

وَكَأَدْبُرِ عِزِّ الْجَمَالِ الشُّمْرِ وَالنُّشْدِ

مَا أَلْحَ سَيْبُكَ نَاوِيًا وَادْلَا جَا وَلَا اِعْتِيَا مَلِكًا جَمَالًا وَاجْدَلًا

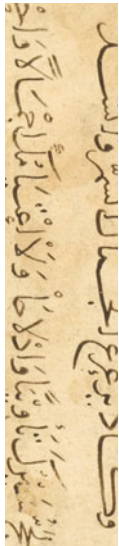


الْحَجَّ أَنْ تَقْصِدَ الْبَيْتَ الْحَرَامَ عَلَيَّ يَحْيَى بَدَلًا لِحَجِّ لَاتِبَعِي بِهِ جَا جَا  
وَسَطِي كَأَمَلِ الْإِنصَافِ مَتَّحِرًا رَدَّ عِ الْهُوِي هَادِيًا وَ الْجَوْ مَبْنَاهَا

# The Worlds of Islam

## Afro-Eurasian Connections

600–1500



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- The Messenger and the Message
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“There were tens of thousands of pilgrims, from all over the world. They were of all colors, from blue-eyed blondes to black-skinned Africans. But we were all participating in the same ritual, displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood that my experiences in America had led me to believe never could exist between the white and non-white. . . . I have never before seen sincere and true brotherhood practiced by all colors together, irrespective of their color.”<sup>1</sup> So said Malcolm X, the American black radical leader and convert to Islam, following his participation in 1964 in the hajj, or pilgrimage, to Mecca. That experience persuaded him to abandon his earlier commitment to militant black separatism, for he was now convinced that racial barriers could indeed be overcome within the context of Islam.

As the twenty-first century dawned, Islam had acquired a noticeable presence in the United States, with more than 1,200 mosques and an estimated 8 million Muslims, of whom some 2 million were African Americans. Here was but one sign of the growing international influence of the Islamic world. Independence from colonial rule, the Iranian Revolution of 1979, repeated wars between Israel and its Arab neighbors, the rising price of oil—all of this focused global attention on the Islamic world in the second half of the twentieth century. Osama bin Laden and the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States, U.S. military action in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the increasing assertiveness of Muslims in Europe likewise signaled the growing role of Islam in world affairs in the first decade of the new millennium.

**The Hajj:** The pilgrimage to Mecca, known as the *hajj*, has long been a central religious ritual in Islamic practice. It also embodies the cosmopolitan character of Islam as pilgrims from all over the vast Islamic realm assemble in the city where the faith was born. This painting shows a group of joyful pilgrims, led by a band, on their way to Mecca.

(Bibliothèque nationale de France)

PROMINENCE ON THE WORLD STAGE, OF COURSE, was nothing new for Muslim societies. For a thousand years (roughly 600–1600), peoples claiming allegiance to Islam represented a highly successful, prosperous, and expansive civilization, encompassing parts of Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. While Chinese culture and Buddhism provided the cultural anchor for East Asia during the postclassical millennium and Christianity did the same for western Eurasia, the realm of Islam touched on both of them and decisively shaped the history of the entire Afro-Eurasian world.

The significance of a burgeoning Islamic world was enormous. It thrust the previously marginal and largely nomadic Arabs into a central role in world history, for it was among them and in their language that the newest of the world's major religions was born. The sudden emergence and rapid spread of that religion in the seventh century C.E. was accompanied by the creation of a huge empire that stretched from Spain to India. Both within that empire and beyond it, a new and innovative civilization took shape, drawing on Arab, Persian, Turkish, Greco-Roman, South Asian, and African cultures. It was clearly the largest and most influential of the new third-wave civilizations. Finally, the broad reach of Islam generated many of the great cultural encounters of this age of accelerating connections, as Islamic civilization challenged and provoked Christendom, penetrated and was transformed by African cultures, and also took root in India, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. The spread of Islam continued in the modern era so that by the beginning of the twenty-first century, perhaps 1.2 billion people, or 22 percent of the world's population, identified as Muslims. It was second only to Christianity as the world's most widely practiced religion, and it extended far beyond the Arab lands where it had originated.

## The Birth of a New Religion

Most of the major religious or cultural traditions of the classical era had emerged from the core of established civilizations—Confucianism and Daoism from China, Hinduism and Buddhism from India, Greek philosophy from the Mediterranean world, and Zoroastrianism from Persia. Christianity and Islam, by contrast, emerged more from the margins of Mediterranean and Middle Eastern civilizations. The former, of course, appeared among a small Middle Eastern people, the Jews, in a remote province of the Roman Empire, while Islam took hold in the cities and deserts of the Arabian Peninsula.

### *The Homeland of Islam*

#### ■ Description

In what ways did the early history of Islam reflect its Arabian origins?

The central region of the Arabian Peninsula had long been inhabited by nomadic Arabs, known as Bedouins, who herded their sheep and camels in seasonal migrations. These peoples lived in fiercely independent clans and tribes, which often engaged in bitter blood feuds with one another. They recognized a variety of gods, ancestors, and nature spirits; valued personal bravery, group loyalty, and hospitality; and greatly treasured their highly expressive oral poetry. But there was more to Arabia than camel-herding nomads. Scattered oases, the highlands of Yemen, and interior

mountains supported sedentary village-based agriculture, and in the northern and southern regions of Arabia, small kingdoms had flourished in earlier times. Arabia also sat astride increasingly important trade routes that connected the Indian Ocean world with that of the Mediterranean Sea and gave rise to more cosmopolitan commercial cities, whose values and practices were often in conflict with those of traditional Arab tribes.

One of those cities, Mecca, came to occupy a distinctive role in Arabia. Though somewhat off the major long-distance trade routes, Mecca was the site of the Kaaba, the most prominent religious shrine in Arabia, which housed representations of some 360 deities and was the destination for many pilgrims. Mecca's dominant tribe, the Quraysh, had come to control access to the Kaaba and grew wealthy by taxing the local trade that accompanied the annual pilgrimage season. By the sixth century C.E., Mecca was home to people from various tribes and clans as well as an assortment of individual outlaws, exiles, refugees, and foreign merchants, but much of its growing wealth was concentrated in the hands of a few ruling Quraysh families.

Furthermore, Arabia was located on the periphery of two established and rival civilizations of that time—the Byzantine Empire, heir to the Roman world, and the Sassanid Empire, heir to the imperial traditions of old Persia. This location, coupled with long-distance trade, ensured some familiarity with the larger world, particularly in the cities and settled farming regions of the peninsula. Many Jews and Christians as well as some Zoroastrians lived among the Arabs, and their monotheistic ideas became widely known. By the time of Muhammad, most of the settled Arabs had acknowledged the preeminent position of Allah, the supreme god of the Arab pantheon, although they usually found the lesser gods, including the three daughters of Allah, far more accessible. Moreover, they increasingly identified Allah with Yahweh, the Jewish High God, and regarded themselves too as “children of Abraham.” A few Arabs were beginning to explore the possibility that Allah/Yahweh was the only God and that the many others, residing in the Kaaba and in shrines across the peninsula, were nothing more than “helpless and harmless idols.”<sup>2</sup>

To an outside observer around 600, it might well have seemed that Arabs were moving toward Judaism religiously or that Christianity, the most rapidly growing religion in western Asia, would encompass Arabia as well. Any such expectations, however, were thoroughly confounded by the dramatic events of the seventh century.

### *The Messenger and the Message*

The catalyst for those events and for the birth of this new religion was a single individual, Muhammad Ibn Abdullah (570–632 C.E.), who was born in Mecca to a Quraysh family. As a young boy, Muhammad lost his parents, came under the care of an uncle, and worked as a shepherd to pay his keep. Later he became a trader and traveled as far north as Syria. At the age of twenty-five, he married a wealthy widow, Khadija, herself a prosperous merchant, with whom he fathered six children. A highly



Arabia at the Time of Muhammad

**■ Comparison**  
How does the core message of Islam compare with that of Judaism and Christianity?

## Snapshot Key Moments in the Early History of Islam

Birth of Muhammad	570
Beginning of Muhammad's revelations	610
<i>Hijra</i> (the emigration from Mecca to Medina)	622
Muhammad returns to Mecca in triumph	630
Death of Muhammad	632
Rightly Guided Caliphs	632–661
Arab victories against Byzantine and Persian forces	636–637
Conquest of Egypt	640
Compilation of the Quran	650s
Umayyad caliphate	661–750
Conquest of Spain	711–718
Abbasid caliphate	750–1258
Battle of Talas River	751

reflective man deeply troubled by the religious corruption and social inequalities of Mecca, he often undertook periods of withdrawal and meditation in the arid mountains outside the city. There, like the Buddha and Jesus, Muhammad had a powerful, overwhelming religious experience that left him convinced, albeit reluctantly, that he was Allah's messenger to the Arabs, commissioned to bring to them a scripture in their own language.

According to Muslim tradition, the revelations began in 610 and continued periodically over the next twenty-two years. Those revelations, recorded in the Quran, became the sacred scriptures of Islam, which to this day Muslims everywhere regard as the very words of God and the core of their faith. Intended to be recited rather than simply read for information, the Quran, Muslims claim, when heard in its original Arabic, conveys nothing less than the very presence of the divine. Its unmatched poetic beauty, miraculous to Muslims, convinced many that it was indeed a revelation from God. One of the earliest converts testified to its power: "When I heard the Quran, my heart was softened and I wept and Islam entered into me."<sup>3</sup> (See Document 11.1, pp. 502–04 for selections from the Quran.)

In its Arabian setting, the Quran's message, delivered through Muhammad, was revolutionary. Religiously, it was radically monotheistic, presenting Allah as the only God, the all-powerful Creator, good, just, and merciful. It rejected as utterly false and useless the many gods housed in the Kaaba and scorned the Christian notion of the Trinity. Allah was the "Lord sustainer of the worlds, the Compassionate, the Caring, master of the day of reckoning."<sup>4</sup> Here was an exalted conception of the Deity that drew heavily on traditions of Jewish and Christian monotheism. As "the Messenger of

God,” Muhammad presented himself in the line of earlier prophets—Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and many others. He was the last, “the seal of the prophets,” bearing God’s final revelation to humankind. It was not so much a call to a new faith as an invitation to return to the old and pure religion of Abraham from which Arabs, Jews, and Christians alike had deviated.

Submission to Allah (“Muslim” means “one who submits”) was the primary obligation of believers and the means of achieving a place in paradise after death. According to the Quran, however, submission was not merely an individual or spiritual act, for it involved the creation of a whole new society. Over and over again, the Quran denounced the prevailing social practices of an increasingly prosperous Mecca: the hoarding of wealth, the exploitation of the poor, the charging of high rates of interest on loans, corrupt business deals, the abuse of women, and the neglect of the widows and orphans. Like the Jewish prophets of the Old Testament, the Quran demanded social justice and laid out a prescription for its implementation. It sought a return to the older values of Arab tribal life—solidarity, equality, concern for the poor—which had been undermined, particularly in Mecca, by growing wealth and commercialism.

The message of the Quran challenged not only the ancient polytheism of Arab religion and the social injustices of Mecca but also the entire tribal and clan structure of Arab society, which was so prone to war, feuding, and violence. The just and moral society of Islam was the *umma*, the community of all believers, replacing tribal, ethnic, or racial identities. Such a society would be a “witness over the nations,” for according to the Quran, “You are the best community evolved for mankind, enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong.”<sup>5</sup> In this community, women too had an honored and spiritually equal place. “The believers, men and women, are protectors of one another,” declared the Quran.<sup>6</sup> The *umma*, then, was to be a new and just community, bound by a common belief, rather than by territory, language, or tribe.

The core message of the Quran—surrendering to the divine—was effectively summarized as a set of five requirements for believers, known as the Pillars of Islam. The first pillar expressed the heart of the Islamic message: “There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of God.” The second pillar was prayer, to be performed five times a day while facing in the direction of Mecca. The accompanying rituals, including cleansing, bowing, kneeling, and prostration, expressed believers’ submission to Allah and provided a frequent reminder, amid the busyness of daily life, that they were living in the presence of the divine. The third pillar, almsgiving, reflected the Quran’s repeated demands for social justice by requiring believers to give generously to support the poor and needy of the community. The fourth pillar established



### Muslims, Jews, and Christians

The close relationship of three Middle Eastern monotheistic traditions is illustrated in this fifteenth-century Persian painting, which portrays Muhammad leading Moses, Abraham, and Jesus in prayer. The fire surrounding the prophet’s head represents his religious fervor. The painting reflects the Islamic belief that the revelations granted to Muhammad built upon and completed those given earlier to Jews and Christians. (Bibliothèque nationale de France)

a month of fasting during Ramadan, which meant abstaining from food, drink, and sexual relations from the first light of dawn to sundown. It provided an occasion for self-purification and a reminder of the needs of the hungry. The fifth pillar encouraged a pilgrimage to Mecca, known as the *hajj*, where believers from all over the Islamic world assembled once a year and put on identical simple white clothing as they performed together rituals reminding them of key events in Islamic history. For at least the few days of the hajj, the many worlds of Islam must surely have seemed a single realm.

