show that Great Zimbabwe was a Bantu civilization. Archaeologists and historians concluded that from approximately 1200 to 1450 CE, Great Zimbabwe was the thriving commercial and political center of a rich southern African state.

During the Middle Ages, a prosperous elite based in Great Zimbabwe ruled over about 300 settlements on the Zimbabwe Plateau. Great Zimbabwe and the linked settlements had similarly constructed walled enclosures, practiced mixed farming (they grew crops and kept livestock), and used iron, copper, and bronze. The 300 settlements paid tribute in the form of ivory, gold, cattle, and crops to the rulers in Great Zimbabwe. The wealth generated through the collection of tribute helped Great Zimbabwe become a center of trade and artistry. Great Zimbabwe exported gold and ivory...
to cities like Sofala and Kilwa Kisanwani, on the East African coast. From the coast, these goods were carried to the Persian Gulf, India, and China. In exchange, Great Zimbabwe’s elite imported luxury items like stoneware, colored glass beads, and cotton. Out of these imports, artisans based in Great Zimbabwe made jewelry, ornaments, and cloth for elite consumption.

The architectural evidence of Great Zimbabwe’s social hierarchies is one of the most dramatic elements of the site’s ruins. Covering three square miles, the ruins of Great Zimbabwe consists of many clusters of stone buildings. The most famous structures are the Hill Complex (Figure 9.13) and the Great Enclosure (Figure 9.12). The stone buildings were constructed with local granite, and the stones were stacked without mortar. Scholars hypothesize that the ruling elite resided and performed ceremonies on the Hill Complex, symbolically demonstrating their authority with the height and separation of the complex. From about 1300 CE, more than 15,000 people lived in the valley below them in small, circular homes with thatched roofs and walls made of clay and gravel. The Hill Complex overlooked a number of other structures, including the famous Great Enclosure. With its stone walls up to thirty-five feet tall, the Great Enclosure was the largest structure in precolonial sub-Saharan Africa. The Great Enclosure was a ceremonial site, perhaps used by religious leaders or as a site for the initiation of youth. Scholars disagree about its exact function, but suggest that the Great Enclosure further demonstrated the status and wealth of the capital city and the ruling classes.

Great Zimbabwe declined in the fifteenth century and was abandoned by 1450 CE. Some scholars suggest that the site deteriorated because it was supporting up to 30,000 people and thus became too crowded, deforested, and stripped bare of resources through overuse. Surrounding gold mines may have also been depleted. In any case, trade shifted to support the rise of two new kingdoms, Batua to the west and Mutapa to the east. Both kingdoms built stone walls like those seen in Great Zimbabwe and practiced mixed agriculture, using cattle for ceremonies and as symbols of the ruling elite’s power. From the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries, the kingdoms also faced the Portuguese and the influx of other African populations. The Mutapa Kingdom lasted the longest, enduring until 1760. Overall, this rewritten history of southern African statehood acknowledges the significance of the Bantu expansions that brought agriculture and iron to many regions. It also celebrates the African origins of great civilizations and demonstrates how Africans shared technologies and cultural practices across the Zimbabwean plateau.

9.9 THE SWAHILI CITY-STATES (EAST AFRICA)

In the tenth century CE, a grand Persian sultan, Sultan Ali ibn Sulaiman al-Shirazi sailed to Kilwa Kisiwani, an island off the East African coast. When he arrived, he was generous and people liked him, which enabled him to marry the daughter of Mrimba, the local headman. The newlyweds were set up to live more or less happily ever after. However, Sultan Ali and Mrimba made a deal, brokered by Mrimba’s daughter. The deal gave Sultan Ali control of the island in exchange for enough cloth for Mrimba to “walk on it from the island to his new abode on the mainland.”¹⁵ The deal went through and Mrimba moved to the mainland, but then Mrimba regretted relinquishing

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his position and plotted to militarily retake the island from his son-in-law. In response, Sultan Ali used magic from the Qur’an to stop Mrimba’s plot. By reading the Qur’an in a special way, Sultan Ali kept the sea levels high, which confined Mrimba to the mainland, where he gave up and retired. Upon Mrimba’s death, his mainland territory passed to the son of Sultan Ali who also ruled Kilwa Kisiwani. In this oral tradition, the union of Mrimba’s daughter and Sultan Ali forged a new Muslim family, with Persian and African ancestry, that ruled Kilwa Kisiwani and the mainland coast.

The above version is just one account of Kilwa Kisiwani’s origins; nevertheless, it conveys some very important elements of Swahili identity. Starting at least by the thirteenth century CE, in response to resident Arab merchants who scorned non-Muslims and some African practices, African elites in East Africa claimed descent from Shirazis (Persians) and to have been early converts to Islam. In some cases, the connections may have been exaggerated or inaccurate from a historical standpoint. However, regardless of their accuracy, these stories demonstrate some of the defining features of Swahili identity.

As it controlled gold coming from Great Zimbabwe, Kilwa Kisiwani became one of the most prosperous of the Swahili city-states. From 1000 to 1500 CE, Swahili city-states were wealthy urban areas connected both to the African interior and the larger Indian Ocean World. Dozens of Swahili city-states running down the East African coast from Mogadishu to Sofala, and including islands off the coast, were commercial centers, tied together by a shared identity, not an overarching political structure. In addition to Islam and claims to Persian ancestry, Swahili identity also became associated with Indian Ocean trade, an urban style, and a shared language (Swahili).

Historians of Africa trace the origins of the Swahili city-states to the Bantu expansions, explaining that by the first century CE, Bantu farmers had built communities along the East African coast. They traded with southern Arabia, southeast Asia, and occasionally Greece and Rome. Although trade contracted after the fall of the Roman Empire, it rebounded several hundred years later. At that time, residents of the Swahili city-states played a pivotal role as middlemen, selling gold, timber, ivory, resins, coconut oil, and slaves from the interior regions of Africa to traders.
arriving from throughout the Indian Ocean World. In return, Swahili elites bought imported glass, porcelain, silk, spices, and cloth. The seasonal **monsoon winds** that allowed trade between the Swahili coast and southern Arabia, the Persian Gulf, and southeast Asia also facilitated cultural exchange. Blowing towards the East African coast three to four months of the year and reversing several months later, the monsoon winds stranded traders for months at a time, encouraging intermarriage and cultural exchange. Furthermore, the wealth of the Swahili coast attracted Persian and Arab immigrants. With African, Arabian, and southeast Asian influences, Swahili culture became a blended culture as, for example, the Swahili language incorporated loan words from Arabic and Hindi.

One of the quintessential features of the Swahili city-states from 1000 to 1500 CE was their urban style. A few families made up the elite, ruling classes, while most people in the cities were less wealthy, working as craftsmen, artisans, clerks, and sailors. People in villages along the coast could also identify as Swahili. Claimants of Swahili identity spoke the Swahili language and were Muslim. Archaeology shows that emerging Swahili cities had mosques and Muslim burial grounds starting in the eighth century CE. By their height, the Swahili city-states were distinctly Muslim; they had large mosques built of local coral stone. The Swahili, regardless of their economic status, drew a distinction between themselves as Muslims and the “uncultured,” non-Muslim Africans of the interior.

The elite families played a role in fashioning Swahili urban style. In addition to tracing their descent back to some of the earliest Muslim settlers from Persia, they embraced Islam, financing mosques, practicing purdah (the seclusion of women), and hosting large religious celebrations. Their Muslim identity stimulated trade, as visiting Muslim merchants felt comfortable extending credit to them and living with their Swahili host families while waiting for the winds to turn. By 1350 CE, the urban style of Swahili city-states exhibited a distinguishing architecture. Many of the cities became “stone towns” with wealthy Swahili families constructing multi-level homes out of the coarse coral. The Swahili elite
used their stone houses to establish themselves as prominent, creditworthy citizens. They wore imported silk and cotton and ate off imported porcelain to further display their status. Like other Swahili, the ruling classes distinguished themselves from non-Muslims of the interior. They may have been partially moved to draw this distinction by their desire to sell as slaves people captured in the neighboring, non-Muslim communities.

Slavery within the Indian Ocean World, the zone of contact and interaction connecting people living adjacent to the Indian Ocean, began well before the spread of Islam in the seventh century CE. During the high point of the Swahili city-states, Muslim traders controlled the slave trade within the Indian Ocean World. Slaves tended to be captives of war sold to the Arabian Peninsula and regions near the Persian Gulf. Slaves were put to work as sailors, agricultural laborers, pearl divers, domestic workers, concubines, and musicians. Our information about the everyday lives of slaves in this region is very limited.

In one famous revolt, slaves from East Africa (the Zanj), who were forced to work on sugar plantations and salt flats near Basra (in present-day Iraq), seriously challenged the power of the Abbasid Caliphate. Led by Ali ibn Muhammad, the Zanj rose up in the Zanj Rebellion, a guerrilla war against the Abbasids. For fourteen years, the Zanj and their supporters, altogether an estimated 15,000 people, raided towns, seized weapons and food, and freed slaves. They captured Basra and came within seventy miles of Baghdad, the Abbasid capital. The rebels created their own state with fortresses, a navy, tax collection, and their own coinage. At enormous cost, the Abbasids finally put down the revolt in 883 CE using a large army and by offering amnesty to the rebels. Scholars have used the Zanj Rebellion to examine the scope of the Indian Ocean trade in East African slaves, the conditions of slavery in the Indian Ocean World, and the agency (the ability to exert their own will) of slaves. Some of these scholars suggest that the Zanj Rebellion led Muslims in Arabia to largely abandon the practice of using East African slaves as plantation laborers. The rebellion helps them explain why the Indian Ocean slave trade developed differently than the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

While there were some similarities between the trans-Atlantic trade that brought slaves to the Americas and the slave trade within the Indian Ocean World, there were important differences. Both slave trades took Africans, contributing to an African diaspora, or a dispersal of African peoples and their descendants, all over the world. The trans-Atlantic slave trade, which lasted approximately 300 years and reached its peak in the eighteenth century CE, forced approximately 12 million people, mostly from West Africa, into the Americas. The slave trade within the Indian Ocean lasted much longer, about 2000 years, and was generally smaller in scale. Scholars suggest that African slaves in the Indian Ocean World had more social mobility, especially since many of them were skilled soldiers. Also, according to Islamic precepts, slaves had some basic rights and could be incorporated into the households that they served. Theoretically, a freeborn Muslim could not be enslaved. Unlike slavery in the Americas, slavery within the Indian Ocean World was not racially codified, so freed slaves did not automatically face racial discrimination. And due to their reproductive capacities, women were more sought after as slaves within the Indian Ocean World, while the trans-Atlantic slave trade had the highest demand for young men. Despite these general trends, there was great individual variation within the slave experience.
Moving up the East African coast in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the Portuguese sacked some Swahili cities and tried to tax trade. In 1498, when they happened upon the Swahili coast, the Portuguese were trying to establish a direct sea route to the riches of India and China. After using an East African guide to reach India, the Portuguese began to set up a Trading Post Empire, which intended to tax trade within the Indian Ocean. The Trading Post Empire consisted of a series of forts along the Indian Ocean coast where Portuguese administrators collected taxes and issued trade permits. In the early 1500s, the Portuguese returned to the Swahili city-states to enforce their will. As the Swahili city-states did not have a unified political structure or large armies, the Portuguese successfully looted and destroyed some Swahili cities. However, the Portuguese cultural influence and their ability to enforce tax collection was very limited north of Mozambique. The Portuguese did not move inland beyond the coastal cities and, by and large, trade within the Indian Ocean continued without a great deal of Portuguese interference. However, the Portuguese presence encouraged Swahili leaders to ally with the Omanis from southern Arabia. In 1699, the Omanis, working with some Swahili rulers, seized Mombasa from the Portuguese, and began an era of Omani dominance of the Swahili coast.

9.10 CONCLUSION

These African states showcase the continent’s connections to the rest of the world, a multitude of African innovations, and the importance of using a variety of methodologies to interrogate long-held assumptions about Africa.

Africa was not isolated. Instead, oceans and deserts were “highways” in these periods. Aksum, the Western Sudanic states, Great Zimbabwe, and the Swahili coast were all commercially linked to Europe, the Mediterranean, the Arabian Peninsula, the Persian Gulf, southeast Asia, and even China. Although there were local differences, the ruling classes in each of the states collected tribute from outlying areas and participated in long-distance trade. The wealth of these states supported labor specialization, urbanization, and other innovations.

African states contributed to great cultural change. As just one case in point, Ethiopia, the Western Sudanic states, and the Swahili city-states all experienced religious transformations. Not only did Ethiopia serve as a sanctuary for both Christians and Muslims, but Ethiopians also established their own Church, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Starting in the thirteenth century CE, Western Sudanic rulers converted to Islam, maintaining some of their pre-Islamic beliefs while building their connections with the rest of the Islamic World. Medieval African cities like Timbuktu benefitted from these connections. They attracted traders as reports of African gold circulated far and wide. Taxing the gold trade, Western Sudanic rulers developed these cities as both trading depots and places of scholarly learning. The Swahili in coastal East Africa also embraced Islam as one of the defining features of their identity. Their urban style reflected the centrality of Islam, which they believed distinguished them as cultured and refined. All four states also developed numerous other innovations, such as those in art, architecture, metal-working, agriculture, and political organization.
Before the twentieth century, foreigners recorded much of Africa’s written history. There are limitation to their accounts, meaning that a number of written documents about Africa are misleading, at best. Many African societies remembered their own histories orally, using professionalized classes of historians, storytellers, and musicians, in addition to proverbs and the teachings of elders. Over the past fifty years, historians of Africa have done more to incorporate Africa’s oral traditions into their examination of the ancient past. They have also used linguistics and archaeology to create a more accurate written history of the continent and reclaim African civilizations.

9.11 WORKS CONSULTED AND FURTHER READING


10.1 CHRONOLOGY

18,000 – 15,000 BCE  First humans migrate to the Americas

c. 13,000 BCE  Big game hunters inhabit the Great Plains

c. 10,000 BCE  Mesoamericans begin to cultivate squash

10,000 – 3,500 BCE  Paleo-Indian Period

5600 – 3000 BCE  Early Plains Archaic Period

2000 BCE – 250 CE  Preclassic or Formative period in Mesoamerica

c. 1900 BCE  Mesoamericans begin to make pottery

1800 – 800 BCE  Late Initial Period in Peru

1500 – 400 BCE  Middle Formative Period in Mesoamerica. Peak of Olmec statue carving

c. 1000 BCE  Maize becomes widespread in North America

400 BCE – 100 CE  Late Formative Period in Mesoamerica

200 BCE  The Moche begin their conquest of Peru’s north coast

200 BCE – 400 CE  The Hopewell culture flourishes in North America

100 BCE – 600 CE  The Nazca culture flourishes in Peru

400s CE  Tiwankau founded

550 CE  Teotihuacán reaches 125,000 residents

700 CE  The Huari Empire reaches its height

700 – 1400 CE  Cahokia

750 CE  Tikal reaches 80,000 residents

800 CE  The Toltec city of Tula reaches a population of 35,000

1000 CE  The Chimú establish the capital city of Chan Chan

1050 CE  The population of Chaco Canyon’s five great pueblos reaches 5,000 inhabitants

1325 CE  Tenochtitlán founded

1471 CE  Death of Inca Pachacuti
CHAPTER 10: THE AMERICAS

10.2 INTRODUCTION

This city has many public squares, in which are situated the markets and other places for buying and selling. There is one square twice as large as that of the city of Salamanca, surrounded by porticoes, where are daily assembled more than sixty thousand souls, engaged in buying, and selling; and where are found all kinds of merchandise that the world affords, embracing the necessaries of life, as for instance articles of food, as well as jewels of gold and silver, lead, brass, copper, tin, precious stones, bones, shells, snails, and feathers. ...There is also an herb street, where may be obtained all sorts of roots and medicinal herbs that the country affords. There are apothecaries' shops, where prepared medicines, liquids, ointments, and plasters are sold; barbers' shops, where they wash and shave the head; and restaurateurs, that furnish food and drink at a certain price. There is also a class of men like those called in Castile porters, for carrying burdens....Painters' colors, as numerous as can be found in Spain, and as fine shades; deerskins dressed and undressed, dyed different colors; earthenware of a large size and excellent quality; large and small jars, jugs, pots, bricks, and an endless variety of vessels, all made of fine clay, and all or most of them glazed and painted; Maize, or Indian corn, in the grain and in the form of bread, preferred in the grain for its flavor to that of the other islands and terra-firma; pâtés of birds and fish; great quantities of fish, fresh, salt, cooked and uncooked; the eggs of hens, geese, and of all the other birds I have mentioned, in great abundance, and cakes made of eggs; finally, everything that can be found throughout the whole country is sold in the markets, comprising articles so numerous that to avoid prolixity and because their names are not retained in my memory, or are unknown to me, I shall not attempt to enumerate them.¹

The above is from Hernán Cortez’s description of Tenochtitlán, the Aztec capital he and his Tlazcalan allies conquered in 1521. As the Spanish explorers in the Americas, and later the French, English, and Dutch, saw monetary gain from reporting their exploits to their respective monarchs, we often end up with a stilted or incomplete version of the Americas before 1500. Part of this can be attributed to the bias of European explorers, and misinterpretation of Native American beliefs and practices.

Undoubtedly the most misunderstood practice was that of human sacrifice witnessed by the Spanish conquerors of the Aztec Empire. Among Mesoamerican and Andean peoples alike there was a belief that all life, cosmic, human, animal, and plant alike, grew beneath the soil and sprung forth above the surface. Furthermore, humans had a role in nurturing that life cycle. In many of the cultures we will discuss, shamanism was an important religious tradition whereby shamans or religious specialists could control the forces of the natural world. Often shamans would conduct ceremonies requiring sacrifice from members of his community to ensure cosmic and earthly order. While the Spanish (and Hollywood) tend to focus on more dramatic ceremonies where hearts are

cut from living warriors, other kinds of sacrifices in Mesoamerica and the Andes were integrated in hundreds of ways into daily life. For many cultures ritual bloodletting was a widespread practice, but one where the injured party survived to perform the ceremony the next year. Often times, human-shaped grain cakes would serve as stand-ins for actual human participants. Most sacrifices in fact were actually offerings or prayers to Mesoamerican or Andean deities. For example a Nahua newborn might be named in honor of Maya rulers. Or the first corn tortilla of the day might be consumed in honor of the sun. These beliefs would eventually be manifest in physical structures like a cave under Teotihuacán’s Pyramid of the Sun in Mexico or sunken plazas at Chavín de Huantar in Peru and Tiwanaku in Bolivia. These sacred spaces were constructed beneath the earth’s surface to allow the cultures aboveground easier access to the Earth’s creative capacity.

As historians, it also is helpful to point out some of our myopic tendencies regarding the peopling of the Americas. In Chapter One we talked about discrepancies regarding the date at which Homo sapiens arrived in the Americas. While there is evidence supporting an overland migration from Beringia, and geographically speaking the Beringia migration is the most logical explanation, some scholars argue that this approach has become “dogma” and even “ideology,” leaving no room for evidence that may challenge this explanation. While we cannot argue that we are close to abandoning the Beringian migration as the most likely theory, there is mounting evidence that suggests a seaborne migration from Asia or even a “Solutrean” migration from Europe ten thousand years before an ice-free corridor opened up in North America. Considering new theories may help us explain how the Americas came to be populated and how civilizations developed so quickly here.

A third weakness in our narrative of the Americas involves the demographic collapse of the indigenous population that occurred after the arrival of European diseases. Especially in the Circum-Caribbean, millions of indigenous peoples succumbed to European disease and overwork in the first decades of the sixteenth century, giving them little opportunity to construct their own historical narrative apart from the one that Europeans were writing.

Keeping these limitations in mind, our task in this chapter is to admire a pre-Columbian history where in a little over 15,000 years migrants from Asia (probably) populated the Americas by foot, built hundreds of major cities, supported a population in the tens of millions, and constructed two of the most impressive empires the world has ever known. Fortunately recent advances in archaeology and calendrics have helped us uncover much of this pre-Columbian past that had been largely clouded by our obsession with the triumph and tragedy of the European conquest.

### 10.3 QUESTIONS TO GUIDE YOUR READING

1. What crops were first domesticated in the Americas and where?

2. What did we learn from the **Olmec** about the transition from chiefdoms to states?

3. How did the Maya support such rapid urbanization?

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4. What were some of the features of urban life in Teotihuacán and Tenochtitlán?

5. How did The Moche, Huari, and Chimu build their regional influence?

6. How did the Inca use local resources to build their empire?

7. What was the role of Macchu Picchu within the Inca Empire?

8. How were cultures of the North American West able to overcome limited rainfall?

9. What traits did mound building cultures of North America share?

### 10.4 KEY TERMS

- Aspero
- Ayllu
- Cahokia
- Chaco Canyon
- Chan Chan
- Chavín de Huantar
- Chiapas
- Chumash
- Coricancha
- Cuzco
- Great Bison Belt
- Hopewell
- Huaca de la Luna
- Huaca del Sol
- Huari
- Huayna Capac
- LaVenta
- Machu Picchu
- Maiz de Ocho
- Maize
- Mesoamerica
- Norte Chico
- Olmec
- Pachacuti
- Pithouses
- San Lorenzo
- Tenochtitlán
- Teotihuacán
- The Aztec Empire
- The Chimu Kingdom
- The Moche
- The Nazca
- Tikal
- Tiwanaku
- Toltec

### 10.5 MESOAMERICA

This discussion of the Americas before 1500 begins in the “middle.” Although scholars believe that man migrated to Beringia and hence North America first, Mesoamerica was the first section of the Americas where scholars have found evidence of large settlements, agriculture, and unique
cultural traditions, so this chapter starts there. The Mesoamerican culture area is found in what are now the modern countries of Guatemala, Mexico, Belize, El Salvador, and eastern Honduras. The region’s frequent volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and hurricanes gave it quite a staggering amount of ecological diversity including mountains, coastal plains, and a peninsular limestone platform (the Yucatán). The region’s climatic diversity is attributable to the fact that it sits in both tropical and subtropical latitudes.

Less is known about migration to Mesoamerica than for North and South America during the Paleoindian period, but many scholars put people in the region by 15,000 BCE. These early residents hunted large and small game alike and consumed a wide range of plant resources. The Archaic period in Mesoamerica stretched from 8000 to 2000 BCE, during which scores of cultures adapted to the region’s ecological diversity by domesticating wild food sources like “beans, squash, amaranth, peppers, and wild Maize (teosinte).”\(^4\) The maize of large kernels of today took thousands of years of domestication for Mesoamericans to produce, but by the formative period it was a staple crop supporting tens of thousands. Groups living closer to the coast could also take advantage of wetland crops, such as manioc.

10.5.1 Early Farming in Mesoamerica

Just as early farmers in Southwest Asia turned wild plants into domestic crops, so too did their contemporaries in Mesoamerica with maize, squash, and tubers. Foragers in the southern Mexican highlands lived on a diverse diet of plants and animals, including cactus fruit, corn, squash, beans, fish, deer, and rabbits. Their contemporaries in the tropical lowlands further south consumed tubers like manioc, sweet potato, arrowroot as well as fruits like avocados. While Mesoamericans did domesticate most of these crops, they did so before becoming sedentary, a fact revealing the existence of regional variations in the path to agriculture. Around 10,000 years ago, Mesoamericans began to cultivate squash, both as a food source and as storage containers. Rather than staying near their cultivated land, however, early planters formed mobile “agricultural bands” that still hunted and would return to harvest mature squash or chilies. Over time, these bands planted more and hunted less until eventually they formed sedentary agricultural villages. But that process took at least 2,000 years. In fact, it may have been in the much denser tropics in and around Panama where residents first left foraging behind for agriculture. Around 10,000 BCE, after the extinction of megafauna, these tropical peoples begun to cultivate their forest environment. Tropical cultivation tended to be cramped, but tropical residents did manage to domesticate the tubers like manioc, sweet potato and arrowroot that we mentioned above.\(^5\)

Over the next several centuries, village dwellings themselves revealed a growing emphasis on permanence and increasing sophistication. Brick walls and plaster floors began to replace hides and sticks. Unlike round huts, new rectangular houses allowed for expansion by extending walls and adding a perpendicular end wall. Expanding permanent dwellings allowed villages to grow through natural population increase. Permanent dwellings also helped establish distinc-
tions between public and private space and public and private activities, effecting communal and private property. Not only did villages have to decide where and how to build, they also had to organize around when to plant, where to settle, when to harvest, and where to store the food. The invention of pottery during this period served storage needs tremendously. Tasks in construction, gathering, defense, and food production became more specialized and supervised, leading to the beginnings of class. The elite developed, a strata usually comprising warriors, priests, and administrators.

10.5.2 The Formative Period

By the beginning of the Formative Period around 2000 BCE, most residents of Mesoamerica were sedentary, many living in small bands that moved only seasonally. However, by 300 CE many of these small bands had been replaced by quite common large urban centers. This was a rapid transition, to say the least. This rapidity was possible because of greater use of domesticated crops and storage and improved technology, like pottery vessels. Pottery appeared between 1900 BCE and 1750 BCE on the Pacific coast of Chiapas in highland valleys and on the Gulf coast. After about 1400 BCE, scholars start to see widespread sharing of obsidian, shell, jade, and iron artifacts, a sharing which denotes significant interaction by this point. A social hierarchy also began to develop in Chiapas, where there was a two-tiered settlement hierarchy of small centers and villages. In other words, the elite had bigger houses. Over time and in more areas, plastered floors and dirt floors appeared in different dwellings and altars in others. Burials too indicated social differentiation.

The Olmec were the earliest civilization in Mesoamerica and, therefore, drove much of this rapid development. The Olmec developed along the Gulf of Mexico and flourished during the Early Formative and Middle Formative (1500 – 400 BCE), while the Late Formative (400 BCE – 100 CE) saw their evolution and transformation. Scholars use this timeline with the caveat that Mesoamerica houses a number of unique cultural traditions, and there are variations within this timeline in terms of when they developed urbanization, states, agriculture, and certain technologies. The Olmecs’ most

notable accomplishment was their monumental stone sculpture. Other Mesoamerican cultures had stone monuments, but the Olmec versions were unique in their sophistication, size, and number. A common theme occurs during the coherent tradition spanning 1400 BCE to 400 BCE. Statues were carved out of thrones or in low relief on stelae. The largest of them weighed over forty tons. Stones had been transported as much as ninety km from their sources. The labor required to do this demonstrates the power of these rulers. Aside from statue carving, Olmec elites also commissioned carved columns, drains, and embellishments in large houses. An inordinate amount of iron trade also occurred, and objects like polished iron mirrors were found in the tombs of high-ranking individuals. The import of jade sculptures was perhaps even more prominent with thousands of tons of “serpentine blocks” buried in massive offerings at the Olmec center of La Venta in southern Mexico.⁷

Many of these monuments were commissioned by or for elite members of an increasingly sophisticated socio-economic hierarchy first seen in the Early Formative Olmec of San Lorenzo. San Lorenzo itself stood at the apex of a three- or four-tiered settlement hierarchy which included subordinate centers, villages, and special purpose sites. This increasing sophistication became solidified through Olmec politics as well. Early in the Formative Period most groups were organized in tribes, but the Olmec soon began to form a set of chiefdoms that allowed for organized leadership across generations, albeit through kinship ties. The Olmec also became the first civilization in the region to develop a state, where the same hierarchy became more stratified and institutions became more specialized.