A further requirement for believers, sometimes called the sixth pillar, was “struggle,” or *jihad* in Arabic. Its more general meaning, which Muhammad referred to as the “greater jihad,” was an interior personal effort of each Muslim against greed and selfishness, a spiritual striving toward living a God-conscious life. In its “lesser” form, the “jihad of the sword,” the Quran authorized armed struggle against the forces of unbelief and evil as a means of establishing Muslim rule and of defending the umma from the threats of infidel aggressors. The understanding and use of the jihad concept has varied widely over the many centuries of Islamic history and remains a matter of controversy among Muslims in the twenty-first century.

### *The Transformation of Arabia*

#### ■ Change

In what ways was the rise of Islam revolutionary, both in theory and in practice?

As the revelations granted to Muhammad became known in Mecca, they attracted a small following of some close relatives, a few prominent Meccan leaders, and an assortment of lower-class dependents, freed slaves, and members of poorer clans. Those teachings also soon attracted the vociferous opposition of Mecca’s elite families, particularly those of Muhammad’s own tribe, the Quraysh. Muhammad’s claim to be a “messenger of Allah,” his unyielding monotheism, his call for social reform, his condemnation of Mecca’s business practices, and his apparent disloyalty to his own tribe enraged the wealthy and ruling families of Mecca. So great had this opposition become that in 622 Muhammad and his small band of followers emigrated to the more welcoming town of Yathrib, soon to be called Medina, the city of the Prophet. This agricultural settlement of mixed Arab and Jewish population had invited Muhammad to serve as an arbitrator of their intractable conflicts. The emigration to Yathrib, known in Arabic as the *hijra*, was a momentous turning point in the early history of Islam and thereafter marked the beginning of a new Islamic calendar.

The Islamic community, or umma, that took shape in Medina was a kind of “supertribe,” but very different from the traditional tribes of Arab society. Membership was a matter of belief rather than birth, allowing the community to expand rapidly. Furthermore, all authority, both political and religious, was concentrated in the hands of Muhammad, who proceeded to introduce radical changes. Usury was outlawed, tax-free marketplaces were established, and a mandatory payment to support the poor was imposed.

In Medina, Muhammad not only began to create a new society but also declared Islam’s independence from its earlier affiliation with Judaism. In the early years, he

had anticipated a warm response from Jews and Christians, based on a common monotheism and prophetic tradition, and had directed his followers to pray facing Jerusalem. But when some Jewish groups allied with his enemies, Muhammad acted harshly to suppress them, exiling some and enslaving or killing others. This was not, however, a general suppression of Jews, since others among them remained loyal to Muhammad's new state. But the prophet now redirected Muslims' prayer toward Mecca, essentially declaring Islam an Arab religion, though one with a universal message.

From its base in Medina, the Islamic community rapidly extended its reach throughout Arabia. Early military successes against Muhammad's Meccan opponents convinced other Arab tribes that the Muslims and their God were on the rise, and they sought to negotiate alliances with the new power. Growing numbers, though not all, converted. The religious appeal of the new faith, its promise of material gain, the end of incessant warfare among feuding tribes, periodic military actions skillfully led by Muhammad, and the Prophet's willingness to enter into marriage alliances with leading tribes—all of this contributed to the consolidation of Islamic control throughout Arabia. In 630, Muhammad triumphantly and peacefully entered Mecca itself, purging the Kaaba of its idols and declaring it a shrine to the one God, Allah. By the time Muhammad died in 632, most of Arabia had come under the control of this new Islamic state, and many had embraced the new faith.

Thus the birth of Islam differed sharply from that of Christianity. Jesus' teaching about "giving to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's" reflected the minority and subordinate status of the Jews within the Roman Empire. Early Christians found themselves periodically persecuted by Roman authorities for more than three centuries, requiring them to work out some means of dealing with an often hostile state. The answer lay in the development of a separate church hierarchy and the concept of two coexisting authorities, one religious and one political, an arrangement that persisted even after the state became Christian.

The young Islamic community, by contrast, found itself constituted as a state, and soon a huge empire, at the very beginning of its history. Muhammad was not only a religious figure but also, unlike Jesus or the Buddha, a political and military leader able to implement his vision of an ideal Islamic society. Nor did Islam give rise to a separate religious organization, although tension between religious and political goals frequently generated conflict. No professional clergy mediating between God and humankind emerged within Islam. Teachers, religious scholars, prayer leaders, and judges within an Islamic legal system did not have the religious role that priests held within Christianity. No distinction between religious law and civil law, so important in the Christian world, existed within the realm of Islam. One law, known as the *sharia*, regulated every aspect of life. The *sharia* (literally, a path to water, which is the source of life) evolved over the several centuries following the birth of this new religion and found expression in a number of separate schools of Islamic legal practice.

In little more than twenty years (610–632), a profound transformation had occurred in the Arabian Peninsula. A new religion had been born, though one that



had roots in earlier Jewish, Christian, and Zoroastrian traditions. A new and vigorous state had emerged, bringing peace to the warring tribes of Arabia. Within that state, a distinctive society had begun to take shape, one that served ever after as a model for Islamic communities everywhere. In his farewell sermon, Muhammad described the outlines of this community:

All mankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over a black nor a black has any superiority over a white—except by piety and good action. Learn that every Muslim is a brother to every Muslim and that the Muslims constitute one brotherhood.<sup>7</sup>

## The Making of an Arab Empire

It did not take long for the immense transformations occurring in Arabia to have an impact beyond the peninsula. In the centuries that followed, the energies born of those vast changes profoundly transformed much of the Afro-Eurasian world. The new Arab state became a huge empire, encompassing all or part of Egyptian, Roman/Byzantine, Persian, Mesopotamian, and Indian civilizations. The Islamic faith spread widely within and outside that empire. So too did the culture and language of Arabia, as many Arabs migrated far beyond their original homeland and many others found it advantageous to learn Arabic. From the mixing and blending of these many peoples emerged the new and distinctive third-wave civilization of Islam, bound by the ties of a common faith but divided by differences of culture, class, politics, gender, and religious understanding. These enormously consequential processes—the making of a new religion, a new empire, and a new civilization—were central to world history during the postclassical millennium.

### *War and Conquest*

#### ■ Change

Why were Arabs able to construct such a huge empire so quickly?

Within a few years of Muhammad's death in 632, Arab armies engaged the Byzantine and Persian Sassanid empires, the great powers of the region. It was the beginning of a process that rapidly gave rise to an Islamic/Arab empire that stretched from Spain to India, penetrating both Europe and China and governing most of the lands between them (see Map 11.1). In creating that empire, Arabs were continuing a long pattern of tribal raids into surrounding civilizations, but now the Arabs were newly organized in a state of their own with a central command able to mobilize the military potential of the entire Arab population. The Byzantine and Persian empires, weakened by decades of war with each other and by internal revolts, continued to view the Arabs as a mere nuisance rather than a serious threat. But the Sassanid Empire was defeated by Arab forces during the 650s, while Byzantium soon lost the southern half of its territories. Beyond these victories, Arab forces, operating on both land and sea, swept westward across North Africa, conquered Spain in the early 700s, and attacked southern France. To the east, Arab



**Map 11.1** The Arab Empire and the Initial Expansion of Islam, 622–900 C.E.

Far more so than with Buddhism or Christianity, the initial spread of Islam was both rapid and extensive. And unlike the other two world religions, Islam gave rise to a huge empire, ruled by Muslim Arabs, which encompassed many of the older civilizations of the region.

forces reached the Indus River and seized some of the major oases towns of Central Asia. In 751, Arab armies inflicted a crushing defeat on Chinese forces in the Battle of Talas River, which had lasting consequences for the cultural evolution of Asia, for it checked the further expansion of China to the west and made possible the conversion to Islam of Central Asia's Turkic-speaking people.

The motives driving the creation of the Arab Empire were in many ways similar to those of other empires. The merchant leaders of the new Islamic community wanted to capture profitable trade routes and wealthy agricultural regions. Individual Arabs found in military expansion a route to wealth and social promotion. The need to harness the immense energies of the Arabian transformation was also important. The fragile unity of the umma threatened to come apart after Muhammad's death, and external expansion provided a common task for the community.

Also apparent in the making of the Arab Empire was a distinctly religious dimension. To the Arabs themselves, the only possible explanation for their amazing, indeed miraculous, success was that "God gave us the victory over them, allowing us to take their countries and to settle in their lands, their homes, and their property, we having

no strength or force other than the truth.”<sup>8</sup> Many viewed the mission of empire in terms of jihad, bringing righteous government to the peoples they conquered, but this did not mean imposing Islam on individuals at the point of a sword. Initially, Arabs regarded Islam as a revelation uniquely their own and discouraged conversion. By the middle of the eighth century, however, they had come to view it as a universal religion actively seeking converts, but even then they recognized Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians as “people of the book,” giving them the status of *dhimmis* (protected subjects). Such people were permitted to freely practice their own religion, so long as they paid a special tax known as the *jizya*. Theoretically the tax was a substitute for military service, supposedly forbidden to non-Muslims. In practice, many *dhimmis* served in the highest offices within Muslim kingdoms and in their armies as well.

In other ways too, the Arab rulers of an expanding empire sought to limit the disruptive impact of conquest. To prevent indiscriminate destruction and exploitation of conquered peoples, occupying Arab armies were restricted to garrison towns, segregated from the native population. Local elites and bureaucratic structures were incorporated into the new Arab Empire. Nonetheless, the empire worked many changes on its subjects, the most enduring of which was the mass conversion of Middle Eastern peoples to Islam.

### *Conversion to Islam*

#### ■ Explanation

What accounts for the widespread conversion to Islam?

For some people, no doubt, converting to Islam was or subsequently became a matter of profound spiritual or psychological transformation, but far more often, at least initially, it was “social conversion,” defined as “movement from one religiously defined social community to another.”<sup>9</sup> It happened at various rates and in different ways, but in the four centuries or so after the death of Muhammad, millions of individuals and many whole societies within the Arab Empire found their cultural identity bound up with a belief in Allah and the message of his prophet. They had become Muslims. How had this immense cultural change occurred?

In some ways, perhaps, the change was not so dramatic, as major elements of Islam—monotheism; ritual prayer and cleansing ceremonies; fasting; divine revelation; the ideas of heaven, hell, and final judgment—were quite familiar to Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians. Furthermore, Islam was from the beginning associated with the sponsorship of a powerful state, quite unlike the experience of early Buddhism or Christianity. Conquest called into question the power of old gods, while the growing prestige of the Arab Empire attracted many to Allah. Although deliberately forced conversion was rare, living in an Islamic-governed state provided a variety of incentives for claiming Muslim identity.<sup>10</sup> Slaves and prisoners of war were among the early converts, particularly in Persia. Converts could also avoid the *jizya*, the tax imposed on non-Muslims. In Islam, merchants found a religion friendly to commerce, and in the Arab Empire they enjoyed a huge and secure arena for trade. People aspiring to official positions found conversion to Islam an aid to social mobility.

Conversion was not an automatic or easy process. Vigorous resistance delayed conversion for centuries among the Berbers of North Africa; a small group of zealous Spanish Christians in the ninth century provoked their own martyrdom by publicly insulting the Prophet; and some Persian Zoroastrians fled to avoid Muslim rule. More generally, though, a remarkable and lasting religious transformation occurred throughout the Arab Empire. In Persia, for example, between 750 and 900, about 80 percent of the population had made the transition to a Muslim religious identity, while retaining their own ancient language.<sup>11</sup> In places where large-scale Arab migration had occurred, such as Egypt, North Africa, and Iraq, Arabic culture and language, as well as the religion of Islam, took hold. Such areas are today both Muslim and Arab, while Iran, Turkey, and Pakistan, for example, have “Islamized” without “Arabizing.”

### *Divisions and Controversies*

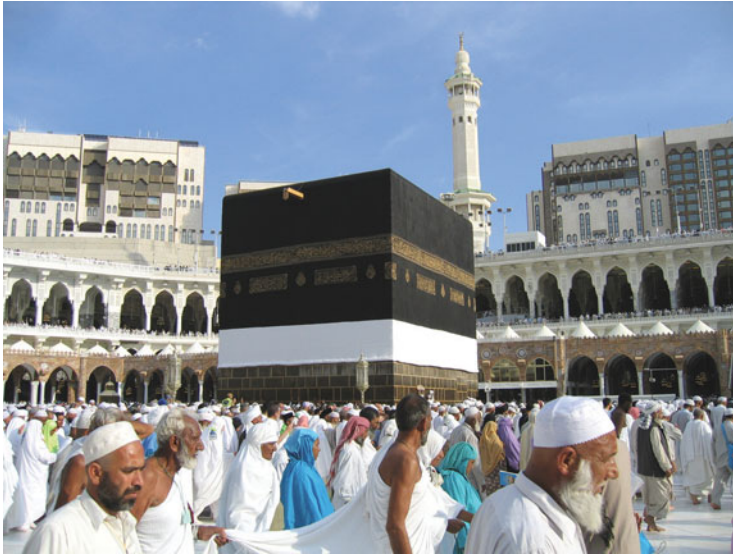
The ideal of a unified Muslim community, so important to Muhammad, proved difficult to realize as conquest and conversion vastly enlarged the Islamic umma. A central problem was that of leadership and authority in the absence of Muhammad’s towering presence. Who should hold the role of caliph, the successor to Muhammad as the political leader of the umma, the protector and defender of the faith? That issue crystallized a variety of emerging conflicts within the Islamic world—between early and later converts, among various Arab tribes and factions, between Arabs and non-Arabs, between privileged and wealthy rulers and their far less fortunate subjects. Many of these political and social conflicts found expression in religious terms as various understandings of the Quran and of Muhammad’s life and teachings took shape within the growing Islamic community.

The first four caliphs, known among most Muslims as the Rightly Guided Caliphs (632–661), were close “companions of the Prophet,” selected by the Muslim elders of Medina. Division surfaced almost immediately as a series of Arab tribal rebellions and new “prophets” persuaded the first caliph, Abu Bakr, to suppress them forcibly. The third and fourth caliphs, Uthman and Ali, were both assassinated, and by 656, less than twenty-five years after Muhammad’s death, civil war pitted Muslim against Muslim.

Out of that conflict emerged one of the deepest and most enduring rifts within the Islamic world. On one side were the Sunni Muslims, who held that the caliphs were rightful political and military leaders, selected by the Islamic community. On the other side of this sharp divide was the Shia (an Arabic word meaning “party” or “faction”) branch of Islam. Its adherents felt strongly that leadership in the Islamic world should derive from the line of Ali and his son Husayn, blood relatives of Muhammad, both of whom died at the hands of their political or religious enemies.

In the beginning, therefore, this divide was simply a political conflict without serious theological or religious meaning, but over time the Sunni/Shia split acquired deeper significance. For Sunni Muslims, religious authority in general emerged

**■ Comparison**  
What is the difference between Sunni and Shia Islam?



### The Kaaba

Located in Mecca, this stone structure covered with a black cloth and known as the Kaaba was originally home to the numerous deities of pre-Islamic Arabia. Cleansed by Muhammad, it became the sacred shrine of Islam and the destination of countless pilgrims undertaking the hajj. Part of that ritual involves circling the Kaaba seven times, as shown here in a photograph from 2004. (Dan Mohiuddin, photographer)

from the larger community, particularly from the religious scholars known as *ulama*. Shia Muslims, on the other hand, invested their leaders, known as *imams*, with a religious authority that the caliphs lacked, allowing them to infallibly interpret divine revelation and law. For much of early Islamic history, Shia Muslims saw themselves as the minority opposition within Islam. They felt that history had taken a wrong turn and that they were “the defenders of the oppressed, the critics and opponents of privilege and power,” while the Sunnis were the advocates of the established order.<sup>12</sup> Various armed revolts by Shias over the centuries, most of which failed, led to a distinctive conception of martyrdom and to the expectation that their defeated leaders were merely in hiding and not really dead and that they would return in the fullness of time. Thus a messianic element entered Shia Islam. The Sunni/Shia schism was a lasting division in the Islamic world, reflected in conflicts among various Islamic states, and was exacerbated by further splits among the Shia. Those divisions echo still in the twenty-first century.

As the Arab Empire grew, its caliphs were transformed from modest Arab chiefs into absolute monarchs of the Byzantine or Persian variety, complete with elaborate court rituals, a complex bureaucracy, a standing army, and centralized systems of taxation and coinage. They were also subject to the dynastic rivalries and succession disputes common to other empires. The first dynasty, following the era of the Rightly Guided Caliphs, came from the Umayyad family (ruled 661–750). Under its rule, the Arab Empire expanded greatly, caliphs became hereditary rulers, and the capital moved from Medina to the cosmopolitan Roman/Byzantine city of Damascus in Syria. Its ruling class was an Arab military aristocracy, drawn from various tribes. But Umayyad rule provoked growing criticism and unrest. The Shia viewed the Umayyad caliphs as illegitimate usurpers, and non-Arab Muslims resented their second-class citizenship in the empire. Many Arabs protested the luxurious living and impiety of their rulers. The Umayyads, they charged, “made God’s servants slaves, God’s property something to be taken by turns among the rich, and God’s religion a cause of corruption.”<sup>13</sup>

Such grievances lay behind the overthrow of the Umayyads in 750 and their replacement by a new Arab dynasty, the Abbasids. With a splendid new capital in Baghdad, the Abbasid caliphs presided over a flourishing and prosperous Islamic civilization in which non-Arabs, especially Persians, now played a prominent role. Persian influence was reflected in a new title for the caliph, “the shadow of God on

earth.” Persian became the language of elite culture in the eastern Islamic lands; Persian poetry, painting, architecture, and court rituals were widely imitated. (See Visual Sources: Islamic Civilization in Persian Miniature Paintings, pp. 512–19, for examples of Persian miniature painting.) But the political unity of the Abbasid Empire did not last long. Beginning in the mid-ninth century, many local governors or military commanders effectively asserted the autonomy of their regions, while still giving formal allegiance to the caliph in Baghdad. Long before Mongol conquest put an official end to the Abbasid Empire in 1258, the Islamic world had fractured politically into a series of “sultanates,” many ruled by Persian or Turkish military dynasties.

A further tension within the world of Islam, though seldom a violent conflict, lay in different answers to the central question: What does it mean to be a Muslim, to submit wholly to Allah? That question took on added urgency as the expanding Arab Empire incorporated various peoples and cultures that had been unknown during Muhammad’s lifetime. One answer lay in the development of the sharia (see Document 11.3, pp. 506–09), the body of Islamic law developed by religious scholars, the ulama, primarily in the eighth and ninth centuries.

Based on the Quran, the life and teachings of Muhammad, deductive reasoning, and the consensus of scholars, the emerging sharia addressed in great detail practically every aspect of religious and social life. It was a blueprint for an authentic Islamic society, providing detailed guidance for prayer and ritual cleansing; marriage, divorce, and inheritance; business and commercial relationships; the treatment of slaves; political life; and much more. Debates among the ulama led to the creation of four schools of law among Sunni Muslims and still others in the lands of Shia Islam. To the ulama and their followers, living as a Muslim meant following the sharia and thus participating in the creation of an Islamic society.

A second and quite different understanding of the faith emerged among those who saw the worldly success of Islamic civilization as a distraction and deviation from the purer spirituality of Muhammad’s time. Known as Sufis, they represented Islam’s mystical dimension, in that they sought a direct and personal experience of the divine. Through renunciation of the material world, meditation on the words of the Quran, chanting the names of God, the use of music and dance, the veneration of Muhammad and various “saints,” Sufis pursued the taming of the ego and spiritual union with Allah. To describe that inexpressible experience, they often resorted to metaphors of drunkenness or the embrace of lovers. “Stain your prayer rug with wine,” urged the famous Sufi poet Hafiz, referring to the intoxication of the believer with the divine presence. Rabia, an eighth-century woman and Sufi master, conveyed something of the fervor of early Sufi devotion in her famous prayer:

O my Lord, if I worship Thee from fear of Hell, burn me in Hell; and if I worship Thee from hope of Paradise, exclude me thence; but if I worship Thee for Thine own sake, then withhold not from me Thine Eternal Beauty.<sup>14</sup>

(See Document 11.4, pp. 509–10, for another expression of Sufi religious sensibility from the thirteenth-century poet Rumi.)

### ■ Comparison

In what ways were Sufi Muslims critical of mainstream Islam?

This mystical tendency in Islamic practice, which became widely popular by the ninth and tenth centuries, was sharply critical of the more scholarly and legalistic practitioners of the sharia. To Sufis, establishment teachings about the law and correct behavior, while useful for daily living, did little to bring the believer into the presence of God. For some, even the Quran had its limits. Why spend time reading a love letter (the Quran), asked one Sufi master, when one might be in the very presence of the Beloved who wrote it?<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, they felt that many of the ulama had been compromised by their association with worldly and corrupt governments. Sufis therefore often charted their own course to God, implicitly challenging the religious authority of the ulama. For these orthodox religious scholars, Sufi ideas and practice verged on heresy, as Sufis claimed to be one with God, to receive new revelations, or to incorporate religious practices from outside the Islamic world.

Despite their differences, the legalistic emphasis of the ulama and Sufi spirituality never became irreconcilable versions of Islam. A major Islamic thinker, al-Ghazali (1058–1111), himself both a legal scholar and a Sufi practitioner, in fact worked out an intellectual accommodation among different strands of Islamic thought. Rational philosophy alone could never enable believers to know Allah, he argued. Nor were revelation and the law sufficient, for Muslims must know God in their hearts, through direct personal encounter with Allah. Thus al-Ghazali incorporated Sufism into mainstream Islamic thinking. Nonetheless, differences in emphasis remained an element of tension and sometimes discord within the world of Islam.

### *Women and Men in Early Islam*

#### ■ Change

How did the rise of Islam change the lives of women?

What did the rise of Islam and the making of the Arab Empire mean for the daily lives of women and their relationship with men? Virtually every aspect of this question has been and remains highly controversial. The debates begin with the Quran itself. Did its teachings release women from earlier restrictions, or did they impose new limitations? At the level of spiritual life, the Quran was quite clear and explicit: men and women were equal.

Those who surrender themselves to Allah and accept the true faith; who are devout, sincere, patient, humble, charitable, and chaste; who fast and are ever mindful of Allah—on these, both men and women, Allah will bestow forgiveness and rich reward.<sup>16</sup>

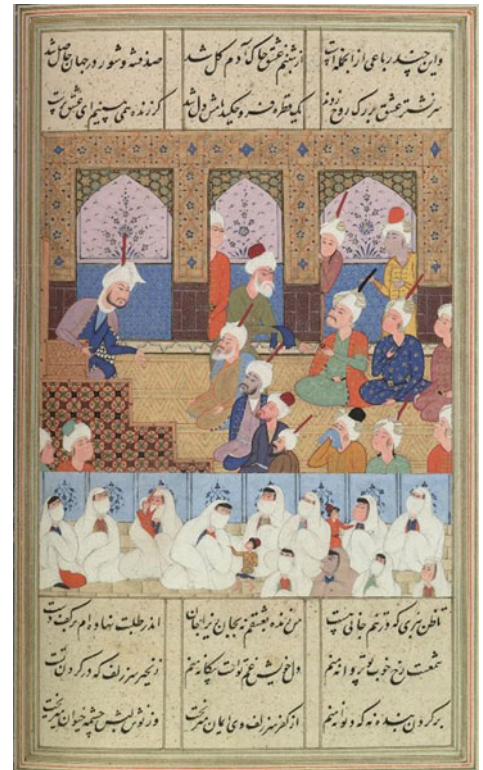
But in social terms, and especially within marriage, the Quran, like the written texts of almost all civilizations, viewed women as inferior and subordinate:

Men have authority over women because Allah has made the one superior to the other, and because they spend their wealth to maintain them. Good women are obedient. They guard their unseen parts because Allah has guarded them. As for those from whom you fear disobedience, admonish them and send them to beds apart and beat them. Then if they obey you, take no further action against them.<sup>17</sup>

More specifically, the Quran provided a mix of rights, restrictions, and protections for women. The earlier Arab practice of female infanticide, for example, was forbidden. Women were given control over their own property, particularly their dowries, and were granted rights of inheritance, but at half the rate of their male counterparts. Marriage was considered a contract between consenting parties, thus making marriage by capture illegitimate. Within marriage, women were expected to enjoy sexual satisfaction and could sue for divorce if they had not had sexual relations for more than four months. Divorce was thus possible for both parties, although it was far more readily available for men. The practice of taking multiple husbands, which operated in some pre-Islamic Arab tribes, was prohibited, while polygyny (the practice of having multiple wives) was permitted, though more clearly regulated than before. Men were limited to four wives and required to treat each of them equally. The difficulty of doing so has been interpreted by some as virtually requiring monogamy. Men were, however, permitted to have sexual relations with female slaves, but any children born of those unions were free, as was the mother once her owner died. Furthermore, men were strongly encouraged to marry orphans, widows, and slaves.