Some scholars even call the Olmec an “empire,” but most say it falls short for a few important reasons. First, the Olmec never had a large enough population at their disposal to form a conquering army. Second, while there existed a number of significant urban Olmec sites, such as La Venta and San Lorenzo, none of them has been identified as an Olmec capital. Finally, the art and archeological records of surrounding societies don’t indicate an Olmec domination but rather the existence of something of a theocratic state, as elites seemed to have both political and religious authority and a considerable amount of influence.

Final questions related to our understanding of the region are: Why did the Olmec evolve at all, and why did they evolve when they did? One theory involves the ecological relationship to Mesoamerica’s lowland environment. Another holds that increasing productivity led to high population growth, which caused a pressure to organize politically. Control of these resources as well as the limited use of warfare accounted largely for the authority of individual chieftains. Other scholars have added to this observation, pointing out that the abundance but lack of diversity of Olmec area agriculture forced them to develop a competitive advantage vis-à-vis societies that lived closer to obsidian, salt, and stone deposits. (The Olmec would need to trade for these resources that were central for hunting and food production). A more sophisticated society would have that advantage.

Once the Olmec did manage to organize as states, they began to plan for their permanence. From the above-mentioned stone deposits, the Olmec produced their cultural hallmark: monumental stone sculpture. Around 1650 BCE, the Olmec began to produce stone effigy bowls, but these are much smaller than the monumental sculptures that followed. Over 200 known monumental

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⁷ Pool, 15.
stone sculptures remain; one-third are from San Lorenzo and the surrounding area. The colossal heads are the largest; some stand up to three and a half meters tall. Each head is unique, containing its own ear ornaments, headdress, specific facial features, and expressions. Most scholars think they are portraits. Table top altars have been found in a range of sizes across Olmec sites. Most now believe they served as thrones but others believe they served as altars as well. They often show humans emerging from a niche in front of the monument. The Olmec also crafted smaller sculptures in the round. These sculptures incorporated human and supernatural themes or humans in ritual or symbolic postures. A fourth sculptural style, one that corresponds to later periods, was stelae. These stelae often depicted supernatural beings and elaborately dressed individuals engaged in specific actions. These stone sculptures would be impressive for modern humans to achieve but are made more impressive considering the fact that the Olmec possessed no metal tools with which to cut them.

The purpose behind these sculptures, outside of their artistic value, seems to have involved monumentality. Stone as a whole gave a sense of order, stability, and equilibrium. The harmonic proportions in the works enhanced those ideas. The sculptures also contained a good enough mix of naturalism and abstraction to give a nod to the spiritual world as well. For the Olmec as shamanists, a direct connection existed between order on earth and order in the spiritual world. Olmec shamans, through ritual and through the assistance of their nagual (also referred to as nagualo) or “animal spirit companions,” could travel to the supernatural world or guard against spirits who desired them harm.8 Therefore, a number of altars and smaller sculptures show human-jaguar or human-dragon anthropomorphs, particularly those that reflect the existence of a gateway or portal between worlds. La Venta Altar 4, for example, had an earthly purpose as a throne and a symbolic one as a cosmological model. When the Olmec ruler sat on the throne he could be present in both the natural and supernatural realms. This journey between worlds was aided by the intercession of the ruler’s animal spirit companion (in this case a jaguar).9

The Olmec undoubtedly left a lasting legacy on the Caribbean coast of Mesoamerica, but the legacy can be difficult to trace, as much of it has been subsumed into a debate about its being a “mother” culture for the Aztec and Maya. (Recent scholarship has given less credence to the

9 Ibid., 393.
Olmec as a “mother culture” and argues that it developed independently of Maya and Valley of Mexico cultures). Hopefully as scholars and students examine the Olmec as an independent cultural entity, its legacy will continue to become clearer.

10.6 THE MAYA

The importance of the influence of the Olmec on the Maya may seem superficial, but it is quite important, as the Maya’s rise to sophistication was so fast and so complete that it almost defies explanation. After settling at the base of the Yucatán Peninsula around 1000 BCE, the lowland Maya learned how to deal with drought, feed tens of thousands of people, and organize politically—all before 250 BCE.

The Late Classic period was one of tremendous growth. The city of Tikal, in present day Guatemala, had reached a population of 80,000 by CE 750, while the population of its rival Calakmul reached 50,000. To support these large populations, the Late Classic Maya had almost a totally engineered landscape that included water management projects, flattened ridge tops, and terraced hillsides. The population was fairly dense in cities and in surrounding countryside. Their leaders had tombs built in their honor, imported luxury items like jade statues, feathers, cacao, and other items from the Mexican Highlands. These activities all demonstrate real sophistication.

The Late Classic Maya also had an advanced numerical annotation system of dots and bars and used zero. Maya writing began as pictographs and blended into quite artistic symbolism. In addition to their more than seven hundred carved monuments, the Maya culture produced wooden carvings, incised jades, and pottery.

Politically speaking, the Maya were never unified under one ruler or even a set of rulers. Instead, the Maya were a civilization that shared a set of cultural traits, a language family, but no single ruler or sense of common identity. Individual Maya Kingdoms rose and fell, but none was ever able to dominate the entire Maya area.

While their rule was perhaps not widespread, Maya rulers did hold tremendous power and prestige within their kingdoms. Rulers were kings at the top of a “steep” social hierarchy that was reinforced by religious beliefs. The king was a hereditary ruler chosen by the gods and a member of one of several elite bloodlines. The Maya priestly class organized a complex pantheon of both gods and deified ancestors.

This ancestor worship required not only ceremony and temple building, but a complex understanding of calendrics as well. Both the Maya and the Olmec...
understood time as “a set of repeating and interlocking cycles instead of the linear sequence of historical time,” much as the concept is understood today. Long cycles alternated with short cycles; the long periods involved the repeated creations and destructions of the world in their creation stories—with an emphasis on repeated. Since cycles are by definition repeated, certain dates are more important than others because they are attached to good and bad events in the past. Calendar priests determined what those dates were and so had considerable power. They also had the power to rewrite the course of events if this benefited the ruler.¹¹

### 10.6.1 Teotihuacán and the Toltec

While the Olmec and Maya accomplished incredible things, urbanization to the north in Mexico’s central valley may have left the most permanent legacy. To the north of the Maya culture area, the Valley of Mexico was the most “agriculturally desirable” zone in Mesoamerica. Climate was temperate, and rainfall, although not abundant, was predictable—in contrast to the drenching rains of tropical Mesoamerica. Lesser amounts of rainfall of course required aqueducts, reservoirs, and canals if a city were to thrive. Cuicuilco was such a city that rose to prominence in the Valley of Mexico by 150 BCE, only to be badly damaged by a volcanic eruption around 400 CE. The subsequent decline of Cuicuilco allowed a competing city, Teotihuacán, to rise to prominence in the area, and by 100 CE, its population reached 60,000 inhabitants. By 550 CE, Teotihuacán was one of the six largest cities in the world, with a population of 125,000. Teotihuacán covered more than 20 square kilometers, had a marketplace, an administrative center and several different types of housing. Its largest buildings seem to have had both a functional and a spiritual use. The Pyramid of the Sun, the largest building in the city was built over a sacred cave likely connected with creation myths. By the fourth century CE, Teotihuacán had the modern equivalent of neighborhoods; new houses were laid out on a rough grid with many homes organized into apartment compounds.¹² The dwellings were constructed of volcanic rock, mortar, and wood for the roofs. The compounds also had a system of underfloor drains. Many of the dwellings in these complexes are decorated with “polychrome wall murals” containing multiple religious themes and military themes, some depicting play or everyday life, while others being much more abstract.¹³

To support its massive population, Teotihuacán needed to secure supplies and tribute from surrounding areas. Many neighboring areas were conquered through a combination of trade and military conquest. Force was used to secure trade routes to the south and thus have access to goods as diverse as cacao beans, tropical bird feathers, salt, medicinal herbs, and honey. Once the city’s influence had expanded and they had become the region’s undisputed merchant power, its subsistence base increased to include the entire Basin of Mexico and some neighboring peoples like Tlazcala. The reach of Teotihuacán’s leadership even extended into Maya kingdoms like Tikal where it influenced, and may have even ousted, a Maya ruler in the late

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¹¹ Ibid.
¹² Adams, 46-49.
¹³ Ibid.
fourth century. Tikal’s position within its own region may in fact have been strengthened by this subordination to Teotihuacán.14

Teotihuacán was able to sustain impressive growth and expansion for more than five centuries, but ultimately its size and complexity seemingly contributed to its decline. At about 650 CE, roughly half of Teotihuacán’s public buildings and a number of temples, pyramids, and palaces were burned. Many were knocked down and torn apart as well. This does not seem to be the work of invaders, but instead internal and external groups who attacked declining symbols of power.

The Late Classic Maya would also experience a collapse of their cultural systems around 840 CE. Years of population growth and demands on and from the elite came to a head with a period of prolonged drought in the early ninth century. Resulting famines and infighting caused population losses in Maya settlements nearing eighty-five percent and in many areas abandoned farmlands were retaken by the forest.15

While many of these Late Classic Maya sites would never recover from their demographic decline, Mesoamerica remained fertile and southern Mexico remained temperate, so a number of polities rose to prominence in the area after the abovementioned declines. Tula, which had been founded by Teotihuacán leaders as an administrative center, emerged in the Valley of Mexico after 650 CE. Tula would become the capital of the Toltecs, who saw their principal city grow to a population of 35,000 by 800 CE. Like all Mesoamerican cities at the time, Tula would expand its influence through trade. Toltec ceramics were found in regions ranging from Costa Rica to Guatemala; while Toltec style I-shaped ball courts and rain dances were adopted by cultures like the Anasazi and Hohokam in modern day Arizona and New Mexico. One of these ball courts still sits near the modern city of Phoenix, Arizona.16 While much of the Hohokam culture area sits in what is now the United States, it was heavily influenced by the culture of Mexico. Not only did the Hohokam build ball courts, they also erected platform mounds and dug irrigation canals like those found in Mexico.

One important difference that the Toltec developed from their predecessors was their desire to conquer. Perhaps influenced by the rapid decline of Teotihuacán, the Toltec wanted to rise to prominence quickly. Their construction of Tula was hasty and conflict with neighbors went beyond typical captive taking or territorial gain. The Toltec viewed their conquest as a “sacred war” where man would aid the gods in their fight against the powers of darkness. The Toltec eventually merged their sacred war with that of the northern Maya in the Puuc Hills of the Yucatán. The northern Maya elites had already adopted “divine war” when the Toltec invaded the Yucatán city of Chichén. Chichén would become the Toltec administrative center in the peninsula in the late tenth century but they did not completely drive out the city’s Maya founders. In fact, the Itza Maya ruled the region under the Toltec and continued to do so well into the post-Columbian period.17

14 Adams, 48-49.
15 Ibid., 60-65.
16 Ibid., 69-71.
17 Ibid., 69-75.
10.7 THE AZTEC

While the Itza were one of the last unconquered native civilizations in the New World, another post-classic kingdom drew the most attention from Mexico’s Spanish conquerors: the Aztec. The Aztec capital was the magnificent city of Tenochtitlán, founded around 1325 CE by a Nahuatl-speaking, previously nomadic group called the Mexica. Tenochtitlán was composed of a network of dozens of smaller city states who used the lake environment to plant wetland gardens and used raised causeways to separate the gardens and move around the city. Some fields were raised as well, a feat which drained them and helped them contribute to supporting a population that totaled around 300,000 people (including the population of the neighboring city of Texcoco). Eventually a network of canals was created that drained fields, fed crops, and provided for navigation with canoes. Not only were these raised fields a source of multiple crops, but also the lake provided wildfowl, salamanders, and algae.

However, as the population grew to over a million, other means of support were needed, so the people looked to outside tribute. Beginning in 1428, the Mexica sought independence from their Tepanec patrons and allied with other outlying towns to form the Triple Alliance, which

Figure 10.2 | Map of Tenochtitlán and Gulf of Mexico | Drawn by member of Hernán Cortés expedition, 1524.
Author: User "Lupo"
Source: Wikimedia Commons
License: Public Domain
by 1431 dominated the basin where they made their home. The unified Aztec people were led by the Mexica ruler Itzcoatl and his advisors. In making an alliance with Texcoco, the Aztec were able to build a causeway between the cities and help improve the infrastructure of Tenochtitlán. They then began construction on the Great Temple, a central market, and a larger network of gardens or chinampas. The Great Temple would become the orienting point for the entire city and would become the site of thousands of human sacrifices.

The Aztec are perhaps best known, and may even have grown infamous (like the Toltec and others before them), for practicing human sacrifice. However, the context in which these sacrifices take place reveals that they were not conducted in a wanton or random manner. First of all, for the new Aztecs, there was little tradition of and, therefore, little opportunity for community building to draw upon. Their rise to power had to have been quick and dramatic. Furthermore, they possessed a worldview that held that even though they had achieved greatness, decline was inevitable. This view was present in their philosophy and their ceremonies—including those of sacrifice. This view was also important for ritual victims, because upon their death, they believed that they would be freed from the burdens of the uncertain human condition and become a carefree hummingbird or butterfly.

For the Aztec, ritual provided a kind of protection against excess; there was order in it, even if it was violent. Men had no independent power, and gods were very abstract in their doling out of gifts. Finally, in the Mexica worldview, the earth receives rather than gives, much like it does in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Through fertility and death, humans satisfy that hunger. The process of birth and death is not “dust to dust” but the transition from one form of flesh to another. All man can do is order his portion of this natural cycle.

10.8 EARLY ANDES

Humans arrived in South America after migrating through North and Mesoamerica; they began to craft small campsites and fishing villages along the Pacific coast. Around 3,000 BCE, the small campsites villages were replaced by residential and ceremonial centers. This transition was made possible through a new focus on irrigation and communal agriculture.
These Pacific coast and Andean cultures left an incredible amount of material culture (much of it well-preserved because of the dry climate) for archeologists to analyze. Their work shows that parts of the Classical Andes—modern Peru, Chile, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Colombia—possessed the same level of cultural complexity as did China, Persia, and India during the same period. Through this material culture, the Classical peoples begin to separate themselves from their ancient and often less complex ancestors.

While it is tempting to lean heavily on artifacts for knowledge of the period, there is a danger of overreliance. For example, pottery of the Moche culture (see Figure 10.3) is well known for its often quite graphic images of female fertility and sexuality. These pieces are important works for archaeologists and historians alike, but one must keep in mind that little is known about how much these representations of Moche female sexuality in art actually tell us about gender relationships in their society. In other words, “shock value” or aesthetic quality should not be confused with universality.

This section begins with the end of the archaic period and the rise of a group of civilizations referred to as the Norte Chico.

### 10.8.1 Norte Chico

The Pacific coast developed large ceremonial and residential centers, which were organized around distinct status and rank among citizens. This area resembles other “crucible” areas like the Deh Luran Plain of Iraq, the Nile in Egypt, and the Olmec heartland. While similarities with the aforementioned early civilizations exist, the Norte Chico stands out for three reasons. First, it was politically “pristine.” Scholars find no evidence that any outside polity influenced its development. Second, it endured for more than 1,300 years. This longevity gave the Norte Chico great influence in what would ultimately become a distinct Andean civilization. For example, large platform mounds of Norte Chico would also appear later in the highland center of Chavín de Huantar. The final reason Norte Chico stands out from other early civilizations is its development happened very quickly. By 2800 BCE, there were a number of similar large sites all with residential complexes, plazas, and platform mounds.

The Aspero site is the archetype of these large sites. It covers fifteen hectares and contains six platform mounds. While there are a number of large sites like Aspero, there doesn’t seem to have been a central Norte Chico chieftom or state. There was no Norte Chico capital and no real evidence of conflict or warfare. This absence of conflict may be connected with the fact that scholars find no indication of differentially-distributed sumptuary goods, such as jewelry, clothing, and exotic trade materials, in Norte Chico. Even shell beads and stone are extremely rare to find in these sites so near to the Pacific.

Usually a cultural area requires some centralization and large scale agriculture before scholars refer to it as a civilization. The Norte Chico earns that distinction, however, because the level of cultural complexity indicates that they at least tried to centralize. Complexity is tricky. In the Norte

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Chico, there occurred episodic attempts at non-egalitarianism which were eventually abandoned. Many scholars also argue that Norte Chico did in fact become sophisticated and sedentary, not through agriculture but through fishing; this argument is known as the maritime theory. While unique, the maritime theory has trouble supporting the idea that the Norte Chico advanced merely through fishing, as insufficient archaeological evidence of communal labor sites centered on fishing exists to support it. Instead, a more likely explanation of Norte Chico complexity involves agriculture and fishing meeting at the middle, in a “shared labor” theory. A number of coastal sites contain not only remnants of cotton fishing nets, but other inland products like avocados and corn as well. These remnants mean that the canal building that took place between 4,000 and 3,000 BCE in the interior was likely only possible with the assistance of the coast’s more plentiful labor force. This assistance was paid for with cotton nets and other agricultural products that in turn helped the coastal population feed itself and grow year after year. A larger temporary labor force would produce more canals and aqueducts, a cycle that explains much of the Norte Chico’s economic expansion. Some of this cooperation may have even taken the form of pilgrimages to Norte Chico sites and the construction of monuments within Aspero, Caral, and other sites to commemorate them. The dry season of July and August presented a lull that would have been a good time for such pilgrimages. Evidence of communal cooking and eating exists, along with that of communal building.

### 10.8.2 Chavín de Huantar

While the Norte Chico is the oldest identifiable civilization along the Pacific Coast, Chavín de Huantar has also captured much attention as a crucible site for Andean culture. Chavín de Huantar is the iconic representation of The Late Initial Period (1800 – 800 BCE), where Peru saw the beginnings of a mix of Andean, coastal, and Amazon cultures. Chavín is located at an altitude of more than 3,000 meters in the Callejon de Conchucos, the easternmost basin between the Cordilleras Negra and Blanca in the Peruvian Andes. It is also midway between the coast and jungle, giving it access to the culture and resources of the greater Andean region. This access made it a pilgrimage center, an importer of luxury goods, and a disseminator first unifying Andean style. Chavin’s “Old Temple” is 330 feet across the back and more than fifty feet high at its highest. The

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temple is U-shaped with a sunken court in the middle, and harpy eagle, jaguar, and parading shamans surround it. The temple is also built around the lanzón (great lance) which was a kind of supernatural conduit. The lanzón is similar in style to the Tello Obelisk which was found in a corner of the Old Temple courtyard. The obelisk contains carvings on all of its sides, carvings which primarily represent tropical and mythical origins or “gifts of the cayman.” Many dualities appear on the obelisk: male-female, plant type, ecological zone, sky-water, life-death, etc. These dualities and their meaning were reinforced by the pilgrimages made to Chavín and the ceremonies contained within them. It seems that Chavín architects used all of the symbolic value of the site available to them. The mixed human-animal features of the sculptures, the ingestion of hallucinogenic San Pedro cactus (also represented in sculpture), and even including acoustic symbolism were all important parts of the pilgrimages. Archaeologists have found marine shell trumpets in the tunnel complex under the city and have attempted to replicate how sound would contribute to the mind-altering rituals undertaken at the complex.

The images and rituals at this site help establish what scholars refer to as the “Chavín cult.” The Chavín cult presents a universalist message based on the combined elements of coast and highlands that helped bring people to sites like this for ceremony and construction. In other words, these ideas helped move the Andes into the state phase. At Chavín, it also seems that there was a leader/priest, like in Egypt. It was, therefore, through spiritual power that the state congealed and grew, as well.

10.8.3 Moche

Chavín de Huantar was not a developed civilization, but it did help create the importance of religion and ceremonial life in the Andes, both in every day practice and in sacred sites. Later, other groups in Peru, groups like the Moche, would build on religion and ceremony to help with state formation. The Moche began to conquer the North coast valleys in 200 BCE and, by 250 CE, had begun to construct the Huaca del Sol or temple of the sun and the Huaca de la Luna or temple

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21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
of the moon at their capital, which bore the same name. The Huaca del Sol seems to have been a royal residence and the Huaca de la Luna a place of worship. The Huaca del Sol contained over 143 million bricks, arranged into columns and marked with symbols perhaps of who made them. Each column probably represented a tax-paying **Ayllu** (kinship-based community), meaning that the Huaca or temple was a literal representation of how the empire was held up by its individual units.

There is still some debate about how much centralization there was at the upper echelons of Moche politics, but there was undoubtedly a leadership class with several administrative levels. The first administrative level was that of the divine kings who are depicted in murals and ceramics from this period. The second was of noble administrators. Below that were bureaucrats who organized the already extant clan system. Below them were the long-standing clan leaders. The lowest level was composed of commoners, many of whom lived in single story adobe houses. Most commoners mastered some craft like metallurgy or weaving. Others were highly skilled and perhaps worked exclusively for the rulers.

Residents living outside of the capital were almost exclusively farmers who lived along the Moche’s extensive irrigation canals—in the Chicama Valley, there is a 120 km long canal still in use today. The Moche found a very practical application of the previously mentioned coastal-mountain symbiosis through the llama. The llama is a domesticated mountain pack animal that the Moche used to journey to the coast and gather guano at the Chincha Islands for fertilizing their valley farms.

By 600 CE, the city of Moche covered an area of a square kilometer and probably had a population of 15,000. Each conquered valley outside of the capital had its own huaca, and each one was connected to Moche by relay runners who carried messages written in the form of lines and dots on Lima beans.

Perhaps the most notable Moche legacy was their art. Their buildings, their murals, and their pottery alike reflected their great skill and the high level of societal stratification. The Huaca del Sol at Cerro Blanco for example contained millions of bricks and more than 100 types of geometric symbols. Moche murals contained a unique series of squares depicting both abstract and mythological concepts involving themes of creation, combat, sacrifice, and men-jaguars. As already mentioned, this sacrifice may not have always been violent, may not have been literal, and always has a functional explanation. In this case, sacrifice is designed to terrify or at the very least impress a subject population. While it is important to contextualize this sacrifice, we must also remind ourselves that this is not a modern civilization with a middle class or even a democratic tradition. It was archaic in the sense that a small group of people was supported by a large population underneath them. This kind of relationship required brutality.

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24 Adams, 106.
10.8.4 Huari

While the Moche were notable because of their art and material culture, their use of violence to achieve and hold power threatens to cloud our image of the north coast peoples. The Huari, on the other hand, were able to build a successful empire in nearby areas combining intimidation and militarism with diplomacy, trade, and ideology. The Huari ruled over more territory than any previous Andean polity, partially by coopting neighboring groups through taxation, distribution of goods, feasting and religious ceremonies. There is also evidence that the Huari used sacred mummy bundles or trophy heads to incorporate outgroups and maintain a ritual relationship with these outgroups. Huari textiles and ceramics were found far from the capital, and Huari architecture was highly influential throughout the region.\(^{25}\) The Huari Empire carved out a centralized state in a region where none had previously existed by coordinating local irrigation and labor systems. By 700 CE, Huari maintained a population of 25,000 and an over 700 kilometer-wide “zone of influence” connected by a road network that may have been the model for the Inca road system. In fact, it was ultimately Huari diplomacy and organization, rather than Moche violence in ritual killings, that provided a more useful precedent for the Inca.\(^{26}\)

10.8.5 Chimu

The Chimu Kingdom was perhaps influenced more directly by remnants of the Moche, occupying as they did more or less the same geographic area. The Chimu capital of Chan Chan was established at about 1000 CE. Through their system of split inheritance, the Chimu forced the newly-ascended ruler to build his own material wealth. This expectation meant conquest of new territory and an increase in taxes. It also meant the construction of a new palace where each ruler would be buried along with hundreds of his attendants and llamas who were sacrificed to accompany him in the afterlife. A Chimu ruler was


\(^{26}\) Adams, 113.
also buried with a sample of the wealth he had accumulated in his lifetime in the form of textiles, wood carvings, pottery, or jewelry. While earthquakes meant that the Chimu had to work hard to reclaim or make any use at all of Moche irrigation canals, they did manage to revive and extend the Moche system to eventually provide Chan Chan with diverse agricultural products from maize to cotton to peanuts. The Chimu also employed violence in their rise to power; however, their conquest by the Inca cut short any means for scholars to see if they intended to follow or rather eventually break from the Moche legacy.27

10.8.6 South Coast peoples

The south coast of Peru developed somewhat distinctly because it is extremely arid. In certain areas along the coast there has never been recorded rain. Surviving there meant accessing and controlling Andean runoff that sometimes went underground. As a result, the south coast’s population was much smaller, but in many ways was culturally richer.

The **Nazca** carved out their civilization along the south coast between 100 BCE to 600 CE. There was a large center at Cahuachi as early as 200 BCE, but it was largely ceremonial rather than residential. Forty huacas were also built in the areas surrounding Cahuachi but also were without large permanent populations. The Nazca maintained a regular pilgrimage to Cahuachi involving music, feasts, and fertility rites. There was some captive sacrifice, but it is not clear of whom. Nazca leadership was probably a confederacy of clans, making the forty huacas the hubs of political and sacred activities. Huacas are further explained in section 10.8.8.

The Nazca are well known for their pottery and textiles. Their pottery depicted mythical feline or otter figures, many of which were associated with water and fertility—in this climate, water essentially is fertility. The same figures are represented on the Nazca lines/geoglyphs that were created by clearing the desert floor of stone and leaving the motifs. The straight lines were probably “ritual walkways.” Others argue that the Nazca Lines were an astronomical calendar centered around the agricultural cycle. Overall, the Nazca had an impressive but brief florescence which came to an abrupt end after a prolonged drought in the 550s CE.28

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**Figure 10.4 | Nazca Lines Hummingbird**

Author: Unukomo
Source: Wikimedia Commons
License: CC BY-SA 3.0
10.8.7 Tiwanaku

Tiwanaku was a ceremonial center and administrative city near Lake Titicaca established in the fifth century CE. At its height, more than 40,000 people lived in the city itself; they were supported by a population of 365,000 in the subjected outskirts. Surrounding farmlands produced high crop yields with abundant quinoa and potatoes supported by meat and legumes. They used canals, ridged fields, and raised fields, and they even created a series of ditches that created fog and prevented frost in the colder months.

In the city itself, several large platform mounds connected by causeways were used by the administrators of this complex system. From subordinate colonies hundreds of miles away, they received corn, coca, tropical birds, and medicinal herbs. Many of these goods were carried by llamas. Alpacas also provided high grade wool for textiles.

Tiwanaku contained many ethnic and linguistic zones and “vertically integrated” many areas of the Andes for the first time. Tiwanaku was relatively stable until its downfall around 1,000 CE, perhaps falling victim to its own success. Saline deposits from long term irrigation may have reduced the fertility of the soil, leaving Tiwanaku without its most distinct advantage.

In general, comparing these three more recent civilizations to the first civilizations of Norte Chico reveals increased complexity in all cases with class structure developing, warfare, and religion, even though their methods of survival were quite different.

10.8.8 The Inca

The Huari and Tiwanaku built on local resources to construct their states. While the Inca are the best known of these Andean civilizations, they began in the same way by building on the Ayllu kinship system.

In some ways, the Ayllu system was ready-made for empire. Ayllus were networks of families and individuals who traded in labor and subsistence and ritual activities. This system meant built-in labor obligations existed, as did rules about marriage and ancestor worship. All of these rules were reinforced through ritual, allowing the Inca to build upon Ayllu rituals to increase his power, authority, and divine claim to the throne. Future Incas were only eligible to rule if they descended from the royal ayllu.

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After the Inca had established their legitimacy, their expansion would begin during the reign of Pachacuti. By the time of his death in 1471, he conquered not only the Chanca and Quechua ethnicities of the southern Andes, but also the coastal Chimú. Topa Inca continued his father’s conquests; he was succeeded by Huayna Capac. The Inca used Cuzco as their imperial capital, expanding it around several huacas into the shape of a puma. They also built the Sun Temple in honor of the god Inti who was all-powerful, benevolent and from whom Inca rulers claimed to descend.

Not only did the Ayllu help the empire take shape, but it also became its main administrative units once it had expanded. Local Ayllu nobility reinforced their connection to the empire through the mumification and consecration of ancestors. Mummies or other sacred bundles would become “huacas,” venerated in Cusco by Inca nobility to establish a sacred connection between local Ayllus and the empire. (See map for the connections between Cuzco and surrounding areas). Labor obligations were the primary form of taxation organized through the Ayllu and closely recorded on quipus. Through Ayllu labor, the Inca were able to collect taxes, store and distribute food, and build their road system. The Inca road system eventually covered over 5,500 kilometers, stretching from Ecuador to Chile. Counting all of the sub-systems, the roads covered brings that amount closer to thirty-two thousand aggregate kilometers. The roads varied in sophistication and width, depending on conditions and need, but could include staircases, causeways, and suspension bridges. This complexity had added elements of efficiency through the Inca network of messengers that would operate twenty-four hours a day and carry a message from one location in the empire to another in a matter of a few days.

The Inca also used religion extensively to keep their empire strong. Each Ayllu had a huaca connected to it with multiple meanings, including as an origin point. The sun, on the other hand, was the royal progenitor, and the temple Coricancha located in Cuzco was the most important temple to the sun. From Coricancha radiated forty-one sacred lines or ceques connected to 328 huacas in the Cuzco valley. Many huacas were connected to water or rain, giving a sacred importance to some drains, fountains, baths, and libations.

An empire of this size would not have been possible without an effective army as well. Inca arms reflected the landscape. Their armor was light, they used lots of projectiles, and they protected their fortresses with boulders that could be rolled down hills.
All these defenses used the advantages the mountains offered. Some archers were even recruited from the Amazon. Their strength was in their combination of mobility and superior numbers. There was very little siege tradition; battles would commence as soon as the armies arrived.

All empires would collect taxes, have armies, and build temples. The Inca were so successful, it seems, because they considered the most fundamental elements of Andean culture to strengthen their hold on power. Pre-Inca Andean society was a uniquely parallel one in which both men and women were important contributors to Andean religious, economic, and political life. In forming their empire, the Inca were very cognizant of Andean understanding of gender. To garner the support of the female sphere (some scholars say to undermine it), the Incas created a revered class of aclla women; these were attractive girls who would represent their newly conquered home Ayllu as elites of the glorious Inca Empire. These “chosen women” not only solidified Inca imperial bonds through marriage, converting a political entity into a family, but also expanded Inca religious legitimacy when a chosen few were periodically sacrificed and converted into the “divine custodians” of their communities.

10.8.9 Machu Picchu

Nestled in the Peruvian Andes, Machu Picchu is undoubtedly the most well-known Inca site by modern tourists. The site is located at 8,000 feet above sea level, in a forested area. It is framed by the Urubamba River and sits on a ridge between two peaks. The site itself must have been spectacular before construction began, but the complex itself is nothing short of extraordinary.30

Despite its iconic status, much less is known about its fifteenth century role. Its construction seems to have been ordered by Pachacuti, who used it as a royal retreat of sorts from Cuzco. The most attractive time for travel would have been during the winter when Machu Picchu was much warmer than Cuzco. There is evidence of the same skilled craftspeople and retainers that accompanied the Inca in Cuzco maintaining a presence in Machu Picchu as well. Macchu Picchu did have tracts of surrounding land to feed the court, the emperor, and visiting dignitaries, and to supply the ceremonies connected with their arrival. However, this was not a city. Only a few year-round residents inhabited it, and even at its

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30 Ibid., 108-09.
seasonal height, the population only reached about 750. There are agricultural terraces which grew potatoes and maize, and a spring for bathing and drinking that was connected by aqueducts to a fountain between the Temple of the Sun and the residences. There are one hundred and seventy-two structures at the site in total, including residences for the Inca’s elite retinue and smaller dwellings for the servants. Also thirty buildings are dedicated to ceremonial purposes, including the Temple of the Three Windows; the Intihuatana, an oblong rock at the head of a large staircase; and The Temple of the Condor. The construction is not only visually impressive, but also structural engineers have remarked at its sophisticated drainage and foundation work that have allowed it to stand mostly intact for more than 500 years.  

10.9 NORTH AMERICA

While most evidence points to human migration through North America to South America, the hallmarks of civilization would arrive later in what are now the United States and Canada. Many of us refer to the areas connected by Panama simply as “The Americas,” but the Panamanian land bridge first linked the two continents only two million years ago. This was prior to human arrival in the Americas, but this separate development meant that North and South American flora and fauna experienced millions of years of separate development and evolution. This distinct development would influence the pace and patterns of human settlement in the Americas a great deal.

10.9.1 The West

The arrival of maize, beans, and squash from northern Mexico helped mark the transition to sedentary culture in the Southwest of what is now the United States. There is some evidence of primitive maize dating back to the middle of the second millennium BCE, but it would not become widespread until about 1000 BCE. A newer, drastically different maize, “Maiz de Ocho,” is believed to have been the key to the flourishing of sedentary villages across the Southwest and to the eventual appearance of large pithouse villages around 500 BCE. Maiz de Ocho is better suited to arid conditions and yields larger kernels which are more easily milled. Pithouses, dwellings whose name indicates that its walls were in fact the sides of an excavated pit, became widespread across the Southwest because they were “thermally efficient.” They lost less heat than aboveground structures in winter and, as they were built into the ground, were cooler in the summer. Pithouses remained in wide use in the area until about 700 CE, when more complex exchange networks and social organization led to more diverse settlement patterns.  

One of these new settlement patterns was the “great pueblo” that appeared as part of the “Chaco Phenomenon” around 900 CE. To deal with unpredictable summer rainfall, the Chaco Anasazi people of New Mexico built three “great houses”—Peñasco Blanco, Pueblo Bonito, and Una Vida,” a large structure situated at natural drainage junctions. The semi-circular town of Pueblo Bonito grew out of a pithouse village to eventually form a semi-circular network of more than 600 rooms and reached a height of five stories along the canyon’s rear wall. The complex’s walls were built of

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31 Ibid., 112-114.  
sandstone blocks whose surfaces and cracks were smoothed and shored up by a clay-sand mortar. Construction of the high ceilings also involved complicated ashlar masonry patterns that could be covered with “adobe plaster or matting.”

Each of the larger Chaco Canyon sites also had at least one great kiva. Kivas were subterranean gathering places which were used by individual kin groups for work, for education, and for ceremonies. Larger kivas were gathering places for more formal ceremonies where political decisions affecting the entire community were often made.

By 1050 CE, five great pueblos in Chaco Canyon supported a total population of around 5,000 people. While most lived within the relatively compact canyon area, the influence of this populace reached well beyond the immediate pueblo complex. Evidence indicates that the Chaco Canyon people may have had exclusive access to sources of turquoise all over New Mexico and used the stone in their workshops where they produced vases, human effigy vessels, incense burners, bells, trumpets and painted tables. By the early twelfth century, Chaco Canyon’s influence extended to much of northwest New Mexico and southern Colorado, where more than seventy outlying sites contained kivas, Chaco pottery, and similar architecture to what was found in Pueblo Bonito. The Chaco also developed a road system that may have been for the distribution of resources or pilgrimages. Either way, the road construction involved considerable cooperation to craft, at different stages, stairways and ramps carved out of bedrock and other pathways lined with boulders. After 1130 CE, drought and growing population densities led to a 100-year decline of the Chaco sites. By the 1200s most of the pueblos of the Chaco system were empty, their population dispersed and away from the canyon. While this was the height of Anasazi village life, they continued to thrive culturally and are recognized as the precursors of the modern Pueblo peoples.

10.9.2 The Pacific coast

Further west, cultures along North America’s Pacific coast were also sedentary, but did not derive their existence from farming. Instead, multiple Pacific coast cultures took advantage of abundant ocean resources, such as various fish species, sea mammals, timber, shellfish, waterfowl, game, and wild plants. The abundance of these resources often suggests that coastal cultures were less complex than their contemporaries in the interior, but the ravages of climate required tremendous adaptation over time. During the Late Holocene period alone, from 2000 BCE to the present, periodic colder episodes may have led to consequences as disparate as lakeside flooding, lowering

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33 Ibid., 301.
34 Ibid., 323-329.
of tree lines, drought, and a reduction of available marsh areas. Northwestern Coastal peoples, for example, addressed this volatility by never putting their eggs in one basket. While they may have primarily eaten acorns or salmon, they made sure to always maintain a secondary food source. Further south, the Chumash, a people inhabiting the central and southern California coast, developed ceremonial centers, provinces incorporating several villages, sophisticated “watercraft,” and vibrant trade with the interior. In fact, this trade helped the Chumash avoid scarcities as well.35

10.9.3 The Plains

The Great Plains represented perhaps the largest area of pre-Columbian North America, but it is also one of the least understood. The Wild West shows of the nineteenth century produced the lasting yet erroneous impression that the Plains Indian culture remained unchanged for centuries. Big game hunters in the Clovis Culture first inhabited the area as early as 13,000 years ago. As big game became extinct around 9000 BCE, Paleo-Indian groups on the plains turned to foraging and fishing in river valleys and to hunting of primarily bison as well as deer and fowl. By 9000 BCE, the Ice Age had left behind a vast expanse of “arid grassland” from Alaska to the Gulf of Mexico, an expanse known as the “Great Bison Belt.” Long before European explorers introduced horses, people on the Great Plains had developed sophisticated processes of hunting bison on foot that involved some hunters disguised as bison, others orchestrating movements among hunting groups, and others shouting to drive the bison toward pre-selected “traps” or “jumps.” Dozens of bison would fall over a precipice to their deaths. By 6000 BCE, plains hunters had more sophisticated projectiles that could penetrate the skin of a surrounded animal or one that had become stuck in mud or sand. Findings at the Olsen-Chubbeeck site in Colorado indicate that by 6500 BCE, Paleo-Indians had also began to butcher seventy-five percent of the animals they killed, which could sustain a group of 100 people for more than a month.36 Early Plains Archaic (5600 – 3000 BCE) activity, while still largely dependent on bison, shows some increasing reliance on fish, fowl, and berries, possibly indicating warmer and drier conditions that “diminished grass cover throughout the Central Plains.” Middle Plains Archaic peoples (2900 BCE to 1000 BCE) adapted their bison hunting to allow for a more sedentary existence, returning to the same hunting ground year after year, and making much of

36 Ibid., 93-96.
the bison meat into pemmican (a brick of pounded flesh and fat), that could be stored for seasons when bison were less plentiful (Fagan 123). By 550 CE, theLate Plains Archaic people had fully incorporated the bow and arrow into their hunts, which tended to be less frequent but more productive, often incorporating “mass kill sites” that were used for hundreds of years in some cases.37

10.9.4 The Eastern Woodlands

The term ‘Middle Woodland’ is occasionally used to refer the period between 200 BCE and CE 400; this coincided with the influence of the Hopewell culture over much of eastern North America. Previous to the Hopewell ascendance, the Adena people built hundreds of burial mounds in and around central Ohio (2300 – 2100 BCE). Accompanying the burials were dozens of types of “grave goods” including spear points, stone pipes, and sculptures of animals and human hands. Hopewell mound building (1000 – 200 BCE) and culture as a whole certainly had antecedents in the Adena and early Woodland cultures as a whole, but the Hopewell tradition stands out in its grandiosity. With their center in the Ohio Valley, the Hopewell created hundreds of hectares of earthworks with regionally specific styles of craftsmanship. Copper, shells, obsidian, and shark and alligator teeth were all used to create personal adornments, containers, pipes, and figurines. Much of this artifact diversity can be attributed to the size and vitality of the Hopewell exchange zone which extended across much of eastern North America from Florida to the Great Lakes. While there is evidence that areas as far away as North Dakota participated in this exchange network, the so-called “core areas” were in the Mississippi, Illinois, Scioto, and Miami river valleys in Illinois and Ohio. As trade picked up, so did the ceremonial and political significance of the artifacts received by local leaders and ultimately included in burial mounds. Some artifacts were buried with their owners at death as symbols of their power in life. The expansion of ceremony through these objects also meant that many of the Hopewellian centers shared physical characteristics such as both platform and conical mounds, structures for cremation, and burial vaults. The local populations who participated in these ceremonies seem to have lived near, but not in, the ceremonial centers themselves in single or multiple family households. Although close to other residents, Hopewell communities were scattered across the area, subsisting through a mix of foraging and horticulture.38

10.9.5 Cahokia

Other North American mound builders established their center at Cahokia, across the Mississippi River from present day Saint Louis. Cahokia was inhabited from about 700 to 1400 CE. At its peak, the city covered nearly six square miles and 10,000 to 20,000 people lived there. Over 120 mounds were built over time, and most of the mounds were enlarged several times. Houses were arranged in rows and around open plazas, and agricultural fields were cultivated nearby. Other mound centers and communities were located in the contiguous “American Bottom” region. Centralization and the beginning of the Mississippian period happened around 1050 CE, and the transition to the Moorehead phase—marked by decreasing mound building—happened about 1200.39

37 Ibid., 122-127.
38 Ibid., 417-422.
What scholars still don’t know about Cahokia is why there was decreased mound building after 1200, during the so-called Moorehead Phase. While scholars usually associate decreased construction with societal decline, recent scholarship suggests that the opposite may be true for Cahokia. Instead of declining, Cahokia might have gone through a transition to a lesser focus on staples and storage and greater focus toward prestige goods and economic power. Their decreased mound building may have coincided with their energy being more focused on controlling trade across the Mississippian Southeast. Scholars see evidence of this shift with an increase in nonlocal raw materials and “prestige goods” at Cahokia during this period, such materials and goods as minerals, igneous rock for axeheads, ceramics, marine shell, quartz crystal, and copper.40

Figure 10.8 | Monks Mound in July
Author: User “Skubasteve834”
Source: Wikimedia Commons
License: CC BY-SA 3.0

40 Ibid.
10.9.6 The Arctic

The Arctic’s harsh climate meant that it was one of the last areas in the Americas to be permanently settled. The first Paleo-Eskimo populations appeared around 4,000 years ago emanating from Eastern Siberia. They were left behind by the original American colonists. The Arctic colonists expanded rapidly across Alaska, through Canada, and into Greenland as they all possessed arctic small tool kits including the important toggle headed harpoons to kill walrus and seal. In general, their evolution was from reindeer hunters to seal hunters, but both types of societies continued to exist side by side.

10.10 CONCLUSION

Humans migrated to the Americas by 15,000 BCE and perhaps as many as 3,000 years before. The earliest recognizable civilizations in the Americas were in Mesoamerica and began during the Archaic period, ten thousand years ago. Farmers in Mesoamerica began to cultivate crops such as corn, squash, beans, chilies, manioc, and sweet potatoes. During Mesoamerica’s more recent Formative Period, the rise of the Olmec Civilization occurred. They would be followed by several others, most notably the Maya, and further to the north the Aztec Empire that was at its height when the Spanish arrived in 1519.

Around 3,000 BCE, small campsites and fishing villages began to appear in Peru. These were eventually replaced by more permanent structures and agriculture communities which would be the antecedents to the incredibly complex cultures of the Classical Andes in Peru, Chile, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Colombia. Among these Pacific Coast cultures were the Moche, the Huari, the Chimú, and the Nazca. Many of these cultures had their political and cultural centers in large urban areas like Tiwanaku, which had a population of about 40,000 people around 100 CE. More than 1,000 years later, it was the Inca Empire that would build on these cultural traditions, extending its rule over more than 5,000 kilometers from Ecuador to Chile.

Sedentary culture first began in North America when people in the desert southwest of the continent began to cultivate maize about three thousand years ago. Groups like the Chaco Anasazi in New Mexico would eventually construct massive complexes of aqueducts, homes, and ceremonial spaces by about 1000 CE. There were other major cultural areas all over North America, from Florida to the frigid Arctic.

Despite (or perhaps because of) their late arrival in the Americas, humans developed at an incredible pace all across the region. The residents of the Americas developed remarkable political sophistication, infrastructure, religion, art, economic integration, and technology that Europeans marveled at when they arrived in the late fifteenth century.

10.11 WORKS CONSULTED AND FURTHER READING


Reilly III, F. Kent. “Art, Ritual and Rulership in the Olmec World.” In Smith and Masson, eds.


### 10.12 LINKS TO PRIMARY SOURCES

**Mesoamerica**

The Aztecs and the Making of Colonial Mexico

http://publications.newberry.org/aztecs/  

Maya Hieroglyphic Writing: The Ancient Codices

http://www.famsi.org/mayawriting/codices/index.html  

Popul Vuh: Creation account of the Quiché Mayan People

The Andes
Moche Decorated Ceramics
   http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/moch/hd_moch.htm
Tiwanaku
   http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/567
Nazca
   http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/700
Machu Picchu
   http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/274

North America
Chaco Canyon
   https://www.nps.gov/museum/exhibits/chcu/index1.html
Hopewell Ceremonial Earthworks
   http://worldheritageohio.org/hopewell-ceremonial-earthworks/
Cahokia Mounds
   http://cahokiamounds.org/explore/
11.1 CHRONOLOGY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year Range</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1206 – 1368 CE</td>
<td>Mongol Empire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1240s – 1502 CE</td>
<td>Khanate of the Golden Horde</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1225 – 1370 CE</td>
<td>The Khanate of Chagatai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1265 – 1335 CE</td>
<td>The Khanate of the Ilkhans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1370 – 1507 CE</td>
<td>Timurid Dynasty</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

11.2 INTRODUCTION

The year was 1216 CE, and a detachment of Mongols campaigned westward out of Mongolia and into Central Asia. They were in aggressive pursuit of the leader of the neighboring Naiman tribe, a certain Küchläg, who had the misfortune of allying with Jamukha, the principle rival of Genghis Khan. The khan had quickly dispatched with their combined armies, forcing Küchläg to seek refuge among the Qara Khitai, located to the southwest. In the intervening years, Küchläg somehow managed to usurp the Qara Khitai throne. Not long thereafter, he attacked a...
Karlut tribal confederacy that appealed to Genghis Khan for protection. The Mongol leader deployed 30,000 troops to track down this troublesome renegade. By 1218 the inveterate adventurer had fled south towards the Pamir Mountains in modern day Afghanistan. Eventually, the Mongol general Jebe, along with the help of some local hunters, caught up with Küchüüg and executed him. And yet it was the pursuit of the fugitive Küchüüg that inadvertently brought the Mongols into Central Asia. Their conquest of the region was one without the forethought of empire, yet the area absorbed, adopted, and integrated the Mongols, just as it had incorporated external forces many times before.

Central Asia displayed a remarkable ability to embrace foreign influences, such as the Turkic migrations, expansion of Islam, and Mongol conquest, internalizing them and making them its own, much like an interesting stew. Situated at the crossroads of many empires, Central Asia was tucked in between the Chinese, Europeans, Arabs, and Indians. There, in the middle of these grand civilizations, just along the Great Silk Road, the region connected the Orient to the Occident and linked it to major patterns in world history. It was from there that these external forces saturated the area and shaped the course of its history.

**Map 11.2 | Map of the Silk Road**

Author: User "Captain Blood"
Source: Wikimedia Commons
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### 11.3 QUESTIONS TO GUIDE YOUR READING

1. How did the geography of Central Asia have an impact on its history?
2. In what way did the Turkic migrations change the culture of Central Asia?
3. How did the nomadic way of life facilitate the Turkic conquest of the region?

4. The process of Islamization took place over centuries. What helped to expedite the conversion process?

5. How did Genghis Khan differ from his predecessors? What enabled him to unite all of the Mongol tribes?

6. What was the significance of Inju to the history of the Chagatai Khanate?

7. What role did religion play in the Ilkhanate?

8. Why did Timur attempt to externalize the violence of the steppe?

9. Has Central Asia been an interesting stew of foreign influences, or has it been the product of internal forces?

10. Should the modern day states of Afghanistan and Iran be considered a part of Central Asia? Going back to the Mongol conquest of the region, what similarities do these states share with the core of Central Asia? What are some of the differences?

11. Should the conflict that has existed between nomadic and sedentary societies be considered the primary force determining the course of Central Asian history?

12. What has been the legacy of the conquests of Central Asia? How have the various empires shaped the region since the Turkic migrations?

### 11.4 KEY TERMS

- Abaga Khan
- Battle of Talas River
- Batu
- Berke Khan
- Börte Üjin
- Chagatay
- Chaghatay Khanate
- Gaykhatu Khan
- General Jebe
- General Sübedey
- Genghis-Khanid Legitimacy
- Golden Horde
- Grand Duchy of Moscow
- Great Hunt
- Güyük
- Heights of Baljuna
- Hülegü Khan
- Inalchuq
- Inju
- Islamization
- Jalal al-Din Manguburti
- Jin Dynasty
- Juchi
- Jurchen
• Kublai Khan
• Khuriltai
• Khwarazmshah Ala al-Din Muhammad II
• Küchüğ
• Mahmud Ghazan
• Möngke
• Mongol Horse
• Naqshbandi Order
• Nasir-ud-Din Mahmud Shah Tughluq
• Nomad Battle Strategy
• Ögedey
• Orkhon Steppe
• Pastoral Nomadism
• Qaghan
• Qutayba ibn Muslim
• Rashid al-Din Hamadani
• Recurve Bow

• Samanids
• Shihihutug
• Silk Road
• Sufism
• Tax Farming
• Temujin (Genghis Khan)
• The Khanate of the Ilkhans
• Thumb Ring
• Timur
• Tokhtamysh
• Toluy
• Transoxiana
• Turkification
• Ulus
• Xiongnu
• Yasa
• Yasaviyah Order

11.5 GEOGRAPHY OF CENTRAL ASIA

Unlike many other regions of the world, Central Asia lacks the distinct topographical features necessary to delineate boundaries. There are several broad geographical zones in Central Asia nonetheless. Perhaps the most well-known topographic area in Central Asia is the great Eurasian Steppe, a latitudinal belt of grassland that stretches from Eastern Europe through Mongolia. It was there that nomadic horse cultures flourished. Located to the south of the steppe was the core of Central Asia, an area known as Transoxiana. This is a dry region that lies beyond the Oxus River, known today as the Amu Darya. In Transoxiana...
trade settlements and irrigated agriculture developed along the Amu Darya and Syr Darya watersheds. Finally, located to the far south, lies the mountainous area of Khorasan, the cultural capital of Persia prior to the appearance of the Mongols.

11.6 TURKIC MIGRATIONS

Nomadic migration was the first major external influence that would be integrated into the culture of the region, as steppe peoples imparted a lasting impression to Central Asia. Beginning with the Xiongnu (209 BCE – 93 CE), a long-term exodus of steppe peoples spread out of Mongolia and into Central Asia. For millennia prior to the rise of Genghis Khan, the winners of the tribal battles for predominance on the Orkhon Steppe, prime pastureland located in western Mongolia, forced the vanquished off to the west. These periodic mass departures of Turkic tribes out of the area progressed southwest into Central Asia in a migration conquest, not a trade diaspora, as happened to Africans during the slave trade. These new arrivals forever altered the ethnic makeup of Central Asia. Previously, the region had been predominantly Persian and Indo-European; when the waves of Turkic tribes penetrated into the area, though, they occupied the great steppe and agricultural basin of Central Asia and pushed these Persian groups to the fringes. Over time, they slowly Turkified the area, endowing it with a more nomadic character.
These Turkic tribesmen divided their society into five strata. Members of the royal tribal clan presided over the social order. This dominant group bestowed its name on the tribal confederation, a collection of tribes. Positioned below them were their allies and associated tribes. Next were the common herders who did not participate in struggles for power. Lower still were the artisans, such as blacksmiths and leatherworkers. And finally, we find slaves at the bottom of the hierarchy. They usually acquired their lowly position in society by means of capture in times of war.

These Turkic wanderers belonged to an unstable confederation of clans and tribes roaming the steppe, loosely bound under a khagan, a charismatic monarch who laid claim to some sort of divine providence. Khagan made use of their personal charisma, as well as their political and military smarts, in order to maintain group cohesion and ward off challenges to their authority. Under strong khagans, tribal confederations were capable of wielding incredible power, but, more often than not, they were notoriously volatile and often imploded upon the death of their leader, collapsing into a brutal struggle for power. The winners in this struggle forced the losers out of the area, and while many went to the north or south, most to the west. Victorious tribes remained in Mongolia on the highly-prized Orkhon Steppe, located near Lake Baikal.

Although the khaganate was a diarchy, or system of dual rule, with the oldest son controlling half of the land, it lacked a clear transition of power, like hereditary succession. Because the khagan theoretically ruled over a series of tribal confederations, any member of the tribal confederation could ascend to the position of monarch by demonstrating their personal charisma and martial skills on the battlefield. This often resulted in a fight to prove oneself that could erupt into broader inter-tribal strife.

Periodic Turkic migrations into Central Asia transformed the sedentary culture of the region. These steppe peoples lived by practicing pastoral nomadism, a way of life centered around herding that most likely predated the Turks but was eventually adopted by them. Their culture was utilitarian in nature and provided all the necessities for life on the great plains of Central Asia, including food, clothing, shelter, and transportation. In order to maintain their pastures, these horsemen followed a fixed, seasonal pattern of migration because they did not want their flocks to overgraze. During the winter, for instance, they camped in foothills and mountain valleys, where it was warmer at lower altitudes. There they built fixed shelters with one main objective: survival. The oral tradition, which included songs, epic narratives, and parables, flourished during the inhospitable winter months.

Figure 11.1 | A Naadam Boy Riding a Mongol Horse on the Mongolian Steppe
Author: User “invictshOG”
Source: Wikimedia Commons
License: Public Domain
In the spring, the nomads made a ten-day trip to the prairieland to graze their herds on fresh grass that just emerged from mountain runoff. There the women and children erected a central camp, usually comprising four yurts, while the men divided the flocks into their specific pastures. They established about ten satellite camps around the central camp, with each herd positioned about ten to twenty miles from the center. This separation of camps minimized the potential threat that their enemies posed to their herds. During the summer, they traveled to mid-mountain fields, where it was cooler and offered access to water. Covering about ten miles per day, it took them approximately fifty days to reach this campground. Finally, in the fall, they returned to the steppe in order to make provisions for the harsh winter. These preparations included drying and preserving their meat, and taking milk from their animals.