Such Quranic prescriptions were but one factor shaping the lives of women and men. At least as important were the long-established practices of the societies into which Islam spread and the growing sophistication, prosperity, and urbanization of Islamic civilization. As had been the case in Athens and China during their “golden ages,” women, particularly in the upper classes, experienced growing restrictions as Islamic civilization flourished culturally and economically in the Abbasid era. In early Islamic times, a number of women played visible public roles, particularly Muhammad’s youngest wife, Aisha. Women prayed in the mosques, although separately, standing beside the men. Nor were women generally veiled or secluded. As the Arab empire grew in size and splendor, however, the position of women became more limited. The second caliph, Umar, asked women to offer prayers at home. Now veiling and the seclusion of women became standard practice among the upper and ruling classes, removing them from public life. Separate quarters within the homes of the wealthy were the domain of women, from which they could emerge only completely veiled. The caliph Mansur (ruled 754–775) carried this separation of the sexes even further when he ordered a separate bridge for women to be built over the Euphrates in the new capital of Baghdad. Such seclusion was less possible for lower-class women, who lacked the servants of the rich and had to leave the home for shopping or work.

Such practices derived far more from established traditions of Middle Eastern cultures than from the Quran itself, but they soon gained an Islamic rationale in the



### Men and Women at Worship

This sixteenth-century Persian painting of a mosque service shows older men with beards toward the front, younger men behind them, and veiled women and children in a separate area. (Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, Ms. Ouseley. Add 24, fol. 55v)



writings of Muslim thinkers. The famous philosopher and religious scholar al-Ghazali clearly saw a relationship between Muslim piety and the separation of the sexes:

It is not permissible for a stranger to hear the sound of a pestle being pounded by a woman he does not know. If he knocks at the door, it is not proper for the woman to answer him softly and easily because men's hearts can be drawn to [women] for the most trifling [reason]. . . . However, if the woman has to answer the knock, she should stick her finger in her mouth so that her voice sounds like that of an old woman.<sup>18</sup>

Other signs of a tightening patriarchy—such as “honor killing” of women by their male relatives for violating sexual taboos and, in some places, clitorrectomy (female genital cutting)—likewise derived from local cultures, with no sanction in the Quran or Islamic law. Where they were practiced, such customs often came to be seen as Islamic, but they were certainly not limited to the Islamic world. In many cultures, concern with family honor, linked to women's sexuality, dictated harsh punishments for women who violated sexual taboos.

Negative views of women, presenting them variously as weak, deficient, and a sexually charged threat to men and social stability, emerged in the *hadiths*, traditions about the sayings or actions of Muhammad, which became an important source of Islamic law. (See Document 11.2, pp. 505–06, for examples of *hadiths*.) A changing interpretation of the Adam and Eve story illustrates the point. In the Quran, equal blame attaches to both of them for yielding to the temptation of Satan, and both alike ask for and receive God's forgiveness. Nothing suggests that Eve tempted or seduced Adam into sin. In later centuries, however, several *hadiths* and other writings took up Judeo-Christian versions of the story that blamed Eve, and thus women in general, for Adam's sin and for the punishment that followed, including expulsion from the garden and pain in childbirth.<sup>19</sup>

Even as women faced growing restrictions in society generally, Islam, like Buddhism and Christianity, also offered new outlets for them in religious life. The Sufi practice of mystical union with Allah allowed a greater role for women than did mainstream Islam. Some Sufi orders had parallel groups for women, and a few welcomed women as equal members. Within the world of Shia Islam, women teachers of the faith were termed *mullahs*, the same as their male counterparts. Islamic education, either in the home or in Quranic schools, allowed some to become literate and a few to achieve higher levels of learning. Visits to the tombs of major Islamic figures as well as the ritual of the public bath provided some opportunity for women to interact with other women beyond their own family circle.

## Islam and Cultural Encounter: A Four-Way Comparison

In its earliest centuries, the rapid spread of Islam had been accompanied by the creation of an immense Arab Empire, very much in the tradition of earlier Mediterranean and Middle Eastern empires. By the tenth century, however, little political unity



remained, and in 1258 even the powerless symbol of that earlier unity vanished as Mongol forces sacked Baghdad and killed the last Abbasid caliph. But even as the empire disintegrated, the civilization that was born within it grew and flourished. Perhaps the most significant sign of a flourishing Islamic civilization was the continued spread of the religion both within and beyond the boundaries of a vanishing Arab Empire (see Map 11.2), although that process differed considerably from place to place. The examples of India, Anatolia, West Africa, and Spain illustrate the various ways that Islam penetrated these societies as well as the rather different outcomes of these epic cultural encounters.

### *The Case of India*

In South Asia, Islam found a permanent place in a long-established civilization as invasions by Turkic-speaking warrior groups from Central Asia, recently converted to Islam, brought the faith to India. Thus the Turks became the third major carrier of Islam, after the Arabs and Persians, as their conquests initiated an enduring encounter

**Map 11.2** The Growing World of Islam (900–1500) Islam as a religion, a civilization, and an arena of commerce continued to grow even as the Arab Empire fragmented.

### ■ Comparison

What similarities and differences can you identify in the spread of Islam to India, Anatolia, West Africa, and Spain?



The Sultanate of Delhi

between Islam and a Hindu-based Indian civilization. Beginning around 1000, those conquests gave rise to a series of Turkic and Muslim regimes that governed much of India until the British takeover in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The early centuries of this encounter were violent indeed, as the invaders smashed Hindu and Buddhist temples and carried off vast quantities of Indian treasure. With the establishment of the Sultanate of Delhi in 1206, Turkic rule became more systematic, although their small numbers and internal conflicts allowed only a very modest penetration of Indian society.

In the centuries that followed, substantial Muslim communities emerged in India, particularly in regions less tightly integrated into the dominant Hindu culture. Disillusioned Buddhists as well as low-caste Hindus and untouchables found the more egalitarian Islam attractive. So did peoples just beginning to make the transition to settled agriculture. Others benefited from converting to Islam by avoiding the tax imposed on non-Muslims. Sufis were particularly important in facilitating conversion, for India had always valued “god-filled men” who were detached from worldly affairs. Sufi missionaries, willing to accommodate local gods and religious festivals, helped to develop a “popular Islam” that was not always so sharply distinguished from Hinduism.

Unlike the earlier experience of Islam in the Middle East, North Africa, and Persia, where it rapidly became the dominant faith, in India it was never able to claim more than 20 to 25 percent of the total population. Furthermore, Muslim communities were especially concentrated in the Punjab and Sind regions of northwestern India and in Bengal to the east. The core regions of Hindu culture in the northern Indian plain were not seriously challenged by the new faith, despite centuries of Muslim rule. One reason perhaps lay in the sharpness of the cultural divide between Islam and Hinduism. Islam was the most radically monotheistic of the world’s religions, forbidding any representation of Allah, while Hinduism was surely among the most prolifically polytheistic, generating endless statues and images of the divine in many forms. The Muslim notion of the equality of all believers contrasted sharply with the hierarchical assumptions of the caste system. The sexual modesty of Muslims was deeply offended by the open eroticism of some Hindu religious art.

Although such differences may have limited the appeal of Islam in India, they also may have prevented it from being absorbed into the tolerant and inclusive embrace of Hinduism as had so many other religious ideas, practices, and communities. The religious exclusivity of Islam, born of its firm monotheistic belief and the idea of a unique revelation, set a boundary that the great sponge of Hinduism could not completely absorb.

Certainly not all was conflict across that boundary. Many prominent Hindus willingly served in the political and military structures of a Muslim-ruled India. Mystical seekers after the divine blurred the distinction between Hindu and Muslim, suggesting that God was to be found “neither in temple nor in mosque.” “Look

within your heart,” wrote the great fifteenth-century mystic poet Kabir, “for there you will find both [Allah] and Ram [a famous Hindu deity].”<sup>20</sup> In fact, during the early sixteenth century, a new and distinct religious tradition emerged in India, known as Sikhism, which blended elements of Islam, such as devotion to one universal God, with Hindu concepts, such as karma and rebirth. “There is no Hindu and no Muslim. All are children of God,” declared Guru Nanak (1469–1539), the founder of Sikhism.

Nonetheless, Muslims usually lived quite separately, remaining a distinctive minority within an ancient Indian civilization, which they now largely governed but which they proved unable to completely transform.

### *The Case of Anatolia*

At the same time that India was being subjected to Turkic invasion, so too was Anatolia (now modern Turkey), where the largely Christian and Greek-speaking population was then governed by the Byzantine Empire (see Maps 11.1 and 11.3). Here, as in India, the invaders initially wreaked havoc as Byzantine authority melted away in the eleventh century. Sufi missionaries likewise played a major role in the process of conversion. The outcome, however, was a far more profound cultural transformation than in India. By 1500, the population was 90 percent Muslim and largely Turkic-speaking, and Anatolia was the heartland of the powerful Turkish Ottoman Empire that had overrun Christian Byzantium. Why did the Turkic intrusion into Anatolia generate a much more thorough Islamization than in India?

One factor clearly lies in a very different demographic balance. The population of Anatolia—perhaps 8 million—was far smaller than India’s roughly 48 million people, but far more Turkic-speaking peoples settled in Anatolia, giving them a much greater cultural weight than the smaller colonizing force in India. Furthermore, the disruption of Anatolian society was much more extensive. Massacres, enslavement, famine, and flight led to a sharp drop in the native population. The Byzantine state had been fatally weakened. Church properties were confiscated, and monasteries were destroyed or deserted. Priests and bishops were sometimes unable to serve their congregations. Christians, though seldom forced to convert, suffered many discriminations. They had to wear special clothing and pay special taxes, and they were forbidden to ride saddled horses or carry swords. Not a few Christians came to believe that these disasters represented proof that Islam was the true religion.<sup>21</sup> Thus Byzantine civilization in Anatolia, focused on the centralized institutions of church and state, was rendered leaderless and dispirited, whereas India’s decentralized civilization, lacking a unified political or religious establishment, was better able to absorb the shock of external invasion while retaining its core values and identity.

The Turkish rulers of Anatolia built a new society that welcomed converts and granted them material rewards and opportunity for high office. Moreover, the cultural barriers to conversion were arguably less severe than in India. The common monotheism of Islam and Christianity, and Muslim respect for Jesus and the Christian

#### ■ Comparison

Why was Anatolia so much more thoroughly Islamized than India?



**Map 11.3** The Ottoman Empire by the Mid-Fifteenth Century

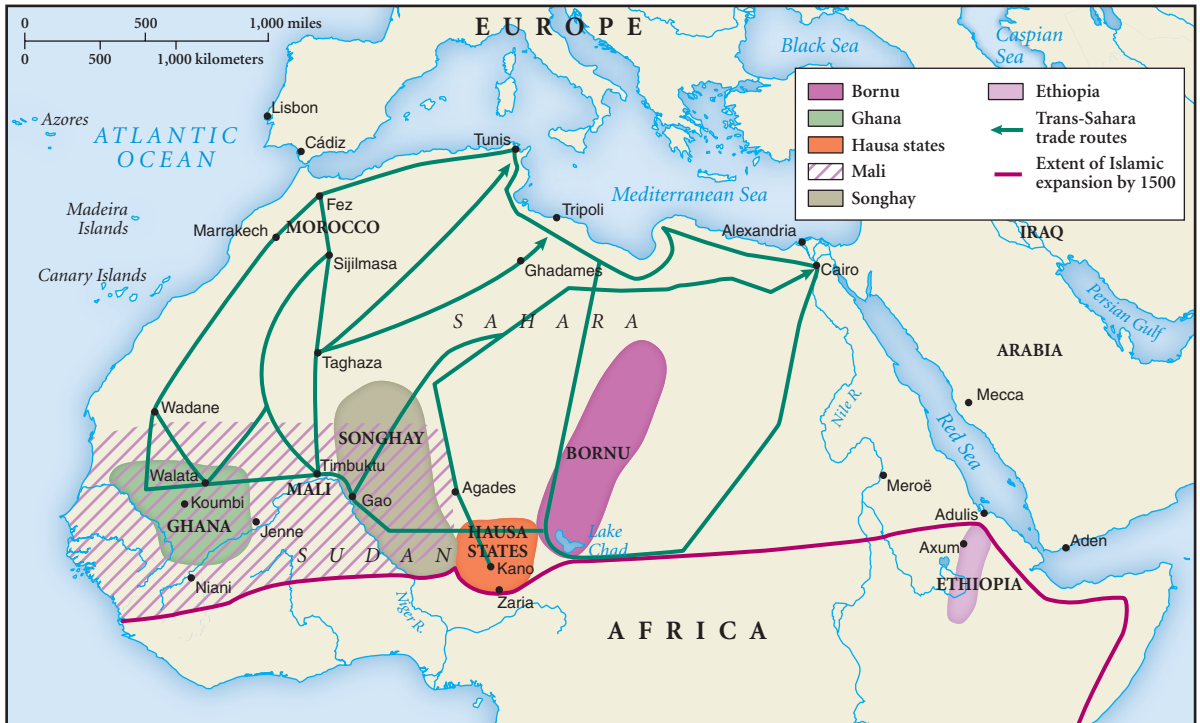
As Turkic-speaking migrants bearing the religion of Islam penetrated Anatolia, the Ottoman Empire took shape, reaching into southeastern Europe and finally displacing the Christian Byzantine Empire. Subsequently, it came to control much of the Middle East and North Africa as well.

scriptures, made conversion easier than crossing the great gulf between Islam and Hinduism. Such similarities lent support to the suggestion of some Sufi teachers that the two religions were but different versions of the same faith. Sufis also established schools, mills, orchards, hospices, and rest places for travelers and thus replaced the destroyed or decaying institutions of Christian Anatolia.<sup>22</sup> All of this contributed to the thorough religious transformation of Anatolia and laid a foundation for the Ottoman Empire, which by 1500 became the most impressive and powerful state within the Islamic world (see Map 11.3).