Enhanced mobility was the key to the survival of pastoral nomads. They actually spent a good portion of their lives on horseback and were accustomed to moving over long distances, taking all of life’s necessities with them. This allowed them to retreat quickly from rival attacks or areas afflicted by natural disaster. Though their way of life appeared seemingly innocuous, it enhanced the ability of these horsemen to expand rapidly and conquer neighboring groups. It was in this manner that pastoral nomadism accorded its practitioners certain martial advantages. The annual Great Hunt served as a military proving ground that helped them hone their fighting skills. In preparation for winter, tribes deployed groups of mounted men, who dispersed in different directions, with the intent of driving every animal within a set perimeter inwards to converge at a pre-established central point. With great coordination taking place over vast distances, these migrants learned how to coordinate their movements based on a color scheme of arrows and whistling patterns. Their herding tactics easily translated to military tactics and proved devastating in combat.

Nomad society was certainly capable of waging war. Their ability to shoot from horseback provided them with a mobile and lethal means to overcome slower, infantry-based armies. These horsemen carried portable, three-foot-long recurve bows capable of piercing enemy armor from over 450 meters. Metal thumb rings enabled a rapid rate of fire without damaging the archer’s fingers. Raised hunting and herding from horseback, nomads even learned how to sleep in the saddle of the Mongol Horse, their indigenous horse. Though not tall in stature,
these sturdy mounts displayed impressive endurance and allowed groups to traverse great distances, often up to 160 kilometers per day. The speed with which they could cover territory on their steeds often confused sedentary forces and multiplied the terror factor. Native to the region, these horses were able to forage for themselves and survive on their own. Nomads did not require supply lines and could, therefore, remain on campaign for an average of three years. The combination of the skills acquired from herding, the double-compound bow, and the Mongol Horse, translated to a formula for political domination of Central Asia, at least until the arrival of Genghis Khan and the Mongols.

Turkic domination of the region began on the battlefield, where the strategies of steppe warfare proved devastating to infantry-based armies. The first stage of the **nomad battle strategy** often commenced with a feigned retreat, in which a group of their cavalry engaged the adversary, retreated, and encouraged their opponents to follow them. This technique lengthened the lines of their challengers, as they pursued the “retreating” Turkic cavalrymen, who were busy shooting backwards from horseback. The next stage of battle involved outflanking the enemy and enveloping them. They then showered their foes with arrows, the objective being to pin the opponent in place. This alone was often enough to break a sedentary power. When fighting against another steppe power, their reserves charged the opponent’s lines so as to break their forces into pieces and finish them off piecemeal. Most importantly, because of their limited numbers, the Turkic horsemen were reluctant to risk fighting an enemy that they did not believe they could defeat, instead, they would poison water wells, scorch the earth, and retreat. The Mongols would later employ similar battle tactics that allowed them to conquer the whole of Central Asia.

### 11.7 Islam

Islam was not the first foreign religion to arrive in Central Asia. In fact, the region had already been exposed to many foreign systems of belief prior to the coming of Islam in the seventh century. Local merchants conducting long-distance trade along the Silk Road came into contact with many different religious doctrines; the trade route served as a conveyor of not only goods but also concepts. Generally, intellectual diffusion is not a one-way street, as western ideas traveled eastward and eastern concepts filtered into the west. In this manner, the Silk Road carried Buddhism, Judaism, Zoroastrianism (an Iranian religion with both monotheistic and dualist elements), Siberian Shamanism, and even Nestorian Christianity to Central Asia. The great number of religions found in the area at the introduction of Islam testified to the great tolerance of the region. By the tenth century, however, all of the non-monotheistic faiths had disappeared from Central Asia in the aftermath of Islamic conquest.

It was **Qutayba ibn Muslim** (669 – 716) who expanded the presence of Islam in Central Asia during the eighth century, as the general’s forces swept into the area, defeated the Persians, and by 715 CE completed their conquest of **Transoxiana**, the region located beyond the Oxus River. A decisive Arab Muslim victory over the Chinese at the **Battle of Talas River** in 751 secured Central Asia and repulsed the only major challenge to Islamic rule. The triumph over the Chinese made it possible for Islam to become entrenched in the region. The Persian **Samanids** (819 – 999) made Islam the official state religion and established a school of theology in Bukhara.
But **Islamization** did not take place overnight; instead, it took centuries. Transoxiana slowly Islamicized, though it never Arabized. The peoples in the area remained culturally Turkic and Persian. Central Asia retained its Turkic and Persian languages, albeit with a heavy Arabic influence in religious vocabulary.

It took generations for Islam to become fully ingrained in the culture of Central Asia. Unlike other places, where the religion filtered into society from the bottom up, as was the case in Southeast Asia, Islamization in the region occurred from the top down. The process incorporated native peoples, who took part in the process of conversion. Local leaders submitted to the faith in order to maintain their social status and elite position in society. The conquerors offered the Central Asian nobility important positions in the administration so long as they professed Islam, providing the opportunity for the native elite to rule in their own right.

Islam also displayed a remarkable ability to assimilate indigenous Central Asian frontier customs as it advanced through the area, allowing some traditional practices to remain so long as it accelerated conversion. By accepting certain harmless practices in order to Islamicize Central Asia, these Muslims mirrored Christian efforts to Christianize Eastern Europe.

### 11.7.1 Sufism

The Islam of Central Asia differed greatly from that which originated in the Arabian Peninsula. This vast region embraced Islam, remaking it into a syncretic faith that was culturally its own. Essentially a sort of mysticism, or folk Islam, Sufism in the area emerged from the fusion of Islamic sedentary civilization and Buddhist nomadic culture. Central Asians were generally receptive and tolerant of foreign beliefs, but in order for the faith to take root in the area, missionaries had to make some concessions to the native, specifically pastoral-nomadic culture. The urban-dwelling and agricultural populations of the region generally accepted Sunni Islam and the law of the Sharia; however, the culture and lifestyle of the itinerant peoples of the steppe did not readily conform to the rigors of Islamic law. Sufism helped convert these tribes to Islam, in part due to its doctrinal flexibility. What arose from the mix of orthodox Islam and Turkic pastoral nomadism was a uniquely Central Asian brand of Sufism.

In this context, Sufis evangelized to groups on the frontier of Central Asia. Actually, Sufi merchants were largely responsible for bringing Islam to the region. Central Asian Sufi orders such as the **Yasaviyah** established themselves along trade routes in order to reach out to travelers. These missionaries also proselytized to the Turkic communities on the steppe. Meanwhile, the **Naqshbandi Order**, operating in travel lodges, spread Sufism by ministering to Iranian and Tajik peoples. The followers of these Sufi orders believed that they could better disseminate a form of the faith that was more loving and caring.

### 11.8 THE MONGOL ERA

The Mongols greatly expanded into Central Asia during the thirteenth century. There they reunited with the Turkic groups who had been expelled from the Orkhon Steppe over the course
of a millennia. The Mongols confronted many Turkic peoples who had radically altered their existence since their days on the plains and adopted a stationary way of life.

At this point in time, forces indigenous to the region shaped the world around it; foreign influence waned as a consequence of nativism. The Mongols created the largest empire in history, as Central Asia externalized the violence of the steppe, yet it was with enormous difficulty that they even united as a people. Perhaps the greatest obstacle for them to overcome was their own divisiveness. Inter-tribal strife was commonplace, but once they united, the Mongols expanded deep into Russia, China, India, and the Middle East.

11.8.1 A New System for Unity

It was Temujin (1206 – 1227), later known as Genghis Khan, who brought this fractured people together and developed a method of governance and expansion that lasted long after his death. Born into the aristocratic Borjigin Clan, most likely in 1167, Temujin’s success related to his convictions. Inspired by oral tales of past glory, his personal charisma and sense of fate enabled him to survive a youth of life-threatening privation, eventually bringing the various Mongol tribes together.

With a keen awareness of his own destiny, Temujin was inspired to achieve greatness. He had a clear vision that God predestined him to function as His temporal ruler on Earth and exhibited a desire to claim universal lordship. Through a series of fights, he eventually subdued local clans in eastern Mongolia. He then expanded his political control of the region through a marriage alliance to Börte Üjin, a member of the Olkhonut Tribe, which maintained friendly relations with Temujin’s Khiyad Tribe. The Merkit Tribe kidnapped his wife not long thereafter. Temujin heroically rescued her from this rival tribe, but she had been held in captivity for eight months and soon gave birth to their first son Juchi, who suffered from an uncertain parentage. Some historians believe that Temujin acquired the notion of conquering all of the Mongols from his liberation of Börte.

Despite his early successes, Temujin remained greatly outnumbered by his opponents and was forced to retreat to the Heights of Baljuna, located in modern day Manchuria, where he convinced his followers to swear an oath of total allegiance to him who called for them to fight unto death for him. For their unwavering loyalty, he promised his supporters
a share in his glory upon their victory. Some Mongol tribes yielded to Temujin by 1204 and agreed to recognize him as their leader, thus paving the way for a period of final unification of the Mongols.

Temujin demanded a high level of commitment from his people, endowing his forces with a coherency and unity of purpose. He also promoted allies based on merit, rather than by the traditional Mongol method of advancement based on position within the tribal hierarchy. His opponents, on the other hand, lacked his force of will and entered into a series of squabbles. Temujin took advantage of their internal fights, emerging victorious by 1206. The culmination of his ascendency took place that year at a Mongol assembly, or khuriltai, which appointed him as the first undisputed ruler of the Mongols, uniting them under the authority of his position. Temujin adopted the name of Genghis Khan, or universal ruler in this context.

Genghis Khan presided over peoples who had experienced near-constant warfare since 1160. Previously, tribal confederations were loose alliances held together under charismatic khagans and punctuated by tribal warfare. He consolidated all of these diverse tribes and reshaped them into a single “nation,” endowing Mongol society with more cohesiveness, a key element to future expansion. He did this by developing a new political order that deviated from tradition.

Restructuring Mongol society into new administrative military units that provided the necessary impetus for expansion, Genghis Khan charged each of his commanders with a tribal unit that was responsible for controlling a particular pasture and fielding soldiers when needed. His system had the added effect of assuaging previous conflicts by assigning the members of one tribe to military detail with other rival tribes, thus emphasizing collective responsibility. By forcing the men from one tribe to stand guard over the pastures of other tribes, he weakened loyalty to ancestral lines and homelands, thereby reinforcing his own leadership.

Genghis Khan represented the ultimate source of justice in his newly-formed state, consolidating his position and making it more authoritarian. By embodying autocracy in the position of the khan, he made the title of khan institutional, not personal, building a new foundation for legitimacy. Previously, tribal leadership rested on charisma. Furthermore, the great khan could not be self-proclaimed but had to be recognized at a khuriltai.

His law, known as Yassa, originated as decrees delivered during war. Yassa remained secret, which allowed Genghis Khan to adapt it to changing circumstances. For example, he later incorporated cultural elements indigenous to Mongol society into the law. He based his code on shamanist principles, and it served as the social and political formula binding all Mongols together. It also strengthened Mongol, rather than clan or tribal identification. It is believed that Genghis Khan himself directed the law, while his stepbrother Shihihutag served as the high judge, and his son Chagatai administered its execution.

### 11.8.2 Expansion

Genghis Khan encouraged Mongol expansion and the conquest of Central Asia. After subduing inter-tribal warfare, he followed tradition and exported the violence of the steppe. He offered incentives to his soldiers; the spoils of victory went to those who followed him into battle. Genghis Khan received ten percent of the loot and divided the remaining ninety percent between
his commanders, who, in turn, distributed their portion amongst their retinue. This plunder also included the inhabitants of all subjugated lands, which resulted in the dramatic depopulation of conquered territory, as the khan received his share of artisans and craftsmen to be sent back to the itinerant Mongol capital.

In 1208, Genghis Khan targeted northern China for pillaging, but he quickly encountered considerable difficulties overcoming well-fortified Chinese municipalities. The Chinese had ringed their principle metropolises with moats and connected these major urban centers to several smaller satellite towns via underground tunnels. The Mongols had attempted to starve these cities into submission, but they lacked the military technology necessary to overcome walls forty-feet high and fifty-feet wide. To counter these challenges, they imported the technology necessary to defeat Chinese cities. Genghis Khan also compensated for a lack of native talent by incorporating foreign engineers into their army. He utilized Arab, Persian, and Chinese experts to solve the problem of defeating Chinese municipalities. Their knowledge of siege warfare enabled them to construct the siege engines capable of subjugating cities.

Adding these new sedentary peoples to the khan’s army inevitably caused problems, for these men hailed from distinctly different cultures and did not interact well with the Mongols.
Genghis Khan, therefore, combined the mobility of his forces with the slow, bulky siege engines of the sedentary armies. While he kept his cavalry independent from the foreign engineers, mostly comprised of mercenaries, he blended these two disparate groups on the battlefield to his strategic advantage.

For the Mongols, building an empire proved much easier than maintaining one. The nomads possessed an inherent need to loot and plunder cities, and Genghis Khan took advantage of this innate desire by remaining on campaign. But the Mongols had difficulty understanding settled civilization and did not know how to maintain order in that new and different cultural milieu. Although they were able to instill fear in their enemies and easily forced many cities to capitulate, the Mongols co-opted local officials to ensure that taxes and tribute flowed freely back to their capital.

With his newly-constructed army, Genghis Khan returned to northern China again in 1210 and began a continuous campaign of destruction, primarily directed against the Jin Dynasty (1115 – 1234), an empire ruled by a Jurchen minority, a Tungusic people from Manchuria who would later call themselves the Manchu. In an early battle, the Jin put their Turkic cavalry up front to confront the Mongol horsemen. The Mongols managed to convince the Jin Dynasty’s cavalry to defect to their side. Genghis Khan subsequently advanced on the Jin capital of Zhongdu and entered into a prolonged siege. In November of 1211, the khan withdrew his troops to their winter pastures, only to return again in 1212. Genghis Khan attempted a rash assault of the city. He failed and was wounded in the process. His Mongols had to retreat once again.

Genghis Khan returned a fourth time in March of 1213, this time with the goal of conquering Korea, Manchuria, and all of northern China. Early difficulties campaigning against the Jin Dynasty prompted him to adjust his strategy. By laying waste to all of northern China, he aimed to annihilate their way of life, turning the region into vast pastureland for his herds. The Mongol leader surrounded Zhongdu and starved the city’s inhabitants into submission. He systematically obliterated everything in order to send a message to the inhabitants that it was futile to resist him. He even considered taking the city, brick by brick, and dumping it into the Yellow River. Fortunately for the residents of Zhongdu, a captured Chinese bureaucrat intervened and convinced Genghis Khan that it would be better to “sack” them every year through the collection of tribute. Mongol interest in rebuilding the city began soon thereafter, as Genghis Khan incorporated northern China into his state and opened the region to trade. This campaign represented the first significant addition of territory to the Mongol Empire.

As this chapter began, it was with the tenacious pursuit of the fugitive Küchlüg in 1216 that originally brought the Mongols into Central Asia. There they aroused the disdain of the local ruler in the area, Khwarazmshah Ala al-Din Muhammad II. Ruling over a loose confederation of disparate peoples, Ala al-Din Muhammad lacked security in his position as the Khwarazmshah. Even his own mother was in intrigue against him. It was he who provoked the wrath of the Mongols. It all began when Genghis Khan sent a trade caravan, which probably included some spies dressed incognito as merchants, to the frontier post of Otrar, located along the Syr Darya. The shah believed that the trade mission was a mere deception meant to obscure an eminent invasion. Inalchuq, uncle of Ala al-Din Muhammad and governor of Otrar, improvidently convinced the
Khwarazmshah to have the entire party executed. An enraged Genghis Khan quickly dispatched another envoy and demanded that the governor of the city be put to death and have his head sent back to Mongolia as proof that Genghis Khan’s wishes were fulfilled. The shah executed this emissary too, a rash decision that precipitated the Mongol onslaught of Central Asia, which resulted in brutal massacres and a drastic depopulation of the region.

Ala al-Din Muhammad prudently fled the area, leaving the citizens of Khwarazmia to defend themselves against the forces of Genghis Khan. A total of five Mongol armies approached the Khwarazm capital of Samarkand from different directions, converging in 1220. The Mongols slayed the inhabitants of the city and constructed pyramid-like edifices out of their severed skulls. In 1221, they seized the city of Urgench and dumped it into the Amu Darya, piece by piece, diverting the course of the waterway. And yet, Khwarazmshah Ala al-Din Muhammad still inexplicably escaped capture and absconded south. Genghis Khan deployed another force of some 30,000 troops under the generals Jebe and Sübedei to track him down and put him to death. The shah eventually sought refuge on an island in Caspian, where he died of pleurisy.
Meanwhile, Jalal al-Din Manguburti, the son of the Khwarazmshah, assembled an army of resistance. Genghis Khan sent his stepbrother Shihihutug to apprehend Jalal, but he escaped to the Hindu Kush Mountains of Afghanistan. Jalal’s forces managed to defeat the Shihihutug-led Mongols on the field of battle at Parwan in the spring of 1221, a rare loss. The Mongols actually respected Jalal for his display of valor and willingness to resist them. Jalal fled to India via the Khyber Pass with his pride intact. The khan headed south himself and defeated Jalal al-Din along the banks of the Indus River. Following their defeat of Jalal, the Mongols descended into India but quickly found the hot and humid climate inhospitable; they decided to return to Mongolia, arriving home by 1225. The Central Asia campaign had started as a punitive expedition but in the process had wiped out any type of resistance in the region.

In the interim, Genghis Khan had ordered Jebe and Sübedei to explore and reconnoiter the west. Between 1221 and 1223 the two most gifted of the khan’s generals traveled towards Russia. In the course of their journey, they defeated the Georgians, Armenians, princes of Rus, and Kipchak Turkic tribes. Then they abruptly returned home. The purpose was not to annex the territory but to gather intelligence, which proved to be important to their campaign against the princes of Rus between 1236 and 1240. Meanwhile, Genghis Khan had died on expedition in southern China in 1227. Upon his death, the Mongols participated in a year of mourning, halting expansion.

11.8.3 Succession

The Mongols were the only steppe tribes whose empire actually expanded upon the death of its founder. In fact, most of the Mongol
conquests actually transpired after the passing of Genghis Khan. Unlike previous tribal confederations, it did not implode because Genghis Khan had invented a safe and reliable means of transferring power. He also stabilized Mongol society and made it less fractious, constructing a framework for subsequent generations to follow. To maintain political legitimacy and inherit the throne under this new system, one had to trace their ancestry back to Genghis Khan through his wife Börte and her four sons, Juchi, Chagatai, Ögedei, and Tolui. This concept dramatically limited contenders for the khanate, mitigating future competition for succession. Only they possessed the required Genghis-Khanid legitimacy.

The khan’s plan to transfer power upon his death also fused older steppe traditions with his new vision. He bequeathed to his sons parts of the world yet unconquered, so that they had to win these new areas. This stipulation produced an incentive for his sons to cooperate in order to collect their patrimony. Genghis Khan had divided the four patrimonial ulus, or states, amongst his sons. The four subsequent empires that grew out of these ulus included the Golden Horde, who were the descendants of Juchi and controlled Russia; the Chagatai Khanate, which traced its lineage to Chagatai and governed Central Asia; the Mongol-founded Yuan Dynasty in China, the progeny of Tolui; and the Ilkhanate of Persia, inheritors of the House of Hülegü and also the successors of Tolui.

Prior to his death in 1227, Genghis Khan expressed a desire that his son Ögedei succeed him, a decision that affronted Juchi, his eldest, whose lineage was questioned. Fortunately for the Mongols, Juchi’s death preceded that of his father’s, narrowly averting a potential civil war. A khuriltai in 1229 confirmed the khan’s wishes, and it was under Ögedei that the Mongols realized their destiny of world domination. Between 1230 and 1233, Ögedei’s troops defeated the remnants of the Jin dynasty in central China. Then they focused their attention on Russia, as they had
actionable intelligence on the divisions among the Russian principalities dating to a 1223 reconnaissance mission that utterly crushed a coalition of Russian and Kipchak princes. In 1236, Ögedei launched his campaign in the dead of winter and used rivers as frozen ice highways. By end of 1237, they had taken the Black Steppe, Vladimir, and Riazan. It was only some fortuitous flooding that prevented the complete destruction of Novgorod. The Prince of Novgorod was, however, sufficiently impressed by the Mongol onslaught so voluntarily agreed to pay their tribute. The Mongols commenced a devastating attack on the city of Kiev in December of 1240, culminating in a nine-day siege. They ultimately destroyed the city as retribution for its resistance. The Mongols steamrolled the Hungarians soon thereafter and left the region in ruins en route to Vienna. By December of 1241, their forces were approaching the outskirts of the city. No military power in Europe was capable of withstanding a Mongol attack.

Fortunately for the Viennese, Ögedei died that very same month, and a one year period of mourning ensued. The Mongols were summoned home in order to choose the next great khan. What was supposed to be a quick election turned into a five-year ordeal because Batu, son of Juchi and grandson of Genghis Khan, refused to return to Mongolia for the khuriltai. This founder of the Golden Horde believed that he would not be chosen and knew that his relatives could not officially convene a khuriltai without him, thus preventing the body from proclaiming the next great khan. It was Ögedei’s death and Batu’s independence of thought that saved Europe from Mongol conquest.

The khuriltai finally proclaimed Güyük, eldest son of Ögedei, the next khan in 1246. This was not a legitimate election though because of Batu’s conspicuous absence. Güyük quickly dispatched an army to punish Batu for meddling in the political process of succession, but Batu had already arranged for his cousin’s assassination in 1248. Güyük’s death led to another period of paralysis. A khuriltai eventually nominated Möngke, Tolui’s oldest son, as the next great khan in 1251. Now Möngke had to deal with the problem that Batu presented. He was willing to allow for Batu’s autonomy so long as he recog-
nized Möngke as the legitimate khan. It was at this point that Batu’s horde become the Golden Horde. He adopted the moniker of “golden” because he was asserting his independence.

Batu died in 1256, and his younger brother Berke became the first khan of the Golden Horde to accept Islam. This sudden conversion to Islam caused systemic problems in the Mongol Empire because different parts of the four lines of Genghis Khan would adopt different faiths, resulting in political divisions that aligned with religious divisions. As a Muslim, Berke spurned his Buddhist cousins and established firm links with the Turkic Mamluk Sultanate in Egypt, thus making an alliance based on faith with a power outside of the Mongol Empire.

Genghis Khan’s empire had exceeded normal steppe expectations, and, with potential fault lines emerging already, his vision of a politically unified empire was never truly realized. A series of civil wars erupted not long thereafter that fractured the Mongol Empire. First came the Toluid Civil War (1260 – 1264), then the Berke-Hülegü War (1262), and finally the Kaidu-Kublai War (1268 – 1301). These three wars had the combined effect of undermining the great khan’s authority, and the empire ended up breaking apart on along the lines of the patrimonial ulus, with each moving in their own direction. In fact, the successors of Kublai Khan (1260 – 1294), who presided over the Yuan Dynasty in China, could not even convene a khuriltai to appoint a great khan following his death. By 1294, there was neither fiction nor façade of a unified Mongol Empire. It was the end of a unified political unit.

### 11.9 THE KHANATE OF CHAGATAI

Chagatai (1226 – 1241), the second son of Genghis and his wife Börte, had participated in his father’s campaigns, and in 1227 he claimed his patrimonial territory designated as between the Caspian Sea and the Tarim Basin. The origins of the Chagatai Khanate shaped its political and demographic character; Chagatai obtained the core of Central Asia, a personal pasture-land located along the Kazakh steppe. He also received the settled lands to the south in modern day Uzbekistan. Chagatai never demonstrated ambition for the position of great khan; rather, he played an important role helping his brother Ögedei exercise authority and uphold Yassa. In doing so, Chagatai served as the glue that helped hold the Mongol Empire together.

As was the case with his father, Genghis Khan, Chagatai had trouble coping with the
cultural differences that existed between steppe and settled societies. His solution to the conflict between these two civilizations was known as **Inju**, a dual-administrative system and a form of indirect rule. Inju was a political concession designed to separate the two incompatible cultures, allowing both to maintain their own traditional laws yet remain subject to the authority of Chagatai and his descendants. Chagatai was conscious not to force Yassa on sedentary Muslim cities; however, it continued to be exercised on the plains. In agricultural and urban areas, a bureaucratic tradition with a Muslim administration persisted. So long as these Muslims did not openly resist Mongol control, they could go about their daily business, free from Mongol interference in their life. It was in this way that the steppe continued to abide by customary Mongol law, while in the south the people of the cities lived according to the Sharia, or Quranic law.

Inju was also an economic arrangement granting the Mongols a share of the resources produced in sedentary lands. The Mongols rewarded those who cooperated in governance with a portion of the profits; those who participated in Inju were entitled to their allotment of the common imperial settled possessions. At first, all of the conquered towns remained the property of the khan, but over time access to the wealth of the urban areas extended to the nomads who took part in Inju.

Although Inju was a practical solution to the difficulty of governing the two separate societies, it ultimately did not resolve the problem of uniting the sedentary Turkic population and the nomadic Mongols since it failed to accommodate the needs of either society. Actually, it encouraged friction between the two civilizations because it placed hardships on both peoples. While the horsemen benefited handsomely from Inju, they considered it incompatible with their traditional practices because it forced them to climb down from their steeds and settle down in the cities. Yes, the Mongols did receive tribute, slaves, and status as compensation for the inconvenience of ruling over settled lands, but the costs of sustaining this empire were heavy. It was just too demanding for them to uphold. First, the maintenance of empire disrupted the nomadic way of life because they often had to join in exhaustive campaigns, lasting years at a time. Second, the nomads were unaccustomed to a considerable amount of government interference in their daily routine. Increasingly, they viewed the prospect of governing an empire as a burden and preferred to revert to a pastoral lifestyle on the prairie. They sought more independence and stability, so they consciously began to defect from the system and return to their pastures.

Those living in the settled lands to the south chaffed under Inju as well. Though they recognized that government remained an essential part of life, Inju encumbered urban-dwelling and farming peoples too. The Mongols stressed this population by raising additional taxes in an unpredictable and disruptive manner. This annoyed the city folk, who were accustomed to more regular taxation. Ultimately, Inju did not mesh well with either lifestyle. The practice rested on force, not utility. The Mongol state sustained two different societies that often remained in conflict, so it stayed in a state of permanent instability.

### 11.9.1 Turko-Mongol Fusion

The Mongols were the first to unify the Eurasian steppe, and their occupation of the region corresponded to a wholesale takeover. As they migrated southwest down the steppe, they failed to displace
the Turkic peoples already established in Central Asia. Early on, the dominant Mongols offered these Turkic groups a deal to either merge with them or suffer harsh reprisal. So as the Mongols progressed westward, their armies gained strength, as more and more of the Turkic tribesmen joined them, resulting in armies that were mostly comprised of Turkic peoples, not Mongols. In this manner, the Turkic groups absorbed and assimilated the invading Mongols, a process known as **Turkification**; the conflict between the two cultures faded over time and eventually led to a fusion of Turkic and Mongolian societies. Over time, these Mongol pastoralists presiding over a sedentary Islamic culture slowly Turkified. They quickly became a Mongol minority governing a Turkic majority.

There were numerous points of contention between the two groups but also many commonalities. Both societies had originated on the steppe in modern day Mongolia, and, while the Turkic groups had settled down over the years and adopted more of a sedentary existence, many of the principles of pastoral nomadism still lingered in their culture. Both adhered to a patrimonial distribution of inheritance. Also, both the Turkic groups and the Mongols organized along tribal lines, and each followed a pattern of co-opting one tribe into another, thus facilitating a fusion of the Mongols with their Turkic hosts. For this system to work though, the Mongols had to speak the idiom of the people they ruled. So instead of the Mongols imposing their language on the majority of the population, the Mongol elite learned Chagatai, a Turkic tongue.

For many years, religion remained the only major distinction between the two societies, but once the Chagataids converted to Islam in 1333 this conspicuous difference disappeared. While the Mongols adopted the creed and language of the Turkic Chagatai, these Turkic peoples incorporated the Mongol political concept of Genghis-Khanid legitimacy.

### 11.10 THE KHANATE OF THE ILKHANS (1265 – 1335)

**Hülegü Khan** (1256 – 1265), grandson of Genghis Khan and son of Tolui, served his brother Möngke (1251 – 1259), the great khan, and campaigned through the Middle East, where he whipped out the Assassins, a secret order of schismatic Shia entrenched in the mountains of Gilan province in 1256. He also destroyed the Abbasid capital of Baghdad in 1258, putting an end to the Caliphate. By 1260 Hülegü controlled parts of Armenia, Iraq, Anatolia, all of Azerbaijan, and all of Iran. Kublai Khan (1250 – 1294) had awarded his brother Hülegü the title of

![Figure 11.8 | Hülegü Khan and Dokuz Khatun | From Rachid Ad-Din’s “History of the World”](image)
Ilkhan, a secondary khan who remained subordinate only to the great khan in Mongolia. This portion of the empire became known as the Khanate of the Ilkhans.

The Ilkhans were a Mongol minority ruling over a Muslim majority; religious problems plagued the Ilkhanate for much of its existence. To begin with, Hülegü, a Nestorian Christian, who later converted to Buddhism on his deathbed, had sacked Baghdad, one of the most politically important cities in the Islamic world, an act that alienated him from his Muslim cousin Berke Khan, ruler of the Golden Horde. The conversion of the Golden Horde to Islam had presented a real problem, for the Ilkhans had initially championed Buddhism in Iraq and Iran. As animosity continued to mount between the two parts of the Mongol Empire over religious differences, we see growing ties of alliance between the Muslim Golden Horde and their coreligionists, the Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt, against the Ilkhans. Belief transcended blood, as one part of Mongol Empire allied against another with an outside source. Faith-based civil wars consumed much of the reign of Abaga Khan (1265 – 1282). These wars were rooted in the Ilkhanate’s inappropriate treatment of their Muslim population. The Golden Horde’s alliance with the Mamluks threatened the Ilkhanate, and yet no longer could Abaga rely on the full might of centralized Mongol power; he was forced to appeal to Kublai Khan to assuage the hostilities between the Ilkhans and the Golden Horde.

Map 11.11 | Map of the Khanate of the Ilkhans at its Greatest Extent, 1256 CE
Author: Arab League
Source: Wikimedia Commons
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Much of the religious conflict during the early Ilkhanate related to doctrinal differences between Islam and the traditional Mongol way of life. The most stubborn problem for the two was the contradiction between the traditional Mongolian method of animal slaughter, which required that no blood be spilled, and the Islamic code of cleanliness, which necessitated that all blood be drained. Each side was appalled by the other’s customs. Furthermore, as practitioners of rigid monotheism, Muslims found the Mongol worship of religious images repulsive, a ritual strictly forbidden in Islam.

While spiritual troubles remained a persistent problem for the Ilkhans, the economic situation deteriorated too. Gaykhatu Khan (1291 – 1295) practically emptied the royal treasury with profligate spending. He experimented with paper money recently adopted from China to compensate for his wasteful expenditures, but overprinting resulted in massive inflation. The Ilkhans also tried to extract the maximum amount of tribute from the countryside to offset declining revenues. This led to an abuse in tax gathering, known as tax farming, in which rulers sold contracts for the collection of revenues to the highest bidder. This method of tax collection provided a strong incentive to despoil peasants.

It was Mahmud Ghazan (1295 – 1304) who solved the Ilkhanate’s continued religious and economic problems. He was the first Ilhan to convert to Islam, thus rehabilitating their image in the eyes of their Muslim subjects and making their rule much more acceptable. Their new public stance towards Islam moderated persistent conflict and paved the way for cultural flourishing. Ghazan patronized Ilkhanid art, scholarship, and science. Ilkhanid art reflected Chinese influence and helped contribute to Persian artistic development. In terms of scholarship, the first true history of the world was completed under the sponsorship of Mahmud Ghazan. Written by Rashid al-Din Hamadani (1247 – 1318), the book was richly illustrated with watercolors and portraiture in the Chinese style. Through his travels in the service of the Mongols, Rashid al-Din had become perceptively aware of Ilkhanid Persia’s cosmopolitan culture. It was Rashid al-Din, a Jewish convert to Islam, who had convinced Mahmud Ghazan to adopt the faith in order to be more attuned to the beliefs of his peoples. Regarding science, the Ilkhans attempted to amass large amounts of astronomical data from China to Europe. With unprecedented accuracy, they became very good at predicting lunar eclipses. Their data was used throughout Eurasia.

Despite the early looting and plundering indicative of a Mongol conquest, the Ilkhans eventually reactivated the Silk Road and promoted transcontinental trade. The newfound safety of the
route throughout Eurasia stimulated trade and encouraged many different kinds of cultures to come together. Ghazan attempted to reform the tax policies that had led to the maximization of taxation. Cities did revive, but the long term negative consequence of conquest continued to be felt by the peasants who suffered from prolonged violence.

Much like the Mongols in Chagatai Central Asia, eventually Ilkhans went native too. Here we see a Persian-Mongol fusion, as they began to identify with Persian culture and speak the Persian language. As they bonded with Persia, they adopted Islam and began to promote Persian as the written language of their land.

11.11 TIMUR

It was under Timur (1370 – 1405) that Central Asia moved to the fore of world events. He attempted to soothe the persistent differences that existed between the steppe and sedentary societies and actually developed a political arrangement that could harness the best attributes of each society, without the dangerous side effect of communal violence associated with combining the two civilizations. He also constructed a new political and military machine that was deeply ingrained in the political background of the Chagatai Khanate, even while he acknowledged that Inju satisfied neither the nomad nor the settled society and eliminated the practice. Astutely recognizing that serious conflict existed between these two incongruent cultures under his control, Timur provided a framework for both societies to live in harmony.

Born in 1336 near Kesh in modern day Uzbekistan, Timur came out of Central Asia and was a product of the Turko-Mongol fusion. He descended from an aristocratic Mongol clan, but he was raised as a Muslim and spoke a Turkic language. Although Timur himself was a native to Transoxiana, he could not assert Genghis-Khanid legitimacy. Unable to trace his ancestry to Genghis Khan, he could not take the title of khan in his own right. Timur understood that because he did not have the correct pedigree, he would have to earn it. His solution was to take the title of emir, meaning commander, and rule through a Chagatayid puppet khan acting as a figurehead. The emir also married into the family of Genghis Khan. While the law of descent was not intended to work this way, Timur changed it to accommodate his children, who would be able to claim Genghis-Khanid legitimacy.

To strengthen the security of his position as emir, he constructed a system of support that ordered his political connections in a series of concentric rings. In his primary circle resided his family and close allies.
The second ring consisted of loyal tribes and Timur’s own Barlas Clan, from which he traced his lineage. The third circle was made up of those peoples Timur had defeated on the battlefield; the second and third rings balanced one another. The outermost bands included Timur’s hereditary professional administrators and bureaucrats, soldiers from the plains serving in his cavalry units, and finally the Persian urban and agricultural populations, from which he recruited his infantry and siege units.

Like many transitional figures in history, such as Suleiman the Magnificent, Timur bridged the medieval and modern worlds. He attempted to imitate Genghis Khan’s success in the field and designed a novel military machine that was well adapted to the environment in which he lived. His military was the product of a Turko-Mongol fusion, employing Turkic siege techniques and the Mongol cavalry. Unlike Genghis Khan, however, Timur increasingly combined his cavalry, siege, and infantry units, placing his heavy cavalry at the center of formations. His army also utilized an early form of artillery. He ventured to monopolize the market on gunpowder technology so that other powers could not benefit from it.

Timur was determined to keep his volatile army occupied, so they would not be a burden to the sedentary population in his realm. It was in this context that he developed a formula for success that promoted peace at home and war abroad, a policy that best served the interests of the merchants and townspeople. He externalized the violence of the steppe and destroyed all of the other trade routes that bypassed his territory. Timur attempted to reactivate and dominate the Silk Road and diverted trade to his lands in order to help rebuild the cities that had been damaged from years of Mongol and nomad rule. He did not aim at permanent occupation or the creation of new states; he just wanted to devastate, even going so far as to campaign against the Golden Horde, Delhi Sultanate, and the Ottoman Empire, all in an effort to redirect trade in his direction.

Timur began his military campaigns attempting to secure the back door of the steppe. During this period, which lasted from 1370 to 1385, he conquered and subdued Mogholistan to the northeast, with the aim of securing the core central land route of the Silk Road. (The Chagatai Khanate had already been divided into two parts by the 1340s, Transoxania in the west, and Mogholistan in the east.) Then he engaged
the Golden Horde between 1385 and 1395. The Golden Horde had been the master of the northern trade route that bypassed Timur’s territory. In order to eliminate this option, he went to war against them in order to divert trade to toward his lands. Timur showed his strategic genius in these expeditions. He defeated a steppe power on the steppe. He put the pieces of his army together in such a way so that he could take his enemies on in their arena and on their terms. In this manner, Timur crushed Tokhtamysh, leader of the Golden Horde, in 1395. During the course of this campaign, Timur destroyed their principle trade cities of Astrakhan and Sarai. An interesting byproduct of Timur’s campaign against the Golden Horde was that it precipitated the rise of the Grand Duchy of Moscow. He had weakened the Golden Horde to such an extent that it made it possible for Moscow to throw off the Mongol yoke.

Timur raided into India from 1398 to 1399 and dealt a blow to the southern sea route that connected the Occident to the Orient. This expedition was primarily for looting, since he never intended to conquer and annex the territory of Nasir-ud-Din Mahmud Shah Tughluq, the last member of the Tughluq Dynasty of the Delhi Sultanate. During this campaign, Timur’s tactical brilliance was on full display; he had an uncanny ability to adapt to any martial environment that he confronted. For instance, when threatened with a cavalry of war elephants, Timur responded by unleashing a pack of camels laden with incendiary material to charge the enemy lines. Shrieking dromedaries with their backs ablaze incited utter pandemonium among Nasir-ud-Din’s cavalry of elephants, who rampaged through the sultan’s own lines. Timur easily routed the sultan’s forces. When faced with the townspeople of Delhi rising up against their aggressors, Timur brutally sacked the capital of the sultanate and justified the violence in religious terms. His was a Muslim victory over the Hindu unbelievers of India.

In Timur’s final period of conquest, which lasted from 1400 to 1404, he campaigned against the Islamic far west, directing his army against the Ottomans. Actually, Timur had initially attempted to avoid conflict with the Ottomans, whose forces had earned an impressive reputation on the battlefield. In fact, Timur had even tried to negotiate with Bayezid I, the Ottoman Sultan, offering him part of Golden Horde’s territory west of Dnieper River. But these two expansionist realms inevitably came into conflict in eastern Anatolia. The conflict between the two empires began as the Ottomans expanded to the east and took control of some Turkmen tribes in eastern Anatolia already under the protection of Timur. The emir responded by taking some other Turkmen tribes under Ottoman suzerainty. Offensive missives replete with insulting incriminations ensued. Timur bided his time, waiting for the perfect moment to attack the Ottomans. In 1402, he launched a devastating attack into the heart of Anatolia, as the Ottomans were preoccupied with campaigning against the Hungarians. During the Battle of Ankara in 1402, Timur managed to convince many of the Ottoman forces to defect to his side. He captured the Ottoman sultan, who died in captivity three months later. Timur had not attempted to conquer the Ottomans; he just wanted to punish them for their unwillingness to cooperate. His Levantine expedition also seems to have been designed to weaken the western terminus of the Silk Road in Aleppo, Syria.

Timur died in 1405 while on a campaign against the Ming Dynasty. He had built an empire that spanned the breadth of Central Asia. Unlike Genghis Khan, whose empire continued to expand after his death, the sons of Timur and their followers squabbled over succession, leading
to a series of internecine battles. Members of the Timurid Dynasty competed among themselves, with commanders switching loyalties. The empire consequently fragmented. The successors of Timur could not manage the difficulties of governing an empire, and it withered away quickly. The political situation resembled that which Chagatayids had to contend with, the steppe military that had been redirected, but with Timur’s death, they returned. A number of Timurid rulers followed; a weak state emerged from all this strife.

11.11.1 Terror and Destruction

Timur certainly committed what we would describe today as war crimes; there definitely was an element of terrorism to his campaigns. In fact, as an admirer of architecture, he is known to have constructed pyramids of human skulls. Extant accounts describe him slaughtering 100,000 Indian prisoners following the Delhi uprising. But not all destruction was the same; and there was a definite difference between that of Genghis Khan and Timur. The emir’s annihilation of the region was not meant to serve a utilitarian purpose so much as to inflict suffering. Genghis Khan’s used terror as a method to protect his troops, whereas Timur engaged in terror and destruction for pleasure.

11.11.2 Legacy

A product of the Turko-Mongolian fusion, Timur had been the first to reunite the eastern and western parts of the Chagatai ulus. His empire represents the construction of the political boundaries passed down to posterity; the maintenance of this space would define boundaries of modern day Central Asia up to the twentieth century. Under Timur we see growing political and cultural distinctions between Iran, Central Asia proper, and India begin to cement. In this context, we see a split taking place on the steppe that will lead to a differentiation of the Uzbeks and Kazaks. By the late fourteenth century, the tribes on the steppe to the north will become known to Muslim writers as Kazaks, whereas the tribes to the south will be increasingly referred to as Uzbeks, a differentiation that has continued to persist and helped to delimit modern borders.

11.12 CONCLUSION

Three forces combined to shape the course of Central Asian history: the Turkic migrations, expansion of Islam, and the Mongol conquest. Beginning in the second century BCE, waves of Turkic migrations entered the region. It is debatable whether or not they Turkified the original Iranian inhabitants or permanently changed the ethnic makeup of the area. Turkic tribes occupied the great steppe, Turkifying the region and endowing it with a more nomadic character. They also populated the agricultural basin of Transoxiana, displacing the original Iranian inhabitants of the area. Many of these Turks slowly settled down over time. These Turkic peoples displayed a unique ability to absorb the Islamic faith and internalize the Mongol conquest.

Islam transformed the religious adherence of Central Asia and left a lasting mark on the region as well. Transoxiana gradually Islamicized, but Turkic and Persian cultures persisted.
Islamization incorporated native peoples in the process of conversion. As Islam spread through the area, the faith demonstrated an extraordinary capacity to incorporate local traditions, permitting some customs to linger so long as doing so accelerated conversion. Sufi missionaries made some compromises with the Turkic nomadic culture in order to establish the religion in the area. Sufism’s inherent flexibility helped to promote conversion, and the blend of orthodox Islam and Turkic pastoral nomadism created a uniquely Central Asian brand of the faith.

The Mongol conquest of Central Asia had the most immediate impact on the history of the region. Although the Mongols eventually Turkified over time, the legacy of Genghis-Khanid legitimacy remained. Genghis Khan had developed a secure and dependable means of transferring power, for Genghis-Khanid legitimacy reduced the number of contenders vying for the throne; the Mongols did not collapse as a “nation” following the death of their founder. Genghis Khan bequeathed a legacy of political legitimacy to the region that would last until 1920.

11.13 WORKS CONSULTED AND FURTHER READING


11.14 LINKS TO PRIMARY SOURCES

Scott C. Levi and Ron Sela eds, Islamic Central Asia: An Anthology of Historical Sources

https://muse.jhu.edu/books/9780253013590

Medieval Sourcebook:

Ibn Battuta: Travels in Asia and Africa 1325 – 1354

http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/1354-ibnbattuta.asp

Sacred Texts


William of Rubruck’s Account of the Mongols

http://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/texts/rubruck.html

Description of Mongol warfare from Friar John of Plano Carpini

http://www.deremilitari.org/RESOURCES/SOURCES/carpini.htm
The Book of Dede Korkut

Ibn al-Athir: On The Tatars, 1220 – 1221CE
   https://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/1220al-Athir-mongols.asp

Marco Polo: On the Tartars
   http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/mpolo44-46.asp

Jalal ad-Din Rumi (1207 – 1273 CE): from The Masnavi, c. 1250 CE
   https://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/1250rumi-masnavi.asp

Jalal-ad-Din Rumi (1207 – 1273 CE): The Fairest Land, c. 1250 CE
   https://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/1250rumi-poems2.asp

Jalal ad-Din Rumi (1207 – 1273): Poems from the Divan-I Shams-I Tabriz, c. 1270 CE
   https://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/1270rumi-poems1.asp

Hafiz (1325 – 1389 CE): Verses in Praise of God, c. 1370 CE
   https://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/1370hafiz.asp
Western Europe and Byzantium circa 1000 - 1500 CE

Andrew Reeves

12.1 CHRONOLOGY

962 CE Otto I crowned Holy Roman Emperor
987 CE Hugh Capet elected king of France
c. 1000 – 1100 CE Emergence of Western European feudalism
1031 CE Fall of the Cordoba Caliphate
1049 CE Pope Leo IX begins papal efforts at Church reform
1054 CE Schism between the pope and the patriarch of Constantinople
1066 CE Norman Conquest of England
1071 CE Battle of Manzikert annihilates Byzantine field army
1077 CE Henry IV repents to Pope Gregory VII at Canossa
1085 CE Fall of Muslim Toledo to the Christian kingdom of Leon-Castile
1091 CE Norman conquest of Muslim Sicily complete
1095 CE Council of Clermont, calling of the First Crusade
1099 CE Fall of Jerusalem to Christian Crusaders, establishment of Crusader States
1100 – 1135 CE King Henry I rules England
1118 – 1143 CE Emperor John II rules the Byzantine Empire
1122 CE Concordat of Worms
1125 – 1152 CE Raymond is archbishop of Toledo, begins sponsoring the translation of Muslim and Greek philosophy from Arabic into Latin
1143 – 1180 CE Emperor Manuel Komnenos rules the Byzantine Empire
1154 – 1189 CE King Henry II rules England
1176 CE Frederick Barbarossa defeated by Lombard League at the Battle of Legnano; Manuel Komnenos defeated by Saljuq Turks at the Battle of Myriokephalon
1187 CE Kingdom of Jerusalem defeated by Saladin at the Battle of Hattin, fall of Jerusalem, Pope Gregory VIII issues Audita tremendi, calling the Third Crusade
1189 – 1192 CE  The Third Crusade, a rump (remnant of a larger government) Christian Kingdom of Jerusalem is re-established, but Jerusalem remains in Muslim hands

1203 – 1226 CE  France's Capetian kings extend the control of lands directly ruled by the crown

1204 CE  Crusaders sack Constantinople, break-up of the Byzantine Empire

1212 CE  Almohad Caliphate defeated by Spanish Christian kingdoms at the Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa

1215 CE  Magna Carta

1215 – 1250 CE  Frederick II is Holy Roman Emperor

1224 – 1274 CE  Life of St. Thomas Aquinas

1229 CE  A treaty between Frederick II and Egyptian sultan al-Kamil returns Jerusalem to Christian rule

1240 CE  Mongol Conquest of Kievan Rus

1241 CE  Mongol invasion of Hungary

1244 CE  Jerusalem falls to Ayyubid Egypt

1248 – 1254 CE  The Seventh Crusade, France's King Louis IX defeated by Egypt, Egyptian Mamluk coup d'état

1250 – 1273 CE  There is no Holy Roman Emperor

1261 CE  Restoration of the Byzantine Empire

1291 CE  Last Crusader territory in the Levant falls to Mamluk Egypt

c. 1300 CE  Genoese sailors begin exploring the Atlantic Ocean

early 1300s CE  Genoese sailors are visiting the Canary Islands

1309 CE  Beginning of Avignon papacy

1314 – 1326 CE  Civil war in the Holy Roman Empire

1315 – 1322 CE  The Great Famine

1324 CE  Mansa Musa’s hijj

1331 CE  Nearly all Byzantine territory in Asia Minor has fallen to the Ottoman Turks

1337 CE  The Hundred Years’ War begins

c. 1350 CE  Beginning of Italian Renaissance and Humanism

1347 – 1351 CE  The Black Death, nearly a third of Europe’s population dies

1356 CE  The Holy Roman Empire becomes an elected monarchy

1358 CE  French peasant revolt

1378 CE  Beginning of Great Schism

1385 CE  Lithuania united with Poland, Lithuanian monarch converts to Christianity

1396 CE  Ottoman Turks conquer Bulgaria

1397 CE  Union of Kalmar unites Sweden, Denmark, and Norway under a single crown

1404 CE  Castilian effort to conquer the Canaries begins
1415 – 1417 CE Council of Constance resolves the Great Schism
1440 CE Lorenzo Valla shows the Donation of Constantine to be a forgery
mid 1400s CE Iberians are settling the Azores, a plantation economy worked by African slaves begins to flourish in the Canaries and Azores
1453 CE Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, final fall of the Byzantine Empire; End of Hundred Years’ War and English attempts to conquer France
1454 CE Treaty of Lodi brings nearly a half century of peace to Italy
1455 – 1485 CE Wars of the Roses in England
1459 CE Final Ottoman conquest of Serbia
1479 CE Marriage of Queen Isabella of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon creates a united Spanish monarchy
1492 CE King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella complete the Reconquista with the conquest of Granada, Christopher Columbus, sailing for the Spanish crown, makes landfall in the Western Hemisphere
1494 CE France invades Italy

12.2 INTRODUCTION

15 July 1099: The Al-Aqsa mosque looked down on the city of Jerusalem, the light of the sun reflecting off of its golden dome. Down below the hill on which the mosque stood, a scene of slaughter was unfolding. Up against the northern wall of the city stood a wooden tower laboriously rolled into place hours earlier, over the top of which had poured a desperate band of European knights, the first over the walls of the Holy City.

Within the walls, the narrow, winding streets between the ancient stone buildings of the city rang with the clash of steel on steel and the cries of the dead and dying. Smoke from fires breaking out within the city mingled with the smell of death. In parts of the city, its defenders, Muslim Egyptians, were still fighting, going down under the sword strokes of the Christian soldiers fighting their way through the streets. In the southwest, a small group of defenders had retreated into the more heavily fortified citadel where they were negotiating a surrender with Count Raymond of Toulouse, a shrewd but irascible noble from the south of France.

Elsewhere in the city, the killing of the soldiers was giving way to a more horrific slaughter, as the mail-clad knights cut down men, women, and children where they stood, torturing some with fire, and threatening others with worse if they did not turn over their valuables. By the end of the day, the Christian soldiers hacking their way through the city streets waded through blood up to their ankles.

As the day went on, soldiers pushed through the piles of dismembered corpses to the golden-domed Al-Aqsa Mosque. The mosque stood where Solomon’s temple had been millennia before, and the knights, smeared with the blood of slaughter, fell to their knees in prayer, grateful that God had delivered their enemies into their hands.

These men had traveled more than two thousand miles by land and sea. Tens of thousands of their comrades lay dead along the way from starvation, thirst, disease, or battle. But these
warriors had made it from their European homelands to seize control of the city of Jerusalem, a city sacred to Jew, Christian, and Muslim, and bring it under Christian rule for the first time in more than four centuries.

An army made up of many of the soldiers of Western Europe had managed to successfully make war on its Muslim enemies and seize territories in the Middle East, near the heart of Muslim culture and political power. How had they done so? And why? To understand, we must look to the how the European Christian world had developed over the eleventh century.

In the years between about 1000 and 1500, the culture and institutions of Western Europe took on a form that was distinct from the post-Roman Germanic kingdoms of the early Middle Ages and which would, in many ways, lay the foundations of Europe (and the Americas) into modern times. At the end of this period, thinkers seeking to bring about a new birth of ancient learning would look back on the thousand years that had come before as the Middle Ages, a period between the world of the Ancient Greeks and Romans and their own. But although these thinkers ostentatiously rejected the Middle Ages, they were in many ways its heirs. To see how this culture developed, we shall begin in Western Europe in the chaotic years of the early eleventh century.

12.3 QUESTIONS TO GUIDE YOUR READING

1. Who held most political and military power in a feudal system?

2. What were some reasons that European towns started to grow in the eleventh century?

3. Why did Europe’s agricultural output increase in the eleventh century?

4. What were some lasting results of the eleventh-century popes’ attempts to reform the Church?

5. What did Pope Urban II call on Western Europe’s nobles to do in 1095?

6. How did the thirteenth-century Capetian kings of France strengthen their authority?

7. Why did Frederick Barbarossa and Frederick II ultimately fail to establish control over Italy?

8. What was the Reconquista?

9. How did noble and peasant diets differ?

10. What caused the death of a third of Europe’s population between the years 1347 and 1351?

11. Why were Genoese merchants in the service of Iberian kings exploring the Atlantic and western Africa in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries?

12. Why did Christopher Columbus think he could sail directly from Europe to Asia?
12.5 THE EMERGENCE OF A FEUDAL ORDER IN WESTERN EUROPE

Out of the chaos and mayhem of the tenth and eleventh centuries, **East Francia**—the eastern third of Charlemagne’s Empire that is in roughly the same place as modern Germany—and England had emerged as united and powerful states. In the aftermath of the Abbasid Caliphate’s political collapse and the gradual weakening of Fatimid Egypt (see Chapter Eight), the eleventh-century Byzantine Empire was the strongest, most centralized state in the Eastern Mediterranean, and indeed, probably the strongest state west of Song China.

Most of the rest of Christian Western Europe’s kingdoms, however, were fragmented. This decentralization was most acute in **West Francia**, the western third of what had been
Charlemagne’s empire. This kingdom would eventually come to be known as France. Out of a weak and fragmented kingdom emerged the decentralized form of government that historians often call feudalism. We call it feudalism because power rested with armed men in control of plots of agricultural land known as fiefs and Latin for fief is feudum. They would use the surplus from these fiefs to equip themselves with weapons and equipment, and they often controlled their fiefs with little oversight from the higher-ranked nobles or the king.