But the Islamization of Anatolia occurred within a distinctly Turkish context. A Turkish language, not Arabic, predominated. Some Sufi religious practices, such as ecstatic turning dances, derived from Central Asian Turkic shamanism (see Visual Source 8.5, p. 376). And Turkic traditions offering a freer, more gender-equal life for women, common among pastoral people, persisted well after conversion to Islam, much to the distress of the Arab Moroccan visitor Ibn Battuta during his travels among them in the fourteenth century: “A remarkable thing that I saw... was the respect shown to women by the Turks, for they hold a more dignified position than the men. . . . The windows of the tent are open and her face is visible, for the Turkish women do not veil themselves.”<sup>23</sup> He was not pleased.

### *The Case of West Africa*

Still another pattern prevailed in West Africa. Here Islam accompanied Muslim traders across the Sahara rather than being brought by invading Arab or Turkic armies. Its acceptance in the emerging civilization of West African states in the centuries after 1000 was largely peaceful and voluntary, lacking the incentives associated elsewhere with foreign conquest. Introduced by Muslim merchants from an already Islamized North Africa, the new faith was accepted primarily in the urban centers of the West African empires—Ghana, Mali, Songhay, Kanem-Bornu, and others (see Map 11.4). For African merchant communities, Islam provided an important link to Muslim trading partners, much as Buddhism had done in Southeast Asia. For the monarchs and their courts, it offered a source of literate officials to assist in state administration as well as religious legitimacy, particularly for those who gained the prestige conferred by a pilgrimage to Mecca. Islam was a world religion with a single Creator-God, able to comfort and protect people whose political and



**Map 11.4** West Africa and the World of Islam

Both trans-Saharan commerce and Islam linked the civilization of West Africa to the larger Muslim world.

economic horizons had expanded well beyond the local realm where ancestral spirits and traditional deities might be effective. It had a religious appeal for societies that were now participating in a wider world.

By the sixteenth century, a number of West African cities had become major centers of Islamic religious and intellectual life, attracting scholars from throughout the Muslim world. Timbuktu boasted more than 150 lower-level Quranic schools and several major centers of higher education with thousands of students from all over West Africa and beyond. Libraries held tens of thousands of books and scholarly manuscripts. Monarchs subsidized the construction of mosques as West Africa became an integral part of a larger Islamic world. Arabic became an important language of religion, education, administration, and trade, but it did not become the dominant language of daily life. Nor did West Africa experience the massive migration of Arab peoples that had promoted the Arabization of North Africa and the Middle East. Moreover, in contrast to India and Anatolia, Sufi holy men played little role until at least the eighteenth century. Scholars, merchants, and rulers, rather than mystic preachers, initially established Islam in West Africa.

Islam remained the culture of urban elites and spread little into the rural areas of West Africa until the nineteenth century. No thorough religious transformation occurred in West Africa as it had in Anatolia. Although many rulers adopted Islam,



### The Great Mosque at Jenne

This mosque in the city of Jenne, initially constructed in the thirteenth century, illustrates the assimilation of Islam into West African civilization. (Bildagentur/TIPS Images)

They are not like the women of your country.”<sup>24</sup> Ibn Battuta also noted with disapproval a “dance of the masks” on the occasion of an Islamic festival and the traditional practice of sprinkling dust on their heads as a sign of respect for the king. (See Document 8.3, pp. 362–65, for a fuller account of Ibn Battuta’s travels in West Africa.) Sonni Ali, a fifteenth-century ruler of Songhay, observed Ramadan and built mosques, but he also consulted traditional diviners and performed customary sacrifices. In such ways, Islam became Africanized even as parts of Africa became Islamized.

## The Case of Spain

The chief site of Islamic encounter with Catholic Europe occurred in Spain (called al-Andalus by Muslims), which was conquered by Arab and Berber forces in the early eighth century during the first wave of Islamic expansion. But there, Islam did not overwhelm Christianity as it did later in Anatolia. In fact, Muslim Spain in the several centuries that followed conquest has often been portrayed as a vibrant civilization characterized by harmony and tolerance between its Muslim rulers and its Christian and Jewish subjects.

Certainly Spain’s agricultural economy was the most prosperous in Europe during the ninth and tenth centuries, and at that time its capital of Córdoba was among the largest and most splendid cities in the world. Muslims, Christians, and Jews alike contributed to a brilliant high culture in which astronomy, medicine, the arts, architecture, and literature flourished. It was largely from Spain that the rich heritage of Islamic learning became available to Christian Europe.

Furthermore, social relationships among upper-class members of different faiths were easy and frequent. More than a few Christians converted to Islam, and many others, known as Mozarabs (would-be Arabs), learned Arabic, veiled their women, stopped eating pork, appreciated Arabic music and poetry, and sometimes married

they governed people who steadfastly practiced African religions and whose sensibilities they had to respect if social peace were to prevail. Thus they made few efforts to impose the new religion on their rural subjects or to govern in strict accordance with Islamic law. The fourteenth-century Arab visitor Ibn Battuta was appalled that practicing Muslims in Mali permitted their women to appear in public almost naked and to mingle freely with unrelated men. “The association of women with men is agreeable to us,” he was told, “and a part of good conduct to which no sus-

Muslims. One Christian bishop complained that Spanish Christians knew the rules of Arabic grammar better than those of Latin. During the reign of Abd al-Rahman III (912–961), freedom of worship was declared as well as the opportunity for all to rise in the bureaucracy of the state.

Even assimilated or Arabized Christians, however, remained infidels in the eyes of their Muslim counterparts, and by the late tenth century the era of toleration began to erode. Warfare with the remaining Christian states in northern Spain picked up in the tenth and eleventh centuries, and more puritanical and rigid forms of Islam entered Spain from North Africa. In these circumstances, the golden age of religious harmony faded. Under the rule of Abu Amir al-Mansur (981–1002), an official policy of tolerance turned to one of overt persecution against Christians, which now included the plundering of churches. Social life also changed. Devout Muslims avoided contact with Christians; Christian homes had to be built lower than those of Muslims; priests were forbidden to carry a cross or a Bible, lest they offend Muslim sensibilities; and Mozarabs were permitted to live only in particular places. Thus, writes one scholar, “the era of harmonious interaction between Muslim and Christian in Spain came to an end, replaced by intolerance, prejudice, and mutual suspicion.”<sup>25</sup>

That intolerance was perpetuated as the Christian reconquest of Spain gained ground after 1200. Many Muslims were then forced out of Spain, while those who remained could no longer give the call to prayer, go on pilgrimage, or publicly practice their faith. When the reconquest was completed in 1492, all Jews, some 200,000 of them, were likewise expelled from the country. Thus, as Christianity was displaced by Islam in Anatolia, the opposite process was taking place in Spain, though with far less tolerance for other religions.

## The World of Islam as a New Civilization

As the religion spread and the Abbasid dynasty declined, the civilization of Islam, like Western Christendom and the Hindu world, operated without a single political center, bound more by a shared religious culture than by a shared state. Unlike the other civilizations, however, the Islamic world by 1500 embraced at least parts of virtually every other civilization in the Afro-Eurasian hemisphere. It was in that sense “history’s first truly global civilization,” although the Americas, of course, were not involved.<sup>26</sup> What held the Islamic world together? What enabled many people to feel themselves part of a single civilization despite its political fragmentation, religious controversies, and cultural and regional diversity?

### *Networks of Faith*

At the core of that vast civilization was a common commitment to Islam. No group was more important in the transmission of those beliefs and practices than the ulama. These learned scholars were not “priests” in the Christian sense, for in Islam, at least theoretically, no person could stand between the believer and Allah. Rather

#### ■ Description

What makes it possible to speak of the Islamic world as a distinct and coherent civilization?



they served as judges, interpreters, administrators, prayer leaders, and reciters of the Quran, but especially as preservers and teachers of the sharia. Supported mostly by their local communities, some also received the patronage of *sultans*, or rulers, and were therefore subject to criticism for corruption and undue submission to state authority. In their homes, mosques, shrines, and Quranic schools, the ulama passed on the core teachings of the faith. Beginning in the eleventh century, formal colleges called *madrassas* offered more advanced instruction in the Quran and the sayings of Muhammad; grammar and rhetoric; sometimes philosophy, theology, mathematics, and medicine; and, above all else, law. Teaching was informal, mostly oral, and involved much memorization of texts. It was also largely conservative, seeking to preserve an established body of Islamic learning.

The ulama were an “international elite,” and the system of education they created served to bind together an immense and diverse civilization. Common texts were shared widely across the world of Islam. Students and teachers alike traveled great distances in search of the most learned scholars. From Indonesia to West Africa, educated Muslims inhabited a “shared world of debate and reference.”<sup>27</sup>

Paralleling the educational network of the ulama were the emerging religious orders of the Sufis. By the tenth century, particular Sufi *shaykhs*, or teachers, began to attract groups of disciples who were eager to learn their unique devotional practices and ways of achieving union with Allah. The disciples usually swore eternal allegiance to their teacher and valued highly the chain of transmission by which those teachings and practices had come down from earlier masters. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Sufis began to organize in a variety of larger associations, some limited to particular regions and others with chapters throughout the Islamic world. The Qadiriya order, for example, began in Baghdad but spread widely throughout the Arab world and into sub-Saharan Africa. Sufi orders were especially significant in the frontier regions of Islam because they followed conquering armies or traders into Central and Southeast Asia, India, Anatolia, West Africa, and elsewhere. Their devotional teachings, modest ways of living, and reputation for supernatural powers gained a hearing for the new faith. Their emphasis on personal experience of the divine, rather than on the law, allowed the Sufis to accommodate elements of local belief and practice and encouraged the growth of a popular or blended Islam. But that flexibility also often earned them the enmity of the ulama, who were sharply critical of such deviations from the sharia.

Like the *madrassas* and the sharia, Sufi religious ideas and institutions spanned the Islamic world and were yet another thread in the cosmopolitan web of Islamic civilization. Particular devotional teachings and practices spread widely, as did the writings of such famous Sufi poets as Hafiz and Rumi. (For the poetry of Rumi, see Document 11.4, pp. 509–10.) Devotees made pilgrimages to the distant tombs of famous teachers, who, they often believed, might intercede with God on their behalf. Wandering Sufis, in search of the wisdom of renowned *shaykhs*, found fellow seekers and welcome shelter in the compounds of these religious orders.

In addition to the networks of the Sufis and the ulama, many thousands of people, from kings to peasants, made the grand pilgrimage to Mecca—the hajj—each year, no doubt gaining some sense of the umma. There men and women together, hailing from all over the Islamic world, joined as one people to rehearse the central elements of their faith. The claims of local identities based on family, clan, tribe, ethnicity, or state never disappeared, but now overarching them all was the inclusive unity of the Muslim community.

## *Networks of Exchange*

The world of Islamic civilization cohered not only as a network of faith but also as an immense arena of exchange in which goods, technologies, food products, and ideas circulated widely. It rapidly became a vast trading zone of hemispheric dimensions. In part, this was due to its central location in the Afro-Eurasian world and the breaking down of earlier political barriers between the Byzantine and Persian empires. Furthermore, commerce was valued positively within Islamic teaching, for Muhammad himself had been a trader, and the pilgrimage to Mecca likewise fostered commerce. The extraordinary spurt of urbanization that accompanied the growth of Islamic civilization also promoted trade. (See Visual Source 11.2, p. 516, for a sixteenth-century image of an Islamic city.) Baghdad, established in 756 as the capital of the Abbasid Empire, soon grew into a magnificent city of half a million people. The appetite of urban elites for luxury goods stimulated both craft production and the desire for foreign products.