How had such a system emerged? Even in Carolingian times, armies in much of Western Europe had come from war bands made up of a king’s loyal retainers, who themselves would possess bands of followers. Ultimate control of a kingdom’s army had rested with the king, and the great nobles had also exercised strong authority over their own fighting men. The near constant warfare (both external attacks and civil wars) of the tenth and eleventh centuries, however, meant that the kings of West Francia gradually lost control over the more powerful nobles. Further, the powerful nobles often lost control of the warlords of more local regions. West Francia had little governmental authority and much war.

As a result of constant warfare (albeit warfare that was usually local in scope), power came to rest in control of fiefs and the ability to extract surplus from their occupants and to use this surplus to outfit armed men. The warlords who controlled fiefs often did so by means of armed fortresses called castles. At first, especially in northern parts of West Francia, these fortresses were of wood, and might sometimes be as small as a wooden palisade surrounding a fortified wooden tower. Over the eleventh and twelfth centuries, these wooden castles came to be replaced with fortifications of stone. A castle had two roles: it would protect a land from attackers (such as Viking raiders), but it would also serve as a base for the control and extortion of a land’s people.

The castle represented Europe’s feudal order in wood and stone. Corresponding to the physical structure of the castle was the figure of the knight. Knights in the eleventh century wore an armor called chain mail, that is, interlocking rings of metal that would form a coat of armor. The knight usually fought on horseback, wielding a long spear known as a lance in addition to the sword at his side. With his feet resting in stirrups, a knight could hold himself firmly in the saddle, directing the weight and power of a charging horse into the tip of his lance.

Knights and castles came to dominate West Francia and then other parts of Europe for several centuries.
reasons. The technology of ironworking was improving so that iron was cheaper (although still very expensive) and more readily available, allowing for knights to wear more armor than their predecessors. Moreover, warfare of the tenth and eleventh centuries was made up of raids (both those of Vikings and of other Europeans). A raid depends on mobility, with the raiders able to kill people and seize plunder before defending soldiers can arrive. Mounted on horseback, knights were mobile enough that they could respond rapidly to raids. The castle allowed a small number of soldiers to defend territory and was also a deterrent to raiders, since it meant that quick plunder might not be possible.

A knight’s equipment—mail, lance, and horse—was incredibly expensive, as was the material and labor to construct even a wooden castle. Although knights had originally been whichever soldiers had been able to get the equipment to fight, the expense of this equipment and thus the need to control a fief to pay for it meant that knights gradually became a warrior aristocracy, with greater rights than the peasants whose labor they controlled. Indeed, often the rise of knights and castles meant that many peasants lost their freedom, becoming serfs, unfree peasants who, although not property that could be bought and sold like slaves, were nevertheless bound to their land and subordinate to those who controlled it.
The regions of West Francia controlled by powerful nobles were nearly independent of the crown. But even at the Frankish monarchy’s weakest, these nearly independent nobles were understood to hold their territories from the king and to owe allegiance to him if he called on them for military service. In this way, feudalism of the European Middle Ages resembled Western Zhou feudalism. The smaller fiefs that made up the territories of these great nobles likewise were understood to be held from these nobles; the knight who held a fief was, at least in theory, required to render military service to the lord from whom he held it. In practice, though, the kingdom of West Francia (and other regions of Western Europe where such a system held sway) had little cohesion as a state, with most functions of a state like minting money, building roads and bridges, and trying and executing criminals in the hands of the powerful nobles.

12.5.1 Global Context

Thus far, we have discussed feudalism in eleventh-century Western Europe, but a decentralized state dominated by a warrior aristocracy could emerge anywhere that central authority broke down. A similar system emerged in Heian Japan of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when mounted soldiers (in this case samurai rather than knights) came to occupy the social role of a warrior aristocracy (see Chapter Four). Such an arrangement would emerge at the same time in the Middle East: the Great Saljuq Empire was dominated by mounted warriors in control of iqtas, units of land whose revenues (often from taxation) would fund these warriors, who in turn held their iqtas from the sultan.

12.6 GROWTH OF TOWNS AND TRADE

Although the eleventh century was in many ways Western Europe’s nadir, it would also see the beginnings of Western Europe’s re-urbanization. One reason for these beginnings was that in those lands that had been part of the Western Roman Empire, city walls often remained, even if these cities had largely emptied of people. During the chaos and mayhem of the tenth and eleventh centuries, people often gathered in walled settlements for protection. Many of these old walled cities thus came to be re-occupied.

Another reason for the growth of towns came with a revival of trade in the eleventh century. This revival of trade can be traced to several causes. In the first place, Europe’s knights, as a warrior aristocracy, had a strong demand for luxury goods, both locally manufactured products and imported goods such as silks and spices from Asia. Bishops, the great lords of the Church, had a similar demand. As such, markets grew up in the vicinity of castles and thus caused the formation of towns that served as market centers, while cathedral cities also saw a growth of population. Moreover, Viking raids had also led to a greater sea-borne trade in the North Sea and Atlantic. Often, Viking-founded markets served as the nucleus of new towns, especially in those lands where the Romans had never established a state and which were not urbanized at all. The Irish city of Dublin, for example, had begun as a Viking trading post.

Further south, in the Mediterranean, frequent raids by pirates (most of whom were Arab Muslims from North Africa) had forced the coastal cities of Italy to build effective navies. One of
cases remained since the fall of the Western Empire. The cities of Genoa and Venice were able to prosper because they stood at the northernmost points of the Mediterranean, the farthest that goods could be moved by water (always cheaper than overland transport in premodern times) before going over land to points further north.

As goods moved north and south between the trade zones of the North Sea and the Mediterranean, nobles along that north-south route realized that they could enrich themselves by taxing markets. They thus sponsored and protected markets in regions of West Francia like Champagne, which themselves would serve as centers of urbanization and economic activity.

The people living and working in towns came to be known as the bourgeois, or middle class. These were called a middle class because they were neither peasant farmers nor nobles, but rather a social rank between the two. Kings and other nobles would frequently give towns the right to self-government, often in exchange for a hefty payment. A self-governing town was often known as a commune.

12.7 GROWTH IN AGRICULTURE

Eleventh-century Europe’s economy was primarily agricultural. The eleventh and twelfth centuries saw a massive expansion of agricultural output in the northern regions of Europe, which led to a corresponding growth in the economy and population. The same improvement in iron technology that allowed the equipping of armored knights led to more iron tools: axes allowed farmers to clear forests and cultivate more land, and the iron share of a heavy plow allowed farmers to plow
Deeper into the thick soil of Western Europe. In addition, farmers gradually moved to a so-called three field system of agriculture: fields would have one third given over to cereal crops, one third to crops such as legumes (which increase fertility in soil), and a third left fallow, i.e., uncultivated either to serve as grazing land for livestock or simply rebuild its nutrients by lying unused. More iron tools and new agricultural techniques caused yields to rise from 3:1 to nearly 8:1 and in some fertile regions even higher. Another factor in the rise of agricultural yields was Europe’s climate, which was becoming warmer in the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries. As a result of both climate and new agricultural tools and techniques, food supplies increased so that Western Europe would go through the majority of the twelfth century without experiencing a major famine.

We should note that at the same time that agricultural yields were rising in Europe, so too were they on the rise in Song China (see Chapter Four). Indeed, compared to China, Europe’s agricultural production was still relatively meager. It was nevertheless enough to bring about a dramatic growth in Europe’s population.

12.8 A ROMAN EMPIRE?

Although the Carolingian Empire had collapsed in the ninth century and West Francia remained fragmented, in Central Europe, the rulers of East Francia formed a new empire on the wreck of Charlemagne’s. King Otto I of East Francia had defeated the Magyars in 955 (see Chapter Seven), and both Otto and his powerful nobles further subordinated the Slavic peoples to the east to his rule, forcing them either to submit to his direct rule or acknowledge him as their overlord. He followed up on the prestige gained from his victory over the Magyars by exercising influence in Northern Italy, intervening in a dispute between Pope John XII (r. 955 – 964) and Berengar, a petty king. On 2 February 962, Pope John XII crowned Otto as Roman Emperor in a ceremony meant to echo Pope Leo III’s crowning of Charlemagne over a century and a half before. Further, Otto deposed Berengar and added Italy to his domains.

Otto was the most powerful ruler in Europe besides the Byzantine emperor. His empire covered most of the German-speaking lands of Central Europe: indeed, Otto and its subsequent emperors would be Germans and the power base of this empire would be firmly Central European. This empire also encompassed northern Italy and much of the territory west of the Rhine. The rulers of this empire would call themselves Roman Emperors and consider themselves the successors to Charlemagne and thus to the Roman Empire. This empire, however, was more modest than Charlemagne’s. Although its emperors would claim that all Christian kings owed them obedience, most other realms of Western Europe were independent, especially West Francia (which we shall hereafter refer to as France). Likewise, this empire’s control of Northern Italy was always somewhat tenuous, since its rulers’ power was based in Germany, far to the north of the Alps.
Because these emperors considered themselves to be Roman Emperors and also protectors of the Church—indeed, Otto I eventually deposed Pope John XII for improperly fulfilling his papal duties—historians call their empire the Holy Roman Empire and its emperors Holy Roman Emperors. The reader should carefully note that these emperors did not use either of those titles. They simply referred to themselves as Roman Emperors and their empire as the Roman Empire. We call the Empire the Holy Roman Empire and the emperors Holy Roman Emperors for the convenience of modern readers, so that they will know that they are reading about neither the Roman Empire, which dominated the entirety of the Mediterranean world in ancient times, nor the Byzantine Empire, a regional power in the Eastern Mediterranean for most of the Middle Ages.
12.9 THE HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE’S PERIPHERIES: SECONDARY STATE FORMATION

Anthropologists speak of secondary state formation, a process by which people who live in a tribe or chiefdom on the periphery of a state will gradually adopt statehood and the ideological trappings associated with statehood. Oftentimes this state formation happens because a people will need to match the resources of a state for raising armed forces, or because a chief will seek the greater prestige and power that comes from being recognized as a king.

In Scandinavia and in Eastern Europe, state formation occurred on the margins of the Holy Roman Empire. In the late tenth century, the Danes, the Poles (a Slavic people), and the Magyars formed the kingdoms of Denmark, Poland, and Hungary, respectively. These kingdoms were often vassal states (i.e., subordinate states) of the Ottonian emperors, but they just as often fought to maintain their independence when they had the capability to do so. Another key factor in the move from chiefdoms to states was the adoption of Christianity: the Christian religion, as we have seen earlier (see Chapter Seven), often legitimated a king. The Christian Bible says that a prince is God’s instrument of executing justice. In exchange for their legitimation, monarchs would protect the institutional Church. We can see this relationship between Christianity and secondary state formation when King Stephen I of Hungary received his crown from the papacy in the year 1000.

Far to the north, in Norway, a land of narrow fjords and valleys surrounded by pine-covered mountains, King Olaf II was following a similar set of policies. A Christian who had converted in 1013 while fighting in France, he spent his reign as king of Norway (1015 – 1030) both consolidating Norway into a kingdom that recognized royal authority and converting that kingdom to Christianity.

12.9.1 Global Context

In Northern and Eastern Europe, secondary state formation had gone hand in hand with the adoption of Christianity, which legitimated kings and whose clergy, familiar with the written word, provided the skills of literacy to monarchs. A similar pattern occurred elsewhere in the world, particularly in the African Sahel (see Chapter Nine). In Africa’s Sahel, between the tenth and thirteenth centuries, as Ghana and then later Mali consolidated into states, their rulers converted their people to Islam, which provided a similar aid to state-building that Christianity did to the rulers of Northern and Eastern Europe.

12.10 EXPANSION OF CHRISTENDOM

In the Middle Ages, the people of Western Europe did not think of Europe as a geographic and cultural area. Rather, they thought of Christendom, those peoples and nations of the world that embraced the Christian religion, as a community sharing common ideals and assumptions. We might compare it to the Muslim notion of Dar al-Islam (see Chapter Eight). And in the eleventh century, Christendom expanded. Not only had the peoples to the north and east embraced

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1 Romans 13:4
Christianity, but also Christian peoples and kingdoms in the Western Mediterranean expanded militarily at the expense of Islam. In Spain, the movement of the Christian kingdoms of northern Spain to expand their territory at the expense of Muslim al-Andalus would come to be known as the **Reconquista**, the reconquest. It was known as the re-conquest because there had been a Christian kingdom in Spain in the sixth and seventh centuries that had fallen to Muslim invaders in 711. Christians would thus have assumed that Spain, even though much of it might be Muslim ruled, was rightfully Christian. The effort by the Christian kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula to dominate, conquer, and re-Christianize al-Andalus would become a key element in how Spanish Christians understood their identity both as Christians and Spaniards.

How did the **Reconquista** begin? From the Muslim conquest of Spain in 711 through the early eleventh century, al-Andalus was the dominant military power of the Iberian Peninsula, with Christian kingdoms confined to the marginal, mountainous regions of the peninsula’s north (see Chapter Eight). But in 1008, Abd al-Rahman (also known as Sanjul), the caliph’s chief adviser, sought to make himself caliph and replace the Umayyad dynasty with his own. The result was nearly three decades of civil war. The Cordoba Caliphate collapsed in 1031, fracturing into what we refer to as the **taifa** states, a set of small, politically weak states. These states were much weaker than the centralized Cordoba Caliphate and so were easy prey for potential conquerors from both the Christian north of the Iberian Peninsula and the Islamic Maghreb.

The Christian kingdoms of Spain had several strengths that enabled them to expand at the expense of the **taifa** states. In the first place, the **taifa** states were not only politically weak, but they were also at odds with each other. In addition, the construction of stone castles in newly-conquered territories allow the Christian kings to secure their conquests. Moreover, the Christian kingdoms of Spain could draw on much of the rest of Western Europe for manpower. By the eleventh century, the knight who inherited a fief would usually be the oldest son of the fief’s lord. This arrangement meant that Western Europe had many knights who, as younger sons, had not inherited from their fathers (inheritance nearly always passed to males). These landless knights were looking either for employment or fiefs of their own. New conquests along the frontier of Muslim Spain thus gave them the perfect opportunity to seize their own lands. As a result, French knights flowed south in a steady stream across the Pyrenees.
In Southern Italy, a group of knights from the region of France known as Normandy (and who were thus called Normans) had fought in the employ of the Byzantine emperors against the Muslim rulers of North Africa and Sicily. They eventually broke with the Byzantine Emperors and created the Kingdom of Sicily, a kingdom comprised of Sicily and Southern Italy, the lands that they had seized from both the Byzantines and Sicilian Muslims, with the last Muslim territory in Sicily conquered in 1091. These knights too had come south to the Mediterranean in search of new lands.

The Christian kingdoms of both Spain and Sicily were relatively tolerant of their Muslim subjects. Although Muslims under Christian rule faced civil disabilities similar to the dhimmi status of Jews and Christians in Muslim-ruled lands, they had a broad array of rights and protections. Indeed, the Christian kings of Sicily often employed Muslim mercenaries in their military service.

These victories by Christian forces over Muslims would be of great interest to the popes, who were seeking to reform the Church and to find ways that knights could be made to serve Christian society.

12.11 CHURCH REFORM IN THE ELEVENTH CENTURY

By the eleventh century, Europe suffered from frequent violence and the Church itself was in a sorry state: Pope John XII, for example, the man who had crowned Otto I, was so infamous for his immorality that it was said that under his rule the papal palace (called the Lateran) was little better than a brothel. From the mid-eleventh century, both popes and other clergymen would seek to reform both the institutional structures of the Church and Christian society as a whole.

The Holy Roman Emperor Henry III (r. 1039 – 1056) set the reforming papacy into motion. In 1049, he had traveled to Rome to be crowned emperor. When he arrived in the city, he found three men claiming to be pope, each supported by a family of Roman nobles. The outraged emperor deposed all three and replaced them with his own candidate, Pope Leo IX (r. 1049 – 1054). Leo IX would usher in a period in which reformers dominated the papacy.

These popes believed that to reform the Church, they would need to do so as its unquestioned leaders and that the institutional Church should be independent from control of laypeople. The position of pope had long been a prestigious one: Peter, the chief of Jesus Christ’s disciples had, according to the Christian tradition, been the first bishop of Rome, the city in which he had been killed. Eleventh-century popes increasingly argued that since Peter had been the chief of Jesus’s followers (and thus the first pope), the whole Church owed the popes the obedience that the disciples had owed Peter, who himself had been given his authority by Christ.

Such a position was in many ways revolutionary. In the Byzantine Empire, the emperors often directed the affairs of the Church (although such attempts frequently went badly wrong as with the Iconoclast Controversy). Western European kings appointed bishops, and the Holy Roman Emperors believed that they had the right to both appoint and depose popes. To claim the Church was independent of lay control went against centuries of practice.

Moreover, not all churchmen recognized the absolute authority of the pope. The pope was one of five churchmen traditionally known as patriarchs, the highest ranking bishops of the Church.
The pope was the patriarch of Rome; the other four were the patriarchs of Constantinople, Antioch, Jerusalem, and Alexandria. With Jerusalem and Alexandria (and often Antioch) under Muslim rule, the patriarch of Constantinople was the most prestigious of the Eastern Orthodox patriarchs, dwelling in a city that was Rome’s successor. The patriarchs of Constantinople believed that the Roman pope had a place of honor because Peter had resided in Rome, but they did not believe he had any authority over other patriarchs.

12.11.1 The *Filioque* Controversy and the Split between Rome and Constantinople

This difference of opinion as to the authority of the pope would eventually break out in conflict. The church following the pope (which we will refer to as the Catholic Church for the sake of convenience), had a creed in its liturgy that said that God the Holy Spirit proceeds both from God the Father and from God the Son. The Eastern Orthodox version of this creed spoke of God the Holy Spirit as proceeding only from God the Father. Representatives of both churches quarreled over this wording, with the popes attempting to order the Orthodox Churches to state that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and from the Son in their creed. We thus call this controversy the *Filioque Controversy*, since Latin for “and from the Son” is *filioque*.

On 16 July 1054, Humbert of Silva Candida, the pope’s legate (i.e., ambassador) together with his entourage stormed into the Hagia Sophia as the patriarch was celebrating Communion and hurled a parchment scroll onto the altar; the scroll decreed the patriarch to be excommunicated. In response, the patriarch excommunicated the pope. Catholic and Orthodox churches were now split.

12.11.2 Simony and the Investiture Controversy

In spite of the schism between Catholic and Orthodox Churches, the popes turned to reforming the Church in the Catholic west. Two pressing concerns of the popes were the elimination of simony, the buying and selling of Church offices, and the protection of the Church’s independence from laypeople. The fight of the reforming popes to assert the Church’s independence led to the *Investiture Controversy*, the conflict between the popes and Holy Roman Emperors (and other kings of Western Europe) over who had the right to appoint churchmen.

To understand the Investiture Controversy, we need to understand the nature of a medieval bishop’s power and authority. A bishop in medieval Europe was a Church leader, with a cathedral church and a palace. A medieval bishop would also hold lands with fiefs on these lands (and military obligations from those who held these fiefs), just like any great noble.

The Holy Roman Emperors believed that they had the right to appoint bishops both because a bishop held lands from the emperor and because the emperors believed themselves to be the leaders of all Christendom. The reforming popes of the eleventh century, particularly Pope Gregory VII (r. 1073 – 1085), objected to this belief. These popes believed that, since their authority as popes came from God, their spiritual authority was superior to the earthly authority of any king or prince. They further claimed their right to be independent rulers of the Papal States in Central Italy, based on the Donation of Constantine (see Chapter Seven).
Gregory VII was up against a man just as strong willed as he in the person of Emperor Henry IV (r. 1056 – 1106). From 1075, their relationship became increasingly adversarial as each claimed the exclusive right to appoint and depose bishops. Eventually, this conflict burst into open flame when Henry claimed that Gregory was in fact not rightfully pope at all and attempted to appoint his own pope. In response, Gregory proclaimed that none of Henry’s subjects had a duty to obey him and encouraged his subjects to rise in rebellion.

Without the Church to legitimate Henry IV, his empire collapsed into civil war. As a result, Henry took a small band of followers and, in the dead of winter, crossed the Alps, braving the snowy, ice-covered passes to negotiate with the pope in person. In January, he approached the mountain castle of Canossa where the pope was staying and begged Gregory for forgiveness, waiting outside of the pope’s castle on his knees in the snow for three days. Finally, Pope Gregory forgave the emperor.

In the end, though, after a public ceremony of reconciliation, Henry returned to Central Europe, crushed the rebellion, and then returned to Italy with an army, forcing Gregory VII into exile. This Investiture Controversy would drag on for another four decades. In the end, the Holy Roman Emperors and popes would reach a compromise with the 1122 Concordat of Worms. The compromise was that clergy would choose bishops, but that the emperor could decide disputed elections. A bishop would receive his lands from the emperor in one ceremony, and the emblems of his spiritual authority from the pope in another. Other kings of Western Europe reached similar compromises with the papacy.

The results of half a century of papal reform efforts were mixed. The Catholic and Orthodox Churches had split with one another, and tensions remain between the two to this day. Although the popes failed to achieve everything they sought, they did gain limited independence of the Church, and they succeeded almost completely in ending the practice of simony. Indeed, one contrast between Western Europe and much of the rest of the world is a strong sense of separation between secular and sacred authority. That separation of Church and state owes much to the troubled years of the Investiture Controversy.
The successes of the papacy in their efforts at Church reform, together with the military successes seen by Christians in the Western Mediterranean against Muslims, would inspire the popes to an even more ambitious effort: the Crusades.

12.12 THE CRUSADES

12.12.1 Background: Disaster at Manzikert

On the surface, the Byzantine Empire of the eleventh century looked like one of the world’s great powers. It dominated the Eastern Mediterranean, with its emperors reigning from Constantinople, a city full of magnificent churches, splendid palaces, and centuries-old monuments of an ancient empire.
But these outward signs of strength concealed several weaknesses. In the first place, the theme system (see Chapter Seven) had begun to break down. The plots of land used to equip soldiers had gradually given way to large estates held by powerful aristocrats. These powerful aristocrats often paid less and less in taxes, starving the state of key resources. The theme soldiers themselves were used less often (and when they did fight, they were often poorly trained and equipped), with the emperors relying on mercenaries for most of their fighting. The civilian aristocracy and the military were often at loggerheads.

The Byzantine emperors of the later eleventh century were nevertheless able to hold their own against external threats until the arrival of the Saljuq Turks in the Middle East (see Chapters Eight and Eleven). Both the Byzantine emperor Romanos IV (r. 1068 – 1071) and the Saljuq sultan Alps Arslan (r. 1063 – 1072) sought to control the Caucasus Mountains, whose passes controlled access to the Middle East from the Central Asian steppes. Control of this route was especially important as the steppes served as a source from which the Turks in the Middle East could recruit more fighters.

Byzantine and Turk finally clashed. Romanos sought to break the Turkish threat on his eastern flank and so mustered an immense army. This army consisted both of soldiers of the themes and mercenary units drawn from many different peoples: Western Europeans, Cumans and Pechenegs from the steppes, Scandinavians, and Turks. Both the heterogeneity of this army and the dysfunctional politics of the eleventh-century Byzantine Empire would prove to be Romanos’s undoing.

On 19 August 1071, the forces of the Byzantine Empire met those of the Great Saljuq Empire at the Battle of Manzikert near the shores of Lake Van in Armenia. The thematic troops were of indifferent quality, but worse for the emperor was the treachery of both the Byzantine commander Andronikos Doukas and the Byzantine force’s Turkic mercenaries. The Byzantine field army was annihilated. The emperor himself was surrounded and taken captive after his elite guard of Norse mercenaries went down fighting in his defense.

The result was a catastrophe for the Empire. Not only had most of the Byzantine Army been wiped out, but also competing Byzantine nobles took the opportunity of the emperor’s captivity to launch their own bids for power. During the decade of civil war that followed, the Empire’s holdings in Asia...
Minor almost all fell under the dominion of the Saljuq Turks. What had been the world’s most powerful Christian state now faced destruction.

Eventually, Alexios Komnenos (r. 1081 – 1118) would seize control of the Byzantine Empire and laboriously rebuild its military strength. Alexios was an able and clever military commander who also possessed good long-term sense. He used the tax base of the Empire’s Balkan possessions to fund a new army, one composed largely of foreign mercenaries and a small core of Greek soldiers. These indigenous soldiers were often granted out blocks of lands known as pronoiai (singular pronoia) whose revenues they would use to equip themselves and their soldiers; a pronoia was similar to a fief in Western Europe. He also recruited steppe peoples, such as the Cumans and Pechenegs, into his forces. Another group of peoples from which he recruited mercenaries was Western Europeans, particularly from the Holy Roman Empire and West Francia. In March of 1095, he sent a request to the pope for military assistance. The long-term consequences of this request would be earth-shaking.

12.12.2 The First Crusade

The pope who received Alexios Komnenos’s request for help was Urban II (r. 1088 – 1099), an associate of reformers like Gregory VII. Churchmen seeking to reform society had looked to quell the violence that was often frequent in Western Europe (especially in France): this violence was usually the work of knights. These reformers were considering how knights could turn their aggression to pursuits that were useful to Christian society rather than preying upon civilians. Fighting against Muslims in Sicily and Spain showed the popes an example of knightly aggression directed towards Christendom’s external enemies (see Chapter Eight).

In addition, the Church had long recognized Roman Law’s concept of Just War: a war could be moral as long as it was defensive, declared by a rightful authority, and likely to cause less damage than if the war had not occurred. By the eleventh century, certain churchmen had further formulated this idea into one of Holy War, that is to say, that a war fought in defense of the Church was not only morally right, but even meritorious.

The final element that led to Pope Urban II’s turning much of the military might of Western Europe to the Middle East was the idea of Jerusalem. The city of Jerusalem was where Jesus Christ was said to have been crucified, to have died, and to have risen from the dead (see Chapter Six). As such, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, built on what was said to be the empty tomb from which Christ had risen was the holiest Church in the Christian world—and this Church had been under the control of Muslims since Caliph Umar’s conquest of Palestine in the seventh century (see Chapter Eight). The city remained important to Christians, however, and, even while it was under Muslim rule, they had traveled to it as pilgrims, that is, travelers undertaking a journey for religious purposes.

Pope Urban thus conceived of the idea of turning the military force of Western Europe to both shore up the strength of the flagging Byzantine Empire (a Christian state), and return Jerusalem and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher to Christian rule after four centuries of Muslim domination.

On 27 November 1095, he gathered several of the major nobles of Western Europe (as well as many lower-ranked knights) to an open-air sermon at Clermont, where he was presiding over a
Church council. In this sermon, he proclaimed that it was the duty of these warrior aristocrats, as Christians, to defend the Byzantine Empire and to put the city of Jerusalem under Christian rule. The result was an enthusiastic response by those knights, who are said to have cried out, “God wills it!” and to have vowed to set off to Jerusalem and bring it under Christian rule. Furthermore, as word of Pope Urban’s admonition spread throughout Western Europe, more and more of the knightly class answered the call, mustering under the leadership of several powerful nobles.

This movement of the knights of most of Western Europe to fight against Muslims in the Middle East is generally known as the first of a series of Crusades. A crusade was a war declared by the papacy against those perceived to be enemies of the Christian faith (usually, but not always, Muslims). Participating in a crusade would grant a Christian forgiveness of sins. We ought to note that such a concept in many ways superficially resembled the Muslim notion of the Lesser Jihad (see Chapter Eight).