Thus Muslim merchants, Arabs and Persians in particular, quickly became prominent and sometimes dominant players in all of the major Afro-Eurasian trade routes of the postclassical era—in the Mediterranean Sea, along the revived Silk Roads, across the Sahara, and throughout the Indian Ocean basin (see Chapter 8). By the eighth century, Arab and Persian traders had established a commercial colony in Canton in southern China, thus linking the Islamic heartland with Asia's other giant and flourishing economy. Various forms of banking, partnerships, business contracts, and instruments for granting credit facilitated these long-distance economic relationships and generated a prosperous, sophisticated, and highly commercialized economy that spanned the Old World.<sup>28</sup>

The vast expanses of Islamic civilization also contributed to the diffusion of agricultural products and practices from one region to another, a process already under way in the earlier Roman and Persian empires. The Muslim conquest of northwestern India opened the Middle East to a veritable treasure trove of crops that had been domesticated long before in South and Southeast Asia, including rice, sugarcane, new strains of sorghum, hard wheat, bananas, lemons, limes, watermelons, coconut palms, spinach, artichokes, and cotton. Some of these subsequently found their way into the Middle East and Africa and by the thirteenth century to Europe as well.<sup>29</sup> Both cotton and sugarcane, associated with complex production processes and slave

### ■ Connection

In what ways was the world of Islam a “cosmopolitan civilization”?

labor, came to play central roles in the formation of the modern global system after 1500. These new crops and the development of the intensified agricultural techniques that often accompanied them contributed to increased food production, population growth, urbanization, and industrial development characteristic of the Muslim Middle East in early Abbasid times.

Technology too diffused widely within the Islamic world. Ancient Persian techniques for obtaining water by drilling into the sides of hills now spread across North Africa as far west as Morocco. Muslim technicians made improvements on rockets, first developed in China, by developing one that carried a small warhead and another used to attack ships.<sup>30</sup> Papermaking techniques entered the Abbasid Empire from China in the eighth century, with paper mills soon operating in Persia, Iraq, and Egypt. This revolutionary technology, which everywhere served to strengthen bureaucratic governments, spread from the Middle East into India and Europe over the following centuries.

Ideas likewise circulated across the Islamic world. The religion itself drew heavily and quite openly on Jewish and Christian precedents. Persia also contributed much in the way of bureaucratic practice, court ritual, and poetry, with Persian becoming a major literary language in elite circles. Scientific, medical, and philosophical texts, especially from ancient Greece, the Hellenistic world, and India, were systematically

translated into Arabic, for several centuries providing an enormous boost to Islamic scholarship and science. In 830, the Abbasid caliph al-Mamun, himself a poet and scholar with a passion for foreign learning, established the House of Wisdom in Baghdad as an academic center for this research and translation. Stimulated by Greek texts, a school of Islamic thinkers known as Mutazalites (“those who stand apart”) argued that reason, rather than revelation, was the “surest way to truth.”<sup>31</sup> In the long run, however, the philosophers’ emphasis on logic, rationality, and the laws of nature was subject to increasing criticism by those who held that only the Quran, the sayings of the Prophet, or mystical experience represented a genuine path to God.

But the realm of Islam was much more than a museum of ancient achievements from the civilizations that it encompassed. Those traditions mixed and blended to generate a distinctive Islamic civilization with many new contributions to the world of learning.<sup>32</sup> (See the Snapshot on p. 499.) Using Indian numerical notation, for example, Arab scholars developed algebra as a novel mathematical discipline. They also undertook much original work in astronomy and optics. They built upon earlier Greek and Indian practice to create a remarkable tradition in medicine and pharmacology. Arab physicians such as al-Razi and Ibn Sina accurately

### A Muslim Astronomical Observatory

Drawing initially on Greek, Indian, and Persian astronomy, the Islamic world after 1000 developed its own distinctive tradition of astronomical observation and prediction, reflected in this Turkish observatory constructed in 1557. Muslim astronomy subsequently exercised considerable influence in both China and Europe. (University Library, Istanbul, Turkey/The Bridgeman Art Library)



## Snapshot Key Achievements in Islamic Science and Scholarship

Person/Dates	Achievement
al-Khwarazim (790–840)	Mathematician; spread use of Arabic numerals in Islamic world; wrote first book on algebra
al-Razi (865–925)	Discovered sulfuric acid; wrote a vast encyclopedia of medicine drawing on Greek, Syrian, Indian, and Persian work and his own clinical observation
al-Biruni (973–1048)	Mathematician, astronomer, cartographer; calculated the radius of the earth with great accuracy; worked out numerous mathematical innovations; developed a technique for displaying a hemisphere on a plane
Ibn Sina (Avicenna) (980–1037)	Prolific writer in almost all fields of science and philosophy; especially known for <i>Canon of Medicine</i> , a fourteen-volume work that set standards for medical practice in Islamic and Christian worlds for centuries
Omar Khayyam (1048–1131)	Mathematician; critic of Euclid's geometry; measured the solar year with great accuracy; Sufi poet; author of <i>The Rubaiyat</i>
Ibn Rushd (Averroës) (1126–1198)	Translated and commented widely on Aristotle; rationalist philosopher; made major contributions in law, mathematics, and medicine
Nasir al-Din Tusi (1201–1274)	Founder of the famous Maragha observatory in Persia (data from Maragha probably influenced Copernicus); mapped the motion of stars and planets
Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406)	Greatest Arab historian; identified trends and structures in world history over long periods of time

diagnosed many diseases, such as hay fever, measles, smallpox, diphtheria, rabies, and diabetes. In addition, treatments such as using a mercury ointment for scabies, cataract and hernia operations, and filling teeth with gold emerged from Arab doctors. The first hospitals, traveling clinics, and examinations for physicians and pharmacologists also were developed within the Islamic world. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, this enormous body of Arab medical scholarship entered Europe via Spain, and it remained at the core of European medical practice for many centuries.<sup>33</sup>



## Reflections: Past and Present: Choosing Our History

Prominent among the many uses of history is the perspective it provides on the present. Although historians sometimes worry that an excessive “present-mindedness” may distort our perception of the past, all of us look to history, almost instinctively, to comprehend the world we now inhabit. Given the obvious importance of the Islamic world in the international arena of the twenty-first century, how might some grasp of the early development of Islamic civilization assist us in understanding our present circumstances?

First, that history reminds us of the central role that Islam played in the Afro-Eurasian world for a thousand years or more. From 600 to 1600 or later, it was a proud, cosmopolitan, often prosperous, and frequently powerful civilization that spanned Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. What followed were several centuries of European or Western imperialism that many Muslims found humiliating, even if some were attracted by elements of modern Western culture. In their recent efforts to overcome those centuries of subordination and exploitation, Muslims have found encouragement and inspiration in reflecting on the more distant and perhaps more glorious past. But they have not all chosen to emphasize the same past. Those labeled as “fundamentalists” have often viewed the early Islamic community associated with Medina, Mecca, and Muhammad as a model for Islamic renewal in the present. Others, often known as Islamic modernizers, have looked to the somewhat later achievements of Islamic science and scholarship as a foundation for a more open engagement with the West and the modern world.

The history of Islam also reveals to us a world of great diversity and debate. Sharp religious differences between Sunni and Shia understandings of the faith; differences in emphasis between advocates of the sharia and of Sufi spirituality; political conflicts among various groups and regions within the larger Islamic world; different postures toward women in Arab lands and in West Africa—all of this and more divided the umma and divide it still. Recalling that diversity is a useful reminder for any who would tag all Muslims with a single label.

A further dimension of that diversity lies in the many cultural encounters that the spread of Islam has spawned. Sometimes great conflict and violence have accompanied those encounters as in the Crusades and in Turkic invasions of India and Anatolia. At other times and places, Muslims and non-Muslims have lived together in relative tranquillity and tolerance—in Spain, in West Africa, in India, and in the Ottoman Empire. Some commentaries on the current interaction of Islam and the West seem to assume an eternal hostility or an inevitable clash of civilizations. The record of the past, however, shows considerable variation in the interaction of Muslims and others. While the past certainly shapes and conditions what happens next, the future, as always, remains open. Within limits, we can choose the history on which we seek to build.

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## Second Thoughts

### What's the Significance?

Quran	ulama	Ibn Battuta
umma	Umayyad caliphate	Timbuktu
Pillars of Islam	Abbasid caliphate	al-Andalus
<i>hijra</i>	al-Ghazali	madrassas
sharia	Sikhism	House of Wisdom
jizya	Anatolia	Ibn Sina

To assess your mastery of the material in this chapter, visit the **Student Center** at [bedfordstmartins.com/strayer](http://bedfordstmartins.com/strayer).

### Big Picture Questions

1. What distinguished the first centuries of Islamic history from the early history of Christianity and Buddhism? What similarities and differences characterized their religious outlooks?
2. How might you account for the immense religious and political/military success of Islam in its early centuries?
3. In what ways might Islamic civilization be described as cosmopolitan, international, or global?
4. “Islam was simultaneously both a single world of shared meaning and interaction and a series of separate and distinct communities, often in conflict with one another.” What evidence could you provide to support both sides of this argument?
5. What changes did Islamic expansion generate in those societies that encountered it, and how was Islam itself transformed by those encounters?

### Next Steps: For Further Study

Reza Aslan, *No God but God* (2005). A well-written and popular history of Islam by an Iranian immigrant to the United States.

Richard Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period* (1979). A scholarly study of the meaning and process of conversion in the early history of Islam and in several distinct places.

Richard Eaton, *Islamic History as Global History* (1990). A short account by a major scholar that examines Islam in a global framework.

John Esposito, ed., *The Oxford History of Islam* (1999). Up-to-date essays on various periods and themes in Islamic history. Beautifully illustrated.

Francis Robinson, ed., *Cambridge Illustrated History of the Islamic World* (1996). A series of essays by major scholars, with lovely pictures and maps.

Judith Tucker, *Gender and Islamic History* (1994). A brief overview of the changing lives of Islamic women.

“The Travels of Ibn Battuta: A Virtual Tour with the Fourteenth Century Traveler,” [http://www.sfusd.k12.ca.us/schwww/sch618/Ibn\\_Battuta/Battuta's\\_Trip\\_Twelve.html](http://www.sfusd.k12.ca.us/schwww/sch618/Ibn_Battuta/Battuta's_Trip_Twelve.html). A beautifully illustrated journey across the Islamic world in the early 1300s.

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For Web sites and additional documents related to this chapter, see **Make History** at [bedfordstmartins.com/strayer](http://bedfordstmartins.com/strayer).

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# Documents

## Considering the Evidence: Voices of Islam



Like every other great religious tradition, Islam found expression in various forms. Its primary text, the Quran, claimed to represent the voice of the divine, God's final revelation to humankind. Other early Islamic writings, known as *hadith*, recorded the sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad. Still others reflected the growing body of Islamic law, the *sharia*, which sought to construct a social order aligned with basic religious teachings. Devotional practices and expressions of adoration for Allah represented yet another body of Islamic literature. All of this gave rise to differing interpretations and contending views, generating for Islam a rich and complex literary tradition that has been the source of inspiration and debate for almost 1,400 years. From this immense body of work, we present just a few samples of the voices of Islam.

### Document II.1

## The Voice of Allah

To Muslims, the Quran contains the very words of God. The term *quran* itself means "recitation" in Arabic, and the faithful believe that the angel Gabriel spoke God's words to Muhammad, who then recited them. Often called "noble" or "glorious," the Quran, compiled into an established text within thirty years of the Prophet's death, was regarded as a book without equal, written in the most sublime Arabic. Copying it was an act of piety, memorizing it was the starting point for Muslim education, and reciting it was both an art form and a high honor. Organized in 114 Surahs (chapters), the Quran was revealed to Muhammad over a period of some twenty-two years. Often the revelations came in response to particular problems that the young Islamic community and the Prophet were facing. The selections that follow convey something of the Quran's understanding of God, of humankind, of the social life prescribed for believers, of relations with non-Muslims, and much more.

- What are the chief characteristics of Allah, to Muslims the single source of all life and being?
- What religious practices are prescribed for Muslims in these passages? What are their purposes in the life of believers?

- What specific prescriptions for social life do these selections contain? Notice in particular those directed toward the weakest members of society. How would you describe the Quran's view of a good society?
- What attitude toward Jews, Christians, and other non-Muslim peoples do these passages suggest?
- What circumstances surrounding the birth of Islam might help to explain the references in the Quran to fighting and warfare?
- The sacred texts of all religious traditions provide ample room for conflicting understandings and interpretations. What debates or controversies might arise from these passages? Consider in particular views of women, of religious practice, of warfare, and of relationships with Jews and Christians.

## *The Quran*

### Seventh Century C.E.

#### Surah 1

In the name of God, the Most Gracious and the Dispenser of Grace. All praise is due to God alone, the sustainer of all the worlds... Lord of the Day of Judgment. Thee alone do we worship; and unto Thee alone do we turn for aid. Guide us in the straight way, the way of those upon whom Thou hast bestowed Thy blessing, not of those who have been condemned, nor those who go astray.

#### Surah 2

This divine writ [the Quran]—let there be no doubt about it—is [meant to be] a guidance for all the God-conscious who believe in [the existence of] that which is beyond the reach of human perception, and are constant in prayer, and spend on others out of what We provide for them as sustenance; and who believe in that which has been bestowed from on high upon thee, [O Prophet,] as well as in that which was bestowed before thy time...