As these forces mustered and marched south and east, the religious enthusiasm accompanying them often spilled out into aggression against non-Christians other than Muslims. One group

Map 12.3 | The Crusader States | These regions were known to Western Europeans as Outremer, Old French for “across the sea”
Author: Ian Mladjov
Source: Original Work
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of Crusaders in the area around the Rhine engaged in a series of massacres of Jewish civilians, traveling from city to city while killing Jews and looting their possessions before this armed gang was forced to disperse.

The Crusaders traveled in two main waves. The first traveled to the Byzantine Empire, and was ferried across the Bosporus but was wiped out by a Turkish army. The second wave, however, was better planned and coordinated, and, upon its arrival in the Byzantine Empire, reached an uneasy truce with the Alexios Komnenos (who had been expecting a modest force of mercenaries and not the armed might of most of Western Europe). The Crusaders were fortunate. After Nizaris had assassinated Nizam al-Mulk and the Fatimid caliph of Egypt had died (both in 1092), the Middle East fell into political chaos (see Chapter Eight). When the Crusaders marched east in 1096, they encountered not a unified Great Saljuq Empire, but a collection of independent and semi-independent sultans and emirs.

The Crusaders moved east, winning a string of victories in Asia Minor: when they could not be outmaneuvered, the armored knights of Western Europe often stood at an advantage against the lightly armored or unarmored mounted archers that mostly made up the bulk of Turkish forces. Following the path of the crusading army, Alexios was able to restore much of western Asia Minor to the control of the Byzantine Empire, although the central Anatolian plateau would remain under the dominion of the Saljuq Turks. The Crusaders advanced on Antioch, the largest and most prosperous city of the Levant, and, after a siege of nearly a year, both seized control of the city and defeated a Turkish army that attempted to relieve it. The army then marched south to Jerusalem and into territory controlled by the Fatimid caliphate—itself a Shi’ite state that was no friend of the Sunni Saljuq Turks. Venice and Genoa, meanwhile, transported supplies to the Crusaders by sea. The Crusaders rejected Fatimid overtures for a negotiated settlement and, in June of 1099, arrived outside the walls of Jerusalem. The Crusaders stormed the city’s walls, and, as the city fell, it was subject to a brutal sack, with both the city’s defenders and its civilian population subject to a bloody slaughter. We must note that there was nothing particularly unique about this massacre. The custom among most pre-modern peoples was that if a city resisted an attacking army, then it would be subject to sack and massacre of its population were it to fall.

After the fall of Jerusalem, the Crusaders established four states in the Levant: the County of Edessa, in northern Mesopotamia, the Principality of Antioch, centered on the city of Antioch...
and its environs; the County of Tripoli, in what is roughly Lebanon today; and the Kingdom of Jerusalem, which occupied Palestine and whose capital was the city of Jerusalem. These states were ruled by men (and often women) who were Catholic in religion and ethnically Western European. The religion and institutions of these Crusader States were nearly the same as those of Western Europe.

These states attracted some settlers, in both their warrior aristocracy and even merchants and peasants. But many of the subjects of the Christian rulers of these kingdoms were Muslims (or Christian Arabs, who had special privileges over their Muslim counterparts, but fewer rights than Catholic, ethnically Western European Christians). Indeed, the Crusader States would consistently suffer from a lack of manpower: although the pope had spoken of rich lands for the taking in Palestine, most of the knights who had gone on the First Crusade (and survived) returned to Western Europe. The Crusader States relied on extensive networks of heavily fortified stone castles for defense. They were fortunate that the Middle East was politically fragmented and Fatimid Egypt was weak. Whether these states would be sustainable in the face of stronger Muslim powers remained to be seen.

12.13 THE TWELFTH CENTURY IN WESTERN EUROPE

In the twelfth century, many of Europe’s kingdoms saw a gradual centralization of state power. England had long been Western Europe’s most centralized state. In 1066, a group of Normans under their Duke, William the Bastard, invaded England. William defeated the English army, making himself the king of England: he was thus known as William the Conqueror. This conquest of England by French-speakers moved the culture, language, and institutions of England closer to those of France. Although England looked more feudal, it nevertheless retained a centralized bureaucratic apparatus. William was able to use this bureaucracy to conduct a nationwide census, a feat of which no European state outside of the Byzantine Empire was capable. Although England would suffer a civil war of nearly a decade and a half in the twelfth century, for the most part, its monarchs, particularly

Figure 12.11 | King Henry II and his wife, Eleanor of Aquitaine
Author: Anonymous
Source: Wikimedia Commons
License: Public Domain
Henry I (r. 1100 – 1135) and Henry II (r. 1154 – 1189), were innovative and clever administrators, creating a network of royal courts and a sophisticated office of tax collection known as the **Exchequer**.

France had entered the tenth and eleventh centuries as the most loosely-governed kingdom of Europe. In 987, France’s nobles elected Hugh Capet, the count of Paris, as king, effectively replacing the Carolingian dynasty. The **Capetian** Dynasty’s kings, however, directly controlled only the lands around Paris. In addition, after the Norman conquest of England in 1066, the Norman kings of England were also dukes of large French territories. Thus, for the first part of the twelfth century, much of France was under the effective control of the English crown.

In spite of these challenges, the Capetian monarchs gradually built their kingdom into a functional state. They cultivated a reputation as defenders of Christianity in order to gain legitimacy from the Church. They also sought to enforce the feudal obligations that the powerful nobles owed to the crown, often calling on them to serve militarily so as to create a habit of obedience to the king.

To the southwest, the rise of the Muslim Almoravid Empire under the rule of aggressively expansionist Muslim religious reformers in North Africa briefly put the **Reconquista** in jeopardy, but, by the early twelfth century, it had resumed, with the Muslim stronghold of Zaragoza falling to Christian armies in 1118. After the First Crusade, those knights...
who traveled to Spain to help its Christian kings fight Muslims received the same forgiveness of sins that the papacy granted to crusaders in the Levant. Over the twelfth century, four major Christian kingdoms would emerge in the Iberian Peninsula: Portugal, Leon-Castile, Navarre, and Aragon. These kingdoms would develop a sophisticated system of taxation in order to fund the Reconquista. In the later twelfth century, they faced the challenge of the Almohad Empire that emerged from the Islamic Maghreb to unite Muslim Spain and North Africa. By the 1150s, Christian Spain was on the defensive once again.

In Scandinavia, too, a set of strong monarchies had emerged in Denmark and Norway by the end of the twelfth century.

12.14 EMPIRES: RECOVERY AND COLLAPSE

12.14.1 Frederick Barbarossa and the Holy Roman Empire

The Investiture Controversy had weakened the power of the Holy Roman Emperors. In the early part of the twelfth century, power in the Holy Roman Empire decentralized in the same way that it had in tenth- and eleventh-century France, while the cities of northern Italy were increasingly governing themselves with little direct authority exercised by the Holy Roman Emperors. The Holy Roman Emperor Frederick Barbarossa (r. 1152 – 1190) sought to arrest this decline and make his subjects adhere to his authority.

Frederick’s two overriding goals were to ensure that the great princes of Central Europe and the city-states of Northern Italy acknowledged and submitted to his authority. Northern Italy was a particularly vexing challenge. By the middle of the twelfth century, many of the cities of northern Italy had gradually moved from rule by an urban nobility or bishops to self-government by an elected commune, and these communes were often reluctant to acknowledge imperial authority, especially with respect to the taxes that Barbarossa believed were owed him. Shortly after beginning his reign, Barbarossa sought to implement this authority.

Barbarossa had a great deal of initial success, but eventually the city-states of Northern Italy united into an organization called the Lombard League, and this League allied with the popes, who lent their moral authority to the cause of the northern Italian city-states. Indeed, part of the difficulties faced by Barbarossa was that any pope would be more likely to try to keep northern and central Italy as far from direct control of the Holy Roman Emperors as possible. If the emperors were too powerful in Northern and Central Italy, then they would threaten the papacy’s independence, jeopardizing everything the eleventh-century reforming popes had struggled to accomplish. Eventually, this coalition of the papacy and Lombard League inflicted a military defeat on Barbarossa at the 1176 Battle of Legnano, after which Barbarossa was forced to concede a great deal of self-rule within the Empire to the Italian city-states.

Near the end of his reign, Barbarossa would lead an immense army on a crusade. In 1187, the kings of Western Europe found themselves forced to respond to a great catastrophe for Christendom: the city, and, indeed, most of the Kingdom of Jerusalem had fallen to a Muslim army under the sultan Saladin. These kings responded with the effort known as the Third Crusade.
12.14.2 The Komnenoi in Byzantium

The other empire claiming (with somewhat more justice) to be the rightful heir of the Roman Empire was the Byzantine Empire, and, after the disaster of Manzikert, the Komnenos emperors had managed to rebuild a Byzantine army based on the system of pronoiai and mercenary forces. Emperor John II (r. 1118 – 1143) followed up on Alexios’s work and established effective Byzantine control over much of Western Anatolia, consolidated imperial hold on Southeastern Europe, and, indeed, forced the Crusader States to acknowledge him as their overlord.

At the same time that Barbarossa sought to build the Holy Roman Empire as a credible power, in the east, Manuel Komnenos (r. 1143 – 1180) sought to do the same with his Empire. He managed to suppress the growing power of Venice in the Eastern Mediterranean, form an alliance with the growing kingdom of Hungary, and temporarily force the Turks of central Anatolia to acknowledge his overlordship. In the end, however, the emperor’s reach exceeded his grasp. His attempt to conquer Fatimid Egypt in alliance with the Kingdom of Jerusalem
failed when the military commander of Damascus, Saladin, outmaneuvered both Byzantium and Jerusalem and instead added Egypt to the territory of Damascus, which created a Muslim Empire in the Middle East that menaced the Crusader States (see Chapter Eight). And the emperor’s effort to return central Anatolia to Byzantine rule ultimately failed when his army was defeated by the Saljuq Sultanate of Rum at Myriokephalon in 1176. Ultimately, the Byzantine Empire’s undoing was not necessarily in individual battles, but rather in that the loss of the wealthy agricultural land of Central Anatolia to the Turks meant that its emperors never quite had the tax base necessary to put their ambitions of a restored Roman Empire into practice.

In the end, the Komnenoi had managed to restore the Byzantine Empire as a regional power, but it was left with structural weaknesses that would eventually prove to be its undoing.

12.15 THE TWELFTH-CENTURY RENAISSANCE

The twelfth century in Western Europe was a time of renewed vibrancy in intellectual activity, and much of this activity centered on Europe’s towns and cities. We call this renewal of intellectual activity the **Twelfth-Century Renaissance** in order to separate it from both the Carolingian Renaissance of the eighth and ninth centuries and the Italian Renaissance of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Both monasteries and cathedrals were centers of education in Western Europe, even during the dark days of the tenth century. Over the eleventh century, thinkers in the monasteries of Western Europe had increasingly sought to apply the tools of logic (in particular Aristotelian logic) to the study of the Bible. But Western Europeans were familiar with very little of Aristotle’s work aside from a small number of logical writings that had been translated from Greek into Latin in the sixth century. The twelfth century would see a massive shift, with an immense growth of interest in philosophy on the part of those men (and a few women) who had a formal education. The spur to this interest would come from events in Southwestern Europe.

Al-Andalus had been a major source of Muslim intellectual activity. As early as the tenth century, Christian scholars, such as Gerbert of Aurillac (who eventually became Pope Sylvester II, r. 999 – 1003), had visited Muslim-ruled Spain to read the works of ancient Greek thinkers that were unavailable elsewhere in Western Europe. Gerbert’s writings show him to be particularly fascinated with Euclid, Arabic numerals, and the concept of zero.

When Toledo fell to Christian armies in 1085, its libraries became available to the larger Christian world. Muslims had translated most of the philosophy of Aristotle into Arabic in addition to writing extensive original works that engaged with the thought of Aristotle and Plato. Once these books were in Christian hands, Raymond, archbishop of Toledo (r. 1125 – 1152), set up translation teams. People who spoke Arabic and the Romance languages of Spain would first translate these books into Spanish, and these books would then be translated into Latin, which would thus make Aristotle and Ptolemy (as well as the works of Arabic philosophers) available to educated people throughout Western Europe. The availability of texts that had been largely known only by reputation to the thinkers of Western Europe spurred an intellectual revolution,

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2 Between the sixth and eleventh centuries, a practice emerged whereby the pope would adopt a distinct name from the name he was born with upon ascension to the papacy. The practice continues to the present day.
as the Christian thinkers sought to understand how to reconcile an understanding of the world based on Christianity with the approach of the non-Christian ancient Greeks.

Such translations on the Christian/Muslim frontier continued through the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Christendom thus had access to the writings of Muslim philosophers. Western Europeans read natural philosophy, such as al-Haytham’s writings on optics and the Aristotelian commentaries of Ibn Rushd (whose name they pronounced as Averroës). This movement saw the translation not only of philosophy, but also of medicine—indeed, in the Muslim world, philosophers often served as physicians—so the medical works of philosophers and physicians such as Ibn Sina (whose name Western Europeans pronounced as Avicenna) were read avidly by Christians in Western Europe.

Philosophy and medicine were not the only fields of study to receive new interest. Western Europeans were also showing a renewed interest in law. Although the kingdoms that had grown up in Western Europe after the fall of the Western Roman Empire had incorporated some elements of Roman Law as well as the oral law of the Germanic peoples into their legal systems, law codes were for the most part unsystematic. Starting from the eleventh century, scholars, particularly those based in the schools of Bologna, began subjecting The Justinian Code (see Chapter Seven) to intense study, using logical analysis to create a body of systematic writing on the interpretation of law. These men who studied Roman Law would often go to work for kings and emperors, with the result that much European law would often draw its inspiration from Justinian.

Most schools were still attached to cathedral churches—indeed, these schools in which medicine, law, and philosophy flourished as disciplines of study might be compared to the madrassas of the Muslim world—so the chief field of study in these schools was theology, that is,
the interpretation of the Bible. And theologians increasingly drew on logical analysis and philosophy of language to understand what they believed was God’s revelation to humanity.

Eventually, many of these cathedral schools gained the right to organize as self-governing institutions. We call these institutions universities. By the end of the twelfth century, the universities of Bologna, Paris, and Oxford had become self-governing institutions and would serve as the foundation of the university system of the Western world that exists to the present day.

12.16 THE THIRD CRUSADE

The Crusader States had endured from 1099 to 1187 because the Muslim Middle East was politically fragmented. Once Saladin had overthrown Egypt’s Fatimid Caliphate and united Egypt to Muslim-controlled Syria and northern Iraq (see Chapter Eight), he was able to turn his resources to destroying
the Crusader States. Eventually, at the 1187 Battle of Hattin, his forces met the combined forces of the Kingdom of Jerusalem. The result was a complete victory for Saladin. With the manpower of most of the Kingdom of Jerusalem killed or captured—knights and noble prisoners would be held for a hefty ransom, while lower-ranked soldiers would go to slave markets—he was easily able to capture most of the castles and cities that made up the kingdom, to include the city of Jerusalem itself.

The result shocked the Christian world, and Pope Gregory VIII quickly issued the bull (that is, an official papal pronouncement) *Audita tremendi*, which called on the Christian world to retake Jerusalem. The kings of England and France, Richard I (known as Lionheart, r. 1189 – 1199) and Philip Augustus (r. 1180 – 1223), respectively, took vows to launch a crusade, as did Holy Roman Emperor Frederick Barbarossa. (As usual, the Christians of Iberia took little part in crusades in the Levant, as their efforts focused on the *Reconquista.*)

Although Frederick Barbarossa died en route (he drowned in a stream in the mountains of Anatolia), both Richard I and Philip Augustus eventually arrived in the Levant by sea. Although Philip soon returned to France, King Richard battled Saladin over the course of two years, to results that were mostly inconclusive. The crusading army seized most of the castles and cities on the coast, and these became the center for a restored, but smaller Kingdom of Jerusalem, but the Crusaders ultimately failed to take Jerusalem itself. The Crusade finally ended in a truce in which both parties ratified this state of affairs, with Christian pilgrims allowed to visit the city of Jerusalem, even though it remained under Muslim rule.

### 12.17 THE FOURTH CRUSADE

While Jerusalem remained under Muslim control, the papacy’s goal was to retake it, especially as, in 1198, the man elected pope was one of the most ambitious men to wear the papal crown of the Middle Ages: Pope Innocent III (r. 1198 – 1216). Innocent’s goals were to morally reform society and to launch a crusade for retaking the holy city of Jerusalem. In the year of his election, he issued a call to crusade that ended up as a disaster.

Between 1185 and 1204, the Byzantine Empire had drastically weakened. After the death of Manuel Komnenos with his heir still a child, the Empire faced a string of catastrophes. The child-emperor was murdered, his successor was eventually overthrown, and the next emperor after that was likewise overthrown. During this political infighting, the Empire’s peripheral territories of Serbia, Cyprus, and Cilicia all seceded. Closer to the center, the Bulgars rose in rebellion in 1186 and re-established an independent Bulgaria within only a few days’ march of Constantinople itself. In addition, the chain of emperors, regents, and usurpers reigning between 1185 and 1204 had allowed the Byzantine navy to gradually disintegrate.

In 1202, a group of crusaders (with kings notably absent) contracted with the government of Venice to transport them to fight in Egypt, now ruled by Saladin’s heirs. When these crusaders proved unable to pay, the Venetian government requested their military assistance. The son of the deposed emperor (whose eyes had been gouged out) approached the crusaders and Venetians. He offered the crusaders military and financial assistance and for Venice to gain trading privileges in the Empire if crusaders and Venetians would help him regain his throne. The end result was that, in 1204, after a
A series of misadventures, a crusader army stormed the walls of Constantinople and put the city to a brutal sack; then, the crusaders parceled out much of the territory of the Byzantine Empire amongst themselves. The most advantageous ports went to Venice, which would use them as the basis of a Mediterranean trading empire that would endure for centuries. The Crusades, which had begun as a result of an appeal for help by the Byzantine Empire, ultimately resulted in its destruction.

Although the Byzantine Empire had been broken up, three states survived that claimed to be legitimate heirs to the Byzantine State. One was established in Western Anatolia with its capital in Nicaea, another, in Epirus, in what is today the country of Albania, while the third was based on the city of Trebizond, on the northern coast of Anatolia. The Nicene Empire would eventually retake Constantinople in 1261, although the restored state would never be the regional power that the Empire had been under the Komnenoi.

Map 12.7 | The Latin Empire in 1212 CE | The Latin Empire of Constantinople (the state established by crusaders after 1204) and Byzantine successor states
Author: Ian Mladjov
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12.18 THE STATES OF THIRTEENTH-CENTURY EUROPE

12.18.1 Eastern Europe

The thirteenth century would prove catastrophic for both Hungary and the Kievan Rus, for the same Mongols who laid waste to much of Asia would eventually arrive from the steppes of Asia and into the plains of Eastern Europe (see Chapter Eleven). In 1240, the Mongols shattered the Kievan Rus, destroyed the city of Kiev, and left the plains around the city littered with dead bodies stretching out to the horizon. The Ruses would remain Mongol vassals for the rest of the Middle Ages. The Mongol advance continued. In 1241, at the Battle of Mohi, a Hungarian army was annihilated, and the Mongols subsequently slew half the kingdom’s population before Batu Khan, the Mongol commander, returned to Mongolia for the election of a new Great Khan (see Chapter Eleven).

Map 12.8 | Europe in 1240 CE
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12.18.2 The Holy Roman Empire: Failure of Frederick II

The Holy Roman Empire remained Europe’s dominant power in the first half of the thirteenth century in spite of Barbarossa’s incomplete success. The Empire would, however, be fatally undermined by the struggles between Emperor Frederick II (r. 1215 – 1250) and a series of mostly forceful and able popes. The dispute was the same as that which had occupied his grandfather, Frederick Barbarossa. Unlike Barbarossa, the base of Frederick II’s power was in Sicily, for his father, Henry VI (r. 1190 – 1197), had married Constance, queen of Sicily, thus making Frederick II ruler of both the Holy Roman Empire and the Kingdom of Sicily. Like his grandfather, he sought to create an empire that ruled both Italy and central Europe. And for the same reason that the popes had opposed Barbarossa, they, together with the cities of northern Italy, opposed Frederick II. In the end, when Frederick died, the Holy Roman Empire collapsed as a unitary state. For nearly twenty years, it had no emperor, as the papacy’s allies hunted down and brutally slaughtered Frederick’s heirs, and then, by the time an emperor was elected from the Austrian nobles of the Hapsburg family in 1273, the Empire was more a loose collection of states than a centralized empire.

12.18.3 Expansion of Christendom on the Frontiers

To the northeast, Christendom continued to expand. In the forests and bogs around the Baltic Sea, German-speaking crusaders (as well as Danes) conquered the heathen peoples, converting them to Christianity and settling the territory with Germans and Danes. These efforts were recognized by the popes as crusades. By the end of the thirteenth century, all of Europe except for Lithuania was Christian. The kingdom of Lithuania would remain resolutely heathen and militarily resist German Crusaders until 1385, at which time the Lithuanian kings finally converted to Christianity when their kingdom was combined with Poland.

In thirteenth-century Spain, the most significant accomplishment of the Christian monarchs was that, on 16 July 1212, at the Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa, the combined armies of Castile, Aragon, Portugal, and Navarre met those of the Almohad Caliphate and won a victory so crushing that the power of the Almohads was forever broken. In the decades that followed, Aragon, Portugal, and Castile conquered all of Muslim Iberia, save for Granada.

12.18.4 France and England

Perhaps the most successful thirteenth-century monarchs were the Capetian kings of France. In the years between 1203 and 1214, King Philip Augustus managed to dispossess the English king of almost all of his territory held in France. He was also increasingly successful in using a set of recognized laws to enhance his legitimacy. So he made sure that he had a strong legal case drawn up by expert lawyers before he dispossessed England’s King John. Likewise, he created a royal court that was a court of final appeal—and that meant that, even in parts of the kingdom where great lords exercised their own justice, the king had increasing authority. In 1208, Pope Innocent III had called a crusade against the semi-independent territories of southern France because of...
the presence there of a group of heretics known as the Cathars. In the resulting crusade (called the **Albigensian Crusade** because much of the fighting happened around the town of Albi), crusaders from the north crushed the power of the great nobles of southern France. King Louis VIII (r. 1223 – 1226) then extended the direct rule of the French crown into areas where, for centuries, the French kings had ruled only indirectly.

France’s King Louis IX (r. 1226 – 1270) was perhaps its most effective Capetian king. He continued the process of establishing the royal courts as supreme in the kingdom. It was in Louis IX’s reign that we can see the beginnings of a sophisticated and accurate royal budget.

When England’s King John (r. 1199 – 1216) lost to Philip Augustus, his outraged nobles rebelled, resulting in a civil war from 1215 to 1217. One temporary treaty of this civil war, a treaty known as **Magna Carta** (signed in 1215), would have a much further-reaching impact than anyone who had drafted it could have foreseen. One particular provision of Magna Carta was that if the king wanted to raise new taxes on the people of England, then he needed to get the consent of the community of the realm by convening a council. The convening of such councils, known as **parliaments**, would come to be systematized over the course of the thirteenth century, until, by the reign of Edward I (r. 1272 – 1307), they would have representatives from most regions of England and would vote on whether to grant taxes to the king.

Parliaments were not unique to England, however. Most Spanish kings would consult with a body known as a **cortes**, with representatives of both Spain’s towns and nobility, and the Scandinavian kings had assemblies called **things**. Indeed, by 1356, the Holy Roman Emperor would be elected by an assembly of the Holy Roman Emperor.
Empire’s greatest nobles, known as electors. England’s parliaments, however, would gradually evolve from assemblies convoked when a king wanted to raise taxes to a regular assembly that gave representative voice to the people of England.

As stated earlier, of thirteenth-century Europe’s monarchs, France’s Capetian kings were some of the most successful. Indeed, King Louis IX’s French state was well-administered enough that he was able to manage the logistics of a military campaign fought at the opposite end of the Mediterranean: the war that modern historians often call the Seventh Crusade.

12.19 LATER CRUSADES AND CRUSADING’S ULTIMATE FAILURE

After the Third Crusade, the re-established Crusader States managed to survive and even expand in power for the next several decades. Syria and Egypt were split between Saladin’s heirs, and the crusader kingdoms often enjoyed good relations with Ayyubid Egypt: indeed, a truce worked out between Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II and the Egyptian sultan al-Kamil in 1229 resulted in the city of Jerusalem itself returning to Christian rule.

Map 12.9 | The Crusader States in 1243 CE
Author: Ian Mladjov
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In the 1240s, however, forces far from the Levant brought down the Kingdom of Jerusalem. As the Mongols gradually conquered Central Asia (see Chapter Eleven), the Khwarazmian Turks were driven from their realm in the steppes into Syria and northern Iraq. They ended up allying with Ayyubid Egypt against the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem, and, in 1244, the combined armies of Damascus and Jerusalem were defeated by an Egyptian/Khwarazmian army. Jerusalem fell under Muslim rule, under which it would remain until 1917.

In response to the fall of Jerusalem, Pope Innocent IV (r. 1243 – 1254) called a crusade that would be led by King Louis IX. While it had contingents from other Western European kingdoms, this effort was primarily an effort of the French crown. Although King Louis IX was able to manage the impressive logistical feat of organizing and equipping an army that seized the northern Egyptian port of Damietta, the effort to take all of Egypt was ultimately unsuccessful. Over the course of 1250, the French army was surrounded in the swamps of the Nile Delta outside of Cairo and forced to surrender, with Louis himself captured. The only lasting result in the Middle East was that, during the fighting, the Ayyubid sultan’s Mamluks launched a coup d’état and seized power in Egypt, thereby creating in Egypt a military power that would dominate the Levant for nearly three centuries (see Chapter Eight).

Indeed, in the four decades after Louis’s failure in the Nile Delta, the Mamluk sultans of Egypt would eventually conquer all of the Crusader States, with the last crusader stronghold in the Levant, the city of Acre, falling in 1291. Although Popes would still call crusades for military efforts against Muslim forces (and indeed, still make calls to retake the city of Jerusalem), crusading had failed. One reason for crusading’s ultimate failure was that, as Western European kings consolidated their power, they often had priorities other than crusading. England’s Edward I, for example, spent a few months fighting in the Levant in 1271; however, he spent most of his reign fighting to subdue England’s neighboring kingdoms of Wales and Scotland.

In the end, the Crusades failed, and their greatest long-term impacts were the destruction of the Byzantine Empire and the growth of the sea power of Genoa and Venice, whose ships and sailors had transported people and supplies between Europe and the Crusader States.

12.20 SCHOLASTICISM

As more and more works of ancient Greek and Muslim philosophy became available to Western European Christians, the question of how to understand the world acquired more urgency. The philosophers of the ancient Greek and Muslim worlds were known to have produced much useful knowledge. But they had not been Christians. How, asked many thinkers, were Christians to understand the world: through divine revelation, as it appeared in the Bible, or through the human reason of philosophers? Indeed, this question was reminiscent of similar questions taking place in the Islamic world, when thinkers such as al-Ghazali questioned how useful the tools of logic and philosophy were in understanding the Quran (see Chapter Eight).