Verily, those who have attained to faith, as well as those who follow the Jewish faith, and the

Christians...—all who believe in God and the Last Day and do righteous deeds—shall have their reward with their Sustainer; and no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve...

And they say, “Be Jews”—or, “Christians”—“and you shall be on the right path.” Say: “Nay, but [ours is] the creed of Abraham, who turned away from all that is false, and was not of those who ascribe divinity to aught beside God.” Say: “We believe in God, and in that which has been bestowed from on high upon us, and that which has been bestowed upon Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob, and their descendants, and that which has been vouchsafed to Moses and Jesus; and that which has been vouchsafed to all the [other] prophets by their Sustainer: we make no distinction between any of them...”

Verily, in the creation of the heavens and of the earth, and the succession of night and day: and in the ships that speed through the sea with what is useful to man: and in the waters which God sends down from the sky, giving life thereby to the earth after it had been lifeless, and causing all manner of living creatures to multiply thereon: and in the change of the winds, and the clouds that run their appointed courses between sky and earth: [in all this] there are messages indeed for people who use their reason...

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Source: Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān* (Bristol: The Book Foundation, 2003), Surahs 1, 2, 4, 5.



True piety does not consist in turning your faces toward the east or the west, but truly pious is he who believes in God, and the Last Day; and the angels, and revelation, and the prophets; and spends his substance—however much he himself may cherish it—upon his near of kin, and the orphans, and the needy, and the wayfarer, and the beggars, and for the freeing of human beings from bondage. . . .

Fasting is ordained for you as it was ordained for those before you, so that you might remain conscious of God. . . .

And fight in God's cause against those who wage war against you, but do not commit aggression, for verily, God does not love aggressors. And slay them wherever you may come upon them, and drive them away from wherever they drove you away, for oppression is even worse than killing. And fight not against them near the Inviolable House of Worship<sup>o</sup> unless they fight against you there first; but if they fight against you, slay them: such shall be the recompense of those who deny the truth. But if they desist, behold, God is much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace. Hence, fight against them until there is no more oppression and all worship is devoted to God alone; but if they desist, then all hostility shall cease, save against those who [willfully] do wrong. . . .

And perform the pilgrimage. . . . [to Mecca] in honor of God; and if you are held back, give instead whatever offering you can easily afford. . . .

There shall be no coercion in matters of faith. . . .

Do not deprive your charitable deeds of all worth by stressing your own benevolence and hurting [the feelings of the needy], as does he who spends his wealth only to be seen and praised by men. . . .

God has made buying and selling lawful and usury<sup>o</sup> unlawful. Hence, whoever. . . . desists [from

<sup>o</sup>**Inviolable House of Worship:** a mosque.

<sup>o</sup>**usury:** the lending of money to be paid back with interest.

usury], may keep his past gains, and it will be for God to judge him; but as for those who return to it they are destined for the fire. . . . God deprives usurious gains of all blessing, whereas He blesses charitable deeds with manifold increase.

#### Surah 4

[R]ender unto the orphans their possessions. . . . and do not consume their possessions together with your own: this, verily, is a great crime. . . .

Men shall have a share in what parents and kinsfolk leave behind, and women shall have a share in what parents and kinsfolk leave behind, whether it be little or much. . . .

And as for those of your women who become guilty of immoral conduct, call upon four from among you who have witnessed their guilt; and if these bear witness thereto, confine the guilty women to their houses until death takes them away or God opens for them a way [through repentance]. And punish [thus] both of the guilty parties; but if they both repent and mend their ways, leave them alone: for, behold, God is an acceptor of repentance, a dispenser of grace. . . .

And it will not be within your power to treat your wives with equal fairness, however much you may desire it; and so, do not allow yourselves to incline toward one to the exclusion of the other, leaving her in a state, as it were, of having and not having a husband.

#### Surah 5

Do not take the Jews and Christians for your allies: they are but allies of one another—and whoever of you allies himself with them becomes, verily, one of them.

## Document 11.2

### The Voice of the Prophet Muhammad

As an expression of Islam, the sayings and deeds of Muhammad, known as the *hadiths*, are second in importance only to the Quran. In various collections of hadiths, Muslims hear the voice and witness the actions of their prophet. While they do not have the authority of divine revelation, these statements have served to guide and inspire Muslims to this day.

In the several centuries following his death, an enormous number of stories about Muhammad circulated within the Islamic community. Scholars gradually developed methods of authentication designed to discover which of these stories most reliably represented the Prophet's words and actions. Considerable controversy accompanied this process, and no single collection of hadiths has ever achieved universal acceptance. One of the earliest and most highly respected of these collections was the work the Persian scholar al-Bukhari (810–870). Traveling extensively throughout the Islamic world, al-Bukhari is said to have collected some 600,000 stories, memorized 200,000 of them, and finally authenticated and published 7,275. The selections that follow suggest something of the range and variety of the hadiths.

- What portrait of Muhammad emerges from this record of his sayings and actions?
- How do these hadiths reflect or build on the teaching of the Quran in Document 11.1?
- What religious and social values do these hadiths highlight?
- In what ways do these hadiths reflect common themes in many of the world's "wisdom traditions," and in what respects are they distinctly Islamic?

### *The Hadith*

#### Eighth and Ninth Centuries

The Apostle of Allah... was asked which [good] work was the most excellent, and he answered: "Belief in Allah and in His Apostle." He was asked: "And then which?" He replied: "Jihād in the way of Allah." He was again asked: "And then what?" and he replied: "An acceptable pilgrimage..."

Source: Arthur Jeffery, ed. and trans., *A Reader on Islam* (The Hague: Mouton, 1962), 81–86.

If a slave serves honestly his [earthly] master and worships earnestly his [heavenly] Lord, he will have a double recompense.

He who shows concern for the widows and the unfortunate [ranks as high] as one who goes on Jihād in the way of Allah, or one who fasts by day and who rises at night [for prayer].

A [true] believer views his sins as though he were sitting beneath a mountain which he fears may fall

on him, but as evil-doer views his sins as a fly that moves across his nose.

In this world be as a stranger, or as one who is just passing along the road.

In two things an old man's heart never ceases to be that of a youth, in love of this world and in hoping long. . . .

To look at a woman is forbidden, even if it is a look without desire, so how much the more is touching her.

Said he—upon whom be Allah's blessing and peace—"Avoid seven pernicious things." [His Companions] said: "And what are they, O Apostle of Allah?" He answered: "Associating anything with Allah, sorcery, depriving anyone of life where Allah has forbidden that save for just cause, taking usury, devouring the property of orphans, turning the back on the day of battle, and slandering chaste believing women even though they may be acting carelessly."

No one who enters Paradise will ever want to return to this world, even could he possess the earth and all that is on it, save the martyrs who desire to return to this world and be killed ten times so great is the regard in which they find themselves held.

To be stationed on the frontier for one day during Holy War is better than (to possess) this world and all that is on it. A place in Paradise the size of one of your whip-lashes is better than this world and all that is on it. . . .

If a man sees something in [the conduct of] his ruler which he dislikes let him put up with it patiently, for there is no one who separates himself

even a span from the community and dies [in that separation], but dies a pagan death. . . .

Said the Prophet. . . : "I had a look into Paradise and I saw that the poor made up most of its inhabitants, and I had a look into Hell and saw that most of its inhabitants were women. . . .

Treat women-folk kindly for woman was created of a rib. The crookedest part of a rib is its upper part. If you go to straighten it out you will break it, and if you leave it alone it will continue crooked. So treat women in kindly fashion. . . .

Said the Apostle of Allah. . . : "O band of youths, let him among you who is able to make a home get married, and let him who is not able betake himself to fasting for he will find in that a quencher [of his passions]."

The worst of foods is that of a feast to which the rich have been invited and the poor overlooked. . . .

Said the Apostle of Allah—upon whom be Allah's blessing and peace—"Do not wear silks and satins, and do not drink from gold and silver vessels nor eat from dishes made thereof, for these things are theirs in this world but ours in the world to come." . . .

Said the Prophet—upon whom be Allah's blessing and peace—"He who drinks wine in this world and repents not of it will be forbidden it in the world to come." . . .

Al-Aqra' said: "I have ten sons but never have I kissed any one of them." The Apostle of Allah—upon whom be Allah's blessing and peace—looked at him, and then said: "He who does not show tenderness will not have tenderness shown him."

### Document II.3

## The Voice of the Law

While Christian scholarship emphasized theology and correct belief, learned Muslims gave more attention to law and correct behavior. That law was known as the sharia, an Arabic term that referred to a path toward water, which is the source of life. To many Muslims, that was the role of law—to construct the good society within which an authentic religious life could find expression.

The sharia emerged as the early Islamic community confronted the practical problems of an expanding empire with a very diverse population. But

no single legal framework developed. Rather, four major schools of Islamic law crystallized, agreeing on fundamentals but differing in emphasis. How much weight should be given to the hadiths and which of them were most reliably authentic? What scope should reason and judgment have in applying religious principles to particular circumstances? Despite disagreement on such questions, each of the four approaches to legal interpretation sought to be all-embracing, providing highly detailed guidance on ritual performance, personal behavior, marriage and family matters, crime and punishment, economic transactions, and political action. The selections that follow, drawn from various legal traditions, illustrate this comprehensive nature of Islamic law and its centrality in an evolving Islamic civilization.

- What do you find most striking about the legal prescriptions in these passages?
- In what ways do these selections draw on and apply the teachings of the Quran and the hadiths?
- How does the role of law in early Islamic civilization differ from that of modern Western society?
- Why do you think the role of law was so central, so highly detailed, and so comprehensive in Islamic civilization?
- What do this document and Document 11.2 suggest about the problems that the early Islamic community confronted?

## *The Sharia* Ninth Century

### On Prayer

The five prayers are obligatory for every Muslim who has reached the age of puberty and has the use of reason, except for women who are menstruating or recovering from childbirth.

If Muslims deny the necessity of prayer through ignorance, one must instruct them; if they deny it willfully, they have apostatized. . . .

If Muslims abstain from saying the prayers from negligence, one should ask them three times to repent; if they repent, it is well, and if they refuse, it is lawful to put them to death.

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Source: John Alden Williams, trans. and ed., *The Word of Islam* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 71, 80–82, 88–89, 94–95, 98–101, 104–5.

### On *Zakat*<sup>o</sup>

The obligation pertains only to a free Muslim who has complete ownership of the property on which it is due. . . . *Zakat* is due only on animals, agricultural products, precious metals, objects intended for sale, the products of mines, and treasure troves.

Whoever has the obligation to pay *zakat* and is able must pay it; if not, they commit a fault for which they must answer. If anyone refuses to pay it and denies its obligatory character they have committed apostasy and may be put to death. If they refuse it from avarice, they shall have the amount taken from them and be given a sentence at the judge's discretion.

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<sup>o</sup>*Zakat*: alms for the poor.

## On Marriage

[Marriage] is contracted by means of declaration and consent. When both parties are Muslims, it must be contracted in the presence of two male or one male and two female Muslim witnesses who are free, sane, and adult. . . .

It is not lawful for a man to marry two women who are sisters or to cohabit with two sisters who are his slaves. . . .

A man may not marry his slave-girl unless he sets her free first, and a woman may not marry her slave, since marriage has as its object that the children belong equally to both parents, and ownership and slavery are not equal states.

Similarly, marriage with an idolatress is forbidden, until she accepts Islam or a religion of the Book.

It is not lawful for a man already married to a free woman to marry a slave. . . . However, a man may lawfully marry a free woman after a slave.

A free man may marry four women, free or slave, but no more. It is unlawful for a slave to marry more than two women. . . .

## On Government

There are ten things a Caliph<sup>o</sup> must do in public affairs:

- 1) Maintain religion according to its established principles.
- 2) Apply legal judgments for litigants so that equity reigns without aiding the oppressor or weakening the oppressed.
- 3) Protect the flock. . . . so that people may gain their living and move from place to place securely.
- 4) Apply the *hudud*, or punishments of the Law, so as to secure God's prohibitions from violation.
- 5) Fortify the marches so that the enemy will not appear due to neglect, shedding the blood of any Muslim or protected person.

<sup>o</sup>**Caliph:** successor to Muhammad as political leader of the Islamic community.

- 6) Wage *jihad* against those who reject Islam so that they become either Muslims or protected people.
- 7) Collect the *zakat* and taxes on conquered territory. . . . without fear or oppression.
- 8) Administer treasury expenditures.
- 9) Delegate loyal and trustworthy people.
- 10) Directly oversee matters and not delegate his authority seeking to occupy himself with either pleasure or devotion. . . .

It is necessary therefore to cause the masses to act in accord with divine laws in all the affairs, both in this world and in the world to come. The authority to do so was possessed by the prophets and after them by their successors.

## On Things Disliked in the Law

It is not permitted to men or women to eat or drink or keep unguents<sup>o</sup> in vessels of gold or silver. . . .

It is not permitted for a man to wear silk, but it is permitted for a woman. . . .

It is not permitted for a man to wear gold or silver, except for silver on a ring, or on a weapon.

It is not permitted for a man to look at a strange woman.<sup>o</sup> . . . A woman frequently needs to bare her hands and face in transactions with men. Abu Hanifa said it was also permitted to look at her feet and Abu Yusuf said it was permitted to look at her forearms as well. . . . However, if a man is not secure from feeling lust, he should not look needlessly even at the face or hands, to avoid sin. He is not allowed to touch her face or hands even if he is free from lust, whether he be young or old.

## On the Economy

It is disliked to corner the market in food for humans or animals if it occurs in a town where this may prove harmful to the people. It is disliked to sell weapons in a time of trouble.

<sup>o</sup>**unguents:** ointments.

<sup>o</sup>**strange woman:** a woman from outside one's immediate family.

There is no harm in selling fruit juice to someone who will make wine of it, since the transgression is not in the juice but in the wine after it has been changed. . . .

Earning a living by changing money is a great danger to the religion of the one who practices it. . . . It is the duty of the *muhtasib*<sup>o</sup> to search out the money changers' places of business and spy on them,

<sup>o</sup>**Muhtasib:** an inspector of the markets.

and if he finds one of them practicing usury or doing something illegal. . . . he must punish that person. . . .

Owners of ships and boats must be prevented from loading their vessels above the usual load, for fear of sinking. . . . If they carry women on the same boat with men, there must be a partition between them.

Sellers of [pottery] are not to overlay any that are pierced or cracked with gypsum. . . . and then sell them as sound.

## Document II.4

### The Voice of the Sufis

Alongside the law, there ran a very different current of Islamic thinking and expression known as Sufism. The Sufis, sometimes called the “friends of God,” were the mystics of Islam, those for whom the direct, personal, and intoxicating experience of the divine source was of far greater importance than the laws, regulations, and judgments of the sharia (see pp. 485–86, 496). Organized in hundreds of separate orders, or “brotherhoods,” the Sufis constituted one of the transregional networks that linked the far-flung domains of the Islamic world. Often they were the missionaries of Islam, introducing the faith to Anatolia, India, Central Asia, and elsewhere.

Among the most prominent exemplars of Sufi sensibility was Rumi (1207–1273), born in what is now Afghanistan and raised in a Persian cultural tradition. Rumi's family later migrated to Anatolia, and Rumi lived most of his adult life in the city of Konya, where he is buried. There he wrote extensively, including a six-volume work of rhymed couplets known as the *Mathnawi*. Following Rumi's death, his son established the Mevlevi Sufi order, based on Rumi's teachings and known in the West as the “whirling dervishes,” on account of the turning dances that became a part of their practice (see Visual Source 8.5 on p. 376).

Rumi's poetry has remained a sublime expression of the mystical dimension of Islamic spiritual seeking and has provided inspiration and direction for millions, both within and beyond the Islamic world. In the early twenty-first century, Rumi was the best-selling poet in the United States. The selections that follow provide a brief sample of the Sufi approach to religious life.

- How would you define the religious sensibility of Rumi's poetry?
- How does it differ from the approach to Islam reflected in the sharia?
- What criticisms might the orthodox legal scholars (ulama) have made regarding the Sufi understanding of Islam?

## *Inscription in Rumi's Tomb*

Thirteenth Century

Come, come, whoever you are,  
Wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving.

---

Source: A frequently quoted inscription hanging inside the tomb of Rumi and generally, though not universally, attributed to him; translator unknown.

It doesn't matter.  
Ours is not a caravan of despair.  
Come, even if you have broken your vow a  
thousand times,  
Come, yet again, come, come.

RUMI

### *Poem*

Thirteenth Century

I searched for God among the Christians and on  
the Cross and therein I found Him not.  
I went into the ancient temples of idolatry; no  
trace of Him was there.

---

Source: M. M. Sharif, *A History of Muslim Philosophy*,  
(Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1966), 2:838.

I entered the mountain cave of Hira and then went  
as far as Qandhar but God I found not. . . .  
Then I directed my search to the Kaaba, the resort  
of old and young; God was not there even.  
Turning to philosophy I inquired about him from  
ibn Sina but found Him not within his range. . . .  
Finally, I looked into my own heart and there I  
saw Him; He was nowhere else.

RUMI

## *“Drowned in God,” Mathnawi*

Thirteenth Century

Dam the torrent of ecstasy when it runs in  
flood,  
So that it won't bring shame and ruin.  
But why should I fear ruin?  
Under the ruin waits a treasure.  
He that is drowned in God wishes to be more  
drowned.  
While his spirit is tossed up and down by the  
waves of the sea,

---

Source: From Kabir Helminski, ed., *The Pocket Rumi  
Reader* (Boston: Shambhala, 2001), 89.

He asks, “Is the bottom of the sea more delightful  
or the top?”  
Is the Beloved's arrow more fascinating, or the  
shield?  
O heart, if you recognize any difference between  
joy and sorrow,  
These lies will tear you apart.  
Although your desire tastes sweet,  
Doesn't the Beloved desire you to be desireless?  
The life of lovers is in death:  
You will not win the Beloved's heart unless you  
lose your own.

---

## Using the Evidence: Voices of Islam

1. **Defining differences within Islam:** In what different ways do the various voices of Islam represented in these documents understand and express the common religious tradition of which they are all a part? What grounds for debate or controversy can you identify within or among them?
2. **Comparing religious traditions:** How would you compare Islamic religious ideas and practices with those of other traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity?
3. **Considering gender and Islam:** How do these documents represent the roles of men and women in Islamic society? Pay particular attention to differences in emphasis.
4. **Seeking additional sources:** Notice that all of these documents derive from literate elites, and each of them suggests or prescribes appropriate behavior. What additional documents would you need if you were to assess the impact of these prescriptions on the lives of ordinary people? What specific questions might you want to pose to such documents?



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# Visual Sources

## Considering the Evidence: Islamic Civilization in Persian Miniature Paintings



Iran, homeland of the ancient Persian Empire and its successors, entered the world of Islam rather differently than did Iraq, Syria, Egypt, and North Africa. In the latter regions, converts to Islam gradually abandoned their native languages, adopted Arabic, and came to be seen as Arabs. In Iran or Persia, by contrast, Arab conquest did not involve the cultural Arabization of the region, despite some initial efforts to impose the Arabic language (see Map 11.1, p. 481). By the tenth century, the vast majority of Persians were Muslims, but the Persian language, Farsi (still spoken in modern Iran), flourished, enriched now by a number of Arabic loan words and written in an Arabic script. In 1010, that language received its classic literary expression when the Persian poet Ferdowsi completed his epic work, the *Shahnama* (*The Book of Kings*). A huge text of some 60,000 rhyming couplets, it recorded the mythical and pre-Islamic history of Iran and gave an enduring expression to a distinctly Persian cultural identity.

That culture had an enormous influence within the world of Islam. Many religious ideas of Persian Zoroastrianism—an evil satanic power, final judgment, heaven and hell, paradise—found their way into Islam, often indirectly via Jewish or Christian precedents. In Iran, Central Asia, India, and later in the Ottoman Empire, Persian influences were pervasive. Persian administrative and bureaucratic techniques; Persian court practices with their palaces, gardens, and splendid garments; Persian architecture, poetry, music, and painting—all of this decisively shaped the high culture of these eastern Islamic lands. One of the Abbasid caliphs, himself an Arab, observed: “The Persians ruled for a thousand years and did not need us Arabs even for a day. We have been ruling them for one or two centuries and cannot do without them for an hour.”<sup>34</sup>

Prominent among the artistic achievements of Persian culture were miniature paintings—small, colorful, and exquisitely detailed works often used to illustrate books or manuscripts. One art historian described them as “little festivals of color in images separated from each other by pages of text.”<sup>35</sup> This artistic style flourished especially from the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries, when Persia was invaded and ruled by a succession of Mongol or Turkic dynasties. These invasions, especially that of the Mongols in the thir-

teenth century, were highly destructive. Great cities were devastated, libraries burned, and artists forced to flee. But the new rulers also proved to be generous patrons of the arts and served as carriers of Buddhist and Chinese artistic forms that enriched Persian painting.

During these centuries, the artists who created these Persian miniatures drew heavily on Persian mythology, poetry, and history as subjects for their paintings. Landscapes, influenced by Chinese techniques, also appeared in Persian miniatures. Scenes from the life of the Prophet Muhammad were likewise among the themes explored by Persian artists, although explicitly Islamic subject matter was represented in only a small proportion of these paintings. Particularly helpful to historians, images of daily life also found a place in Persian miniature painting, providing glimpses into social life in the Arab or Persian centers of Islamic civilization.

Visual Sources 11.1 and 11.2, dating from the early to mid-sixteenth century and measuring about eight by eleven inches, illustrate this focus within Persian miniature painting. Visual sources such as these are often most revealing in their detail, as artists depicted elements of daily life not often recorded elsewhere. Both of them, however, are idealized images that reflect enduring values within the Islamic world rather than referring to specific times or places.

Visual Source 11.1 offers a window on the life of desert pastoral nomads of Arabia.<sup>36</sup> The style of both clothing and tents indicate that this is an Arab nomadic encampment. The image focuses the viewer's attention on the two older men seated inside the elaborately decorated blue tent in the lower left. Seven cups are lined up in front of the men at the bottom, together with their lids, perhaps to keep the beverage warm or the bugs out. The red tent at the left is decorated with a *simurgh*, a legendary Persian winged creature with the head of a dog and the claws of a lion, said to have lived so long that it had acquired universal knowledge. Outside the tent of the woman at the right of the painting are her slippers, and above her another woman tenderly feeds her child. In perhaps the only directly Islamic reference in the painting, the old man approaching the washerwoman holds prayer beads in his right hand. Notice also some apparent Chinese influence in the painting. The presentation of rocks, clouds, and twisted trees reflects features of Chinese landscape painting, while the blue-and-white ceramic bowl near the woman washing clothes suggests some trade with China.

According to some art historians, this image has yet another level of meaning, for it may have served to illustrate the well-known and ancient Arab love story of Layla and Majnun, tragic star-crossed lovers prevented (like Romeo and Juliet) from marrying by a family feud and united only in death. The young man tending the fire at the upper right may represent Majnun, driven mad and into the wilderness by his unfulfilled love. The woman in the beautiful green



**Visual Source 11.1** An Arab Camp Scene (Harvard Art Museum, Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Gift of John Goelet)

gown sitting in the doorway of the red tent on the left side of the painting may be Layla. In this interpretation of the image, the meeting of the two older men represents an incident in the story in which Majnun's father, together with his relatives, asks for Layla's hand in marriage from her father.

- What specific features and activities of nomadic life does the painting portray? What marks this image as an idealized version of an Arab camp? What features of nomadic life may have been omitted?
- Do the writing implements at the very bottom left of the painting—books, a pincase, an inkwell—offer a clue to the discussion that the two men may be having?
- What social distinctions are revealed in this painting?
- What differences in the lives of men and women are suggested in this image?
- What other details do you notice as you study this miniature painting?

Unlike the rural scene of Visual Source 11.1, the urban landscape of Visual Source 11.2 corresponds to no identifiable story or narrative. Also a sixteenth-century painting, it reflects the urban bustle and commercial sophistication of Islamic civilization. Here buildings replace tents as the major structures in the painting. Nine separate sources of light—lamps, candles, and torches—mark this as a nighttime scene, but in Persian painting, unlike in European art, light does not reflect on people or objects and does not cast shadows.

Three distinct sections of the painting illustrate various elements of city life. On the left and bottom of the image, a young prince holds court in his court pavilion attended by various turbaned courtiers. Above and to the right of the court scene, characteristic urban activities unfold along a city street. Finally, in the upper left a woman lounges on the balcony of an urban dwelling, while another woman speaks to an older turbaned man. Notice also the mosque in the upper right corner, inscribed with a well-known saying of Muhammad: "He who builds a mosque for God, God will build for him a dwelling in Paradise." There is also an inscription above the building in the lower right from the fourteenth-century Persian Sufi poet Hafiz: "The pupil of my eye is your nesting place; be kind, alight, for it is your home." As in Visual Source 11.1, intriguing details abound: the garden seen through the window in the arched pavilion; various types of musical instruments; the headscarves on women and the henna decorations on their hands; the elaborate geometric designs on buildings; the prayer beads in the hand of the young boy in front of the mosque.



- What might a historian interested in daily urban life in the Islamic world notice in this painting? What different social groups can you identify?
- What in particular seems to be going on in the court scene? What products and transactions can you find in or around the several shops that line the street?
- How would you define the roles of women as depicted here? Notice in particular the three young women above the court pavilion, seeking to observe the excitement below, from which they were presumably excluded.
- In