This controversy had raged since at least the twelfth century, when certain devout monks had said, “Whoever seeks to make Aristotle a Christian makes himself a heretic.” Out of this controversy, medieval Europe produced its greatest thinker, St. Thomas Aquinas (1224 – 1274). St. Thomas was
a Dominican friar. Friars were those churchmen who, like monks, took vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience. Instead of living in isolated monasteries, though, friars spent much of their time preaching to laypeople in Europe’s growing towns and cities. These friars, whose two major groups were the Franciscans and Dominicans, had schools in most major universities of Western Europe by the early thirteenth century. Aquinas, a philosopher in the Dominican school of the University of Paris, had argued that human reason and divine revelation were in perfect harmony. He did so based on the techniques of the disputed question. He would raise a point, raise its objection, then provide an answer, and this answer would always be based on a logical argument. Aquinas was only part of a larger movement in the universities of Western Europe. We generally call the movement to reconcile Christian theology with human reason through the use of logic scholasticism.

Aquinas and the scholastics can be compared to Zhu Xi and the neo-Confucians of Song China. Just as Zhu Xi had sought to integrate Confucian thought with Buddhist and Daoist philosophy, so also Aquinas sought to integrate both Aristotelian logic and Christian theology.

The period not only saw successes in the field of speculative philosophy and theology, but also in the practical application of science. The master masons who designed Western Europe’s castles and cathedral churches built hundreds of soaring cathedrals that would be the tallest buildings in Europe until the nineteenth century. We call these cathedrals’ architecture Gothic. Gothic cathedrals were well known for their use of pointed arches (which may have been copied from Middle Eastern styles) that allowed taller buildings and for stained-glass windows that admitted a dazzling array of light. These cathedrals were in many ways made possible by the prosperity of Europe’s towns, whose governing councils often financed the construction of these magnificent churches.

Thirteenth-century Europe showed other developments in technology as well. In 1269, Pierre of Harincourt first came to understand the principles of magnetic poles based on an analysis of the magnetic compass (in use since the twelfth century). At the same time, between 1286 and 1306, based on the pre-existing technology of lens-grinding (much of which had come from the Muslim world), Western Europeans invented eyeglasses. Water clocks had been known throughout the
world since ancient times, but, in the years between 1271 and 1300, Western Europeans invented the mechanical clock.

In the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries, Western Europeans gradually adapted the art of *alchemy*, the art of changing (or attempting to change) one element into another, from the Muslim world. Eventually, alchemists (and natural philosophers who studied alchemy) would find new techniques of refining and compounding chemicals, although their ultimate goal, the ability to turn base metals into gold, would never succeed.

In addition to these technologies invented or improved in medieval Europe, the Mongol Empire’s opening of trade routes had allowed the importation of East Asian technologies such as gunpowder.
12.21 DAILY LIFE AT THE MEDIEVAL ZENITH

Even at the height of medieval Europe’s prosperity, most people were peasant farmers, living like their ancestors in the Carolingian or Byzantine Empires. They often lived in villages in one- or two-room houses with separate space for livestock. Only the richest of peasants—and some free peasants did prosper—could afford a bed. Most people slept in straw. The most furniture in a peasant household might be a table and stool. The peasant diet was mainly grain, both bread and porridge, and peasants got their protein from both legumes and eggs. The occasional meat came from chickens, those sheep that were too old for shearing, and sometimes pigs. Beef was reserved for nobles.

Nobles often lived in large rural houses. They were sometimes attached to castles, but many castles were unoccupied in times of peace. The noble diet was heavy in meat; indeed, nobles often suffered from gout, a painful swelling of the joints from too much meat in the diet. Meat dishes were lavishly cooked in spices, like cardamom, cinnamon, cumin, pepper, and saffron (chilies were unknown in the Eastern Hemisphere in pre-modern times).

Peasant recreation might include ball games, wrestling, and, of course, drinking. Beer was northern Europe’s commonest drink, while, in southern Europe, people drank wine. The best quality wines were a luxury, with nobles throughout Europe drinking the wines of Italy and southern France.
Noble recreation included chess (introduced from the Muslim world around the eleventh century), hunting (usually forbidden to peasants), and the tournament, in which knights would form into teams and fight each other, sometimes with blunted weapons, but sometimes with regular weapons, relying on their armor to protect them. Accidental fatalities in hunting and tournaments were common.

Europe’s growing cities had narrow, unpaved streets with pools of waste, through which pigs, dogs, and other animals would wander. Paris, whose streets King Philip Augustus had ordered paved and lined with ditches to carry away waste water, was the exception rather than the rule. Likewise, although London had a network of pipes to carry water from springs by 1236, the inhabitants of most cities got water from wells, and these were often contaminated. Indeed, the disease from parasites and contaminated water meant that cities were population sinks, with more people dying than were born. Their population increased largely because of people migrating from the countryside, since by the twelfth century, most towns of Western Europe recognized a runaway serf as legally free if he or she had resided within the walls of a town for a year and a day.

Medieval Europe remained a patriarchal culture. The division of labor in peasant, middle-class, and noble households, however, meant that women played an active part in economic life. Women peasants would often labor alongside men in the fields, and women often ran taverns. Likewise, among nobles, women usually managed the household and might direct the economic activity of the great agricultural estates.

But women remained subordinate. Although they could be nuns, women could not be ordained as clergy. Legally, a woman was subordinate to her husband. And even though nobles increasingly read love poetry that placed women in a position of honor and devotion (and this poetry may originally have been modeled on the Arabic love poetry common in al-Andalus), this very devotion emphasized the woman as a prize to be sought after rather than as a partner.
12.22 FOURTEENTH CENTURY CRISSES

As the thirteenth century drew to a close, Europe began to run into its Malthusian limits, i.e., how many people a land’s resources can support before food starts to run short. At the same time, the previously-warm climate began to cool, making conditions less suitable for agriculture. Famine returned to Europe.

Between 1315 and 1322, a set of extremely rainy, wet summers—accounts written at the time speak of castle walls being washed away in flood waters—caused crops to fail, resulting in massive famines and starvation. At the same time, livestock throughout western Europe died in droves from outbreaks of Rinderpest, Anthrax, and other diseases.
Many peasants starved. Many more suffered from malnutrition. Contemporary accounts refer to hungry peasants resorting to cannibalism. Like all other crops, cash crops also failed, so that those who did survive were poorer.

Scarcely a generation had passed after the Great Famine when Europe was hit by a global pandemic: the Black Death. The Black Death was almost certainly an outbreak of Bubonic Plague, caused by the bacterium *Yersina pestis*. This disease has an extremely high mortality rate—certain varieties can have a mortality rate of over ninety-nine percent, and even the more survivable varieties usually kill the majority of the infected. The Plague acts in three ways: the variety called Bubonic Plague results in painful, swollen lumps around the armpits, crotch, and neck (locations associated with the lymph nodes); when they burst, a foul-smelling pus emerges. The septicemic variety results in skin turning black and dying all over the body, and the pneumonic variety—almost always fatal—shows no visible symptoms, but affects the lungs, and can cause a victim to go from healthy to dead in the space of twenty-four hours.

The pandemic began in the Yuan Empire (see Chapter Eleven). Unfortunately for the rest of the world, the trade routes opened by the Mongols meant that not only could ideas and technology travel, but that disease could as well. The Plague began in the East and Central Asia, but it quickly spread to the Middle East and North Africa, to the Swahili Coast, and eventually to Western Europe.

Its impacts were calamitous. A little over half of Europe’s population died. After the first outbreak of the Plague, between 1347 and 1351, less virulent outbreaks continued to strike Europe nearly every year until 1782. Europe’s population began a long decline; it did not start recovering until the fifteenth century. It did not return to its pre-Plague levels until the seventeenth (and in some regions, the eighteenth) century. Casualty rates among clergy were as high as sixty percent, with some monastic houses having casualty rates as high as ninety-nine percent, as monks living in communal environments were more likely to spread disease.
In the aftermath of the Plague, however, living conditions for those peasants who survived improved in many ways. Because there were fewer people, those who survived had access to more lands and resources. In addition, the need to find peasants to work the lands of the nobility meant that nobles often offered better wages and living conditions to those who would settle on their lands. As a result, peasant wages rose and serfdom in Western Europe gradually vanished. Although in some kingdoms, monarchs and their assemblies attempted to create legislation to reinforce the social status of the peasantry, these efforts were often unsuccessful. This failure to maintain pre-existing status distinctions stood in contrast to Mamluk Egypt, where, in the aftermath of the Plague, Egypt’s ruling class of largely Turkic Mamluks managed to keep the peasantry in a firmly subordinate role and prevent the rise of peasant wages.

12.23 WAR

Famine and disease were not the only disasters to strike late medieval Europe. The fourteenth century also saw an increase in both civil wars and wars between states. The Holy Roman Empire saw nearly a decade of civil war (1314 – 1326) between rival emperors and, because of the close relations of their kings, Sweden, Denmark, and Norway experienced frequent combinations of civil and interstate war until the 1397 Union of Kalmar brought the three together under one crown.

The longest-running of these wars was between England and France, the so-called Hundred Years’ War (1337 – 1453). In 1328, the French king Charles IV died without a direct heir. England’s king, Edward III (r. 1327 – 1377), related to the French royal family, claimed to be rightful heir to the crown of France. The resulting war would last over a century, although it was broken by frequent, lengthy truces. Although France had many more people than England, the kingdom of England was often able to defeat it. The main reason was that the English kings made increasing use of trained, disciplined infantry armies. Horses are effective in battle against raiders or other horsemen. A horse, however, is less effective when
an infantry formation is able to present a solid front against the horses and use missile weapons on those horses before they can close with their enemy. Using a combination of archers and infantry, the English were able to inflict severe defeats on the French at both Crécy (26 August 1346) and Poitiers (19 September 1356).

The war was particularly hard on the civilians of the French countryside: the method of waging war of a pre-modern army often involved invading enemy territory and burning crops, looting villages, and murdering civilians. French peasants, who had suffered first from the Plague and then from war, rose in rebellion in 1358, but this rebellion was ruthlessly crushed, with the peasants slaughtered and leaders brutally executed.

The Hundred Years’ War would spill over into Spain, which itself was suffering from a vicious war between Castile and Aragon that eventually caused a Castilian civil war, with both French and English intervening.

The wars of the fourteenth and especially fifteenth century saw not only an increasing use of trained, professional armies, but also the employment of gunpowder weapons, invented in Song China and first seen in Europe in the early 1300s. At first, firearms were limited to heavy, cumbersome artillery pieces that were deployed from fixed points. Their use on the battlefield and in sieges was limited, although by the fifteenth century, cannons could blast open the gates of most existing fortifications. By the mid-1400s, the harquebus, a man-transportable firearm, appeared on the battlefield in Spain, bringing gunpowder to the individual infantryman.

### 12.24 SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE IN THE LATE MIDDLE AGES

Meanwhile, in Eastern Europe, the restored Byzantine Empire was unable to fully re-establish itself even as a regional power in the Aegean. The warring Italian city-states of Genoa and Venice controlled many of the best ports of the Aegean and Black Sea, and a new Turkic power, that of the Ottomans, was rising in Central Anatolia in the aftermath of the Mongol destruction of the Saljuq sultanate. Emperor Andronikos II (r. 1282 – 1328) hired a company of mercenaries from the region of Spain called Catalonia, but this Catalan Company, although it won some victories against the Turks, eventually turned on its employer and established a state in Athens that would last for seventy years. With the failure of the Catalan Company to shore up Byzantine defenses in Anatolia, by 1331, nearly all Byzantine territory in Asia Minor had
The disintegration of the Byzantine state did allow for the fourteenth-century flourishing of Serbian and Bulgarian Empires, whose cultures emerged as a melding of both Greek and Slavic elements to create a unique synthesis of cultures and institutions. In the end, though, these Empires would eventually be overwhelmed by the Turks, with the Ottomans conquering Serbia between 1389 and 1459 and Bulgaria in 1396. But even as the Byzantine state crumbled, intellectual activity flourished in the Orthodox Church. Greek intellectuals of the fourteenth century sought to engage with the thought of Aquinas and experiment with new forms of prayer and meditation.

In the end, Ottoman power swept away all resistance, Bulgar, Serbian, and Byzantine, and in 1453, the Turkish army conquered Constantinople. After two thousand years, the last remnant of the Roman Empire was gone. In the meantime, though, the fall of the Byzantine Empire would also be one factor eventually contributing to Europe’s Renaissance.

### 12.25 THE LATE MEDIEVAL PAPACY

In 1250, the papacy looked like it was at its high point. After nearly two centuries of struggle, the popes had definitively broken the power of the Holy Roman Empire. Within less than a century, however, the power and prestige of the papacy would be heavily damaged.

The first major blow came when Pope Boniface VIII (r. 1294 – 1303) clashed with King Philip IV (r. 1285 – 1314) of France. When King Philip attempted to tax French clergy, Pope Boniface resisted strongly, claiming not only that a king had no right to tax any clergy, but also that all earthly authority was subordinate to the authority of the popes, who were rightful lords of the earth. This conflict ended when King Philip had a gang of mercenaries kidnap and abuse the pope. Even though Boniface himself escaped, he died of the shock shortly thereafter.

In order to avoid further antagonizing the French crown, the College of Cardinals (those churchmen in Rome who elect the pope) elected Clement V (r. 1305 – 1314), a Frenchman, to succeed him. Clement, however, never took up residence in Rome. In 1309, he settled the papal court in

![Figure 12.25 | The Kidnapping of Pope Boniface VIII](image)

*Author: Giovanni Villani
Source: Wikimedia Commons
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Avignon, a city owned by the papacy which sat just across the border of the Kingdom of France. To many observers at the time, it looked as though the papacy had been relocated to France under the thumb of the French monarchy.

The Italian poet Petrarch referred to the period when the papacy resided at Avignon as the **Babylonian Captivity of the Church**. He was referring metaphorically to the account in the Old Testament (also referred to as the Hebrew Bible) in which the people of Judaea had been held captive in the city of Babylon. Petrarch was insinuating that God’s community was now held captive in a foreign land rather than occupying Rome, the city of St. Peter and thirteen subsequent centuries of popes.

The crisis would only grow worse. In 1377, Pope Gregory XI (r. 1370 – 1378) moved the papal court back to Rome. At his death, the cardinals, pressured by an angry Roman mob, elected Urban VI, an Italian. Urban, however, soon proved to be erratic and abusive, so many cardinals fled Rome to Avignon, where they elected another pope. The result was that the Catholic Christian world now had two popes, each one claiming to be the rightful representative of Jesus Christ on earth. This period, lasting from 1378 to 1417, is known as the **Great Schism**; it resulted in a divided church, with different bishops following different popes. A 1409 council convened to
depose both popes and appoint a single pope instead resulted in three popes, as neither Rome nor the Avignon papacy recognized this new pope.

In the end, although the conflict was resolved with the Council of Constance (1415 – 1417) deposing all three popes and selecting a new one, the prestige of the papacy had been tarnished. The popes spent much of the later fifteenth century attempting to rebuild the Church’s authority and prestige, although whether they would fully succeed remained to be seen.

12.26 THE EUROPEAN RENAISSANCE

No intellectual movement can be traced to a single cause. An idea has many parents and even more children. But if we look to the Mediterranean world of the fourteenth century, we can find at least a few causes of an intellectual and cultural movement historians generally call the Italian Renaissance. Renaissance comes from the French word for rebirth. It was an intellectual movement whose ideals were to return to the art, literature, and culture of Ancient Greece and Rome.

Northern Italy was well-suited to allow for the emergence of the Renaissance. Thanks to Mediterranean trade, it was one of the wealthiest and most urbanized regions of Western Europe. It was also politically fragmented so that the princes of its many courts all offered sponsorship to artists and intellectuals. Moreover Italy’s education system had focused more on the literature of Ancient Rome than the rest of Europe, whose scholastic curriculum often focused on logic and philosophy.

In this environment, the Italian poet Francesco Petrarch’s (1307 – 1374) writings prompted a greater interest in the literature of Ancient Rome. This focus on studying literature rather than philosophy and theology is often known as humanism, since poetry and literature were called humanistic studies in medieval schools. Another key element of the humanistic movement was that its proponents believed in studying the ancient texts themselves rather than the centuries of commentaries that had grown up around these texts. These values of returning to the original texts shorn of their commentaries also led to an increase in the study of how the writers of ancient Rome had used the Latin
language and even of how Latin style had altered during different times in the Roman Empire’s history.

Originally, humanistic scholars had focused on the study of Latin. But other circumstances soon brought about a greater emphasis on the study of Greek. As the Byzantine Empire crumbled before the Ottoman Turks, many Greek-speaking refugees fleeing the Aegean area settled in Italy, particularly in the city-state of Florence. These refugees brought Greek books with them and founded schools for the study of Greek. In Western Europe after the fall of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century, the study of Greek had declined.

As a result, most readers had known of the literature of Ancient Greece, but they had usually only known it in Latin summaries. By the twelfth century, Western Europeans had read the philosophy of Aristotle and the science of Ptolemy, but usually they knew these philosophers only in translations—which had often been translated from Greek to Arabic to Latin.

So a return to the study of Greek meant that scholars were now reading Greek literature in its original language. Manuel Chrysoloras (c. 1350 – 1415) established a school for the study of Greek in Florence. Western Europeans now had direct access to most of the writings of Plato and Homer for the first time in centuries.

This interest in the culture of the ancient world also led to an interest in the art and architecture of Greece and Rome. Churches, such as Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence (built between 1420 and 1436), sprang up in imitation of the domed temples (and churches) of ancient Rome, while sculptors such as Donatello (1386 – 1466) produced naturalistic sculptures the like of which had not been seen in more than a thousand years.
This intellectual movement was not simply an affair of scholars and artists. Indeed, its impacts would be far-reaching throughout Western Europe. The children of princes and wealthy merchants gradually came to be educated along humanistic lines, and the fashion for a humanistic education would eventually spread from Italy to the elites of all Western Europe.

Humanism’s political impacts would be broad ranging as well. Since the eighth century, the popes had relied on the text of the Donation of Constantine in their struggles with the Holy Roman Empire and to demonstrate their right to rule as earthly princes as well as to spiritually direct the Church. In 1440, the humanist scholar Lorenzo Valla (1407 – 1457) analyzed the Donation of Constantine—and showed definitively that it was a forgery. Its Latin writing style was most certainly not the Latin of fourth-century Rome. Valla had shown that one of the foundational documents by which the papacy claimed legitimacy as an earthly power was a fraud.

Even the ideals of how a ruler should govern came under the influence of Renaissance humanism. In his analysis of the historical writings of Ancient Rome, the humanist Niccolò Machiavelli (1469 – 1527) argued that the circumstances of history show that a prince should not necessarily attempt to rule virtuously, but instead should ruthlessly set aside ethics and morality in order to accomplish the goals of the state. One should note that in many ways rulers already behaved this way, but Machiavelli gave an intellectual justification for doing so.

And, of course, an intense study of the language of ancient texts would lead to an intense study of the ancient text that was most important for Western Europe of the later Middle Ages: the Bible. Humanists such as the Dutch scholar Desiderius Erasmus (1469 – 1536) used the tools of linguistic investigation to analyze the Greek text of the New Testament. Other scholars also began looking at the Bible not with the intellectual tools of logic and philosophy, but with linguistic analysis. They began to look at such a text
as it had been written, and not at the intervening fourteen centuries of commentary. The results of such reading were explosive.

12.27 STATES IN THE LATE MIDDLE AGES AND RENAISSANCE

As Europe transitioned into the fifteenth century, two of Europe’s most organized states remained locked in destructive warfare. England’s king Henry V (r. 1413 – 1422) came close to conquering all of France, aided largely by the fact that France itself was riven by a civil war between two powerful houses of nobles, the Armagnacs and Burgundians. Eventually, however, when France’s rival houses ended their differences, the unified nation was able to expel English troops, using trained and disciplined infantry funded by a centralized apparatus of taxation. The Hundred Years’ War thus ended in 1453. England’s loss in France was followed by a civil war (usually known as the Wars of the Roses because the rival factions used a red and a white rose, respectively, as their emblems) that lasted from 1455 to 1485.

In Northern Italy, at the same time as the brilliant artistic achievements of the Italian Renaissance, the city-states of Italy were locked in near-continual warfare until the 1454 Treaty of Lodi brought almost half a century of peace to the Italian peninsula. That peace would come to an end, however, in 1494, when King Charles VIII of France (r. 1483 – 1498) turned the power of the newly consolidated French state to an invasion of Italy. In the wars that followed, the cannons used by the French army were able to effortlessly batter down the Italian cities’ and castles’ medieval walls. A new era of warfare was beginning.

12.28 IBERIA AND THE ATLANTIC: NEW WORLDS

To the southwest of Europe, events in Iberia would eventually bring about several changes that would usher in the end of Europe’s Middle Ages and the beginnings of modern times.

Portugal, Castile, and Aragon were steeped in the traditions of the Reconquista, of expanding the dominion of the Christian world by force of arms. The Reconquista had established a habit in the Iberian kingdoms of conquering Muslims lands and reducing their Muslim and Jewish inhabitants to subordinate status (or in some cases to outright slavery). By the fifteenth century, these kingdoms had nearly completed the Reconquista. As stated earlier, only Granada remained under Muslim rule.

Meanwhile, over the fourteenth century, both Venice and the Ottoman Empire had forced the Italian city-state of Genoa out of the Eastern Mediterranean, so its sailors and ship owners turned their focus to the western half of the Mediterranean Sea. Constantly on the lookout for new markets, Genoese merchants already knew from trade with the Islamic Maghreb that West Africa was a source of gold. In 1324, Mansa Musa’s hajj to Mecca (see Chapter Nine) had put so much gold into circulation that the price of gold fell by twenty-five percent in the Mediterranean market. If the Muslim rulers of Morocco controlled the overland routes by which gold traveled from Mali to the Mediterranean, then perhaps certain sailors could bypass the overland route by sailing into the Atlantic and around the Sahara and arrive at the source of Africa’s gold.
By 1300, the combination of the compass, a map called the **portolan** (a map that could accurately represent coastlines), and ships that by operating on sails rather than oars needed fewer people meant that European navigators could begin venturing into open waters of the Atlantic that the Arabs and Ancient Romans had largely avoided.

Genoese merchants began tentatively sailing into the Atlantic. In the early 1300s, they were regularly visiting the Canary Islands. These merchants (and others from Western Europe) increasingly served in the employ of Iberian kings. In 1404, King Henry III of Castile (r. 1390 – 1406) began Spanish efforts to conquer the Canaries and convert their indigenous peoples to Christianity. Over the next century, the Spanish would conquer and settle the islands, driven by the *Reconquista* ideal of the military spread of the Christian faith. In the mid-fifteenth century, the kingdom of Portugal began the conquest and colonization of the Azores, nearly 700 miles to the southwest of Iberia in the Atlantic.
Genoese merchants established sugar plantations on these chains of islands, and those plantations were worked by slave labor. Earlier, in the thirteenth century, Venetian merchants had begun to grow sugar (long cultivated in the Muslim world) in their island colonies in the Mediterranean, and labor for these colonies came from the Mediterranean slave trade. Genoese merchants copied this economic model first in Sicily and then, when they began to operate in the Atlantic, in the Canaries and Azores. Often they would purchase the slaves for these plantations from Africans on the continent’s Atlantic coast. Thus began a slave trade that would be as lucrative for its operators as it was brutal for its victims.

The lure of African gold drew mariners serving Iberian monarchs south and west. By 1482, the Portuguese had established the fort and trading post of São Jorge da Mina on the coast of Guinea. And in the Iberian peninsula, in 1479, Isabella, the Queen of Castile, married King Ferdinand II of Aragon, creating a united Spanish kingdom. In 1492, these monarchs, devout Catholics both, completed the Reconquista, conquering Granada, the last Muslim territory in Spain. All of Spain was now under Christian rule, and the king and queen were eager to continue spreading the Catholic religion.

They sponsored a voyage by the Genoese sailor Christopher Columbus. Columbus had miscalculated the size of the world, so he believed that it would be possible to sail to Asia by traveling west across the Atlantic Ocean. European mariners knew the world was a sphere but believed that it was impossible to carry adequate supplies to sail around the world due to the sheer distance between Europe and Asia. When Columbus made landfall in 1492, it was not in East Asia (for he had in fact been wrong, drastically underestimating the size of the world), but rather in a set of lands previously unknown to the peoples of the Eastern Hemisphere. The world was about to be forever changed.

### 12.29 CONCLUSION

Over the eleventh and twelfth centuries, a rise in agricultural production led to an increase in Western Europe’s wealth and population. The chaos of the tenth and eleventh centuries had
brought about the origin of a feudal system dominated by knights. Feudal Europe was thus able to respond to the Byzantine Empire’s requests for help when its field army was annihilated by Saljuq Turks, resulting in the First Crusade and establishment of a set of Crusader States in the Eastern Mediterranean, but these Crusader states were gradually conquered by Muslim powers over the next two centuries. An army of Crusaders would eventually defeat and break up the Byzantine Empire, and although that empire would be re-established, it was never strong enough to resist the pressure of the Ottoman Turks, who finally conquered it in 1453.

As Western Europe grew in population and urbanized, the urban cathedral schools became the center of an increase in intellectual activity over the twelfth century known as the Twelfth-Century Renaissance. Thinkers of the Twelfth-Century Renaissance used the philosophy of the Ancient Greeks and Arabs to understand the world, and in the thirteenth century the intellectual movement known as scholasticism would seek to reconcile Christianity with Arabic and Ancient Greek Philosophy. By the end of the Middle Ages, Europe’s intellectuals would seek to study the writings of the Ancient Greeks and Romans, and not the commentators of the previous thousand years. This movement was known as Renaissance humanism.

Europe’s states—with the notable exception of the Holy Roman Empire—gradually consolidated, but the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries saw increasing interstate warfare. The states that emerged out of this endemic war, however, were more militarily powerful and more centralized. At the same time, sailors in the service of Spain and Portugal were exploring the Atlantic and West Africa until the close of the fifteenth century, when Western Europeans discovered the existence of the continents of the Western Hemisphere.

**12.30 WORKS CONSULTED AND FURTHER READING**


**12.31 LINKS TO PRIMARY SOURCES**

Fordham University’s Internet Medieval Sourcebook contains a wide variety of primary source documents from the Middle Ages (that is, 500 to 1500) hosted by Fordham University. From the main page one can find links based on period and category.

The Internet Medieval Sourcebook:

   [http://legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/sbook.asp](http://legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/sbook.asp)

Georgetown University’s The Labyrinth likewise contains a large selection of links to both primary sources and art and art historical materials. Some of the pages have succumbed to “link rot” due to the relative age of the site, but it remains one of the best collections of primary source material available online for free.

The Labyrinth:

   [https://blogs.commons.georgetown.edu/labyrinth](https://blogs.commons.georgetown.edu/labyrinth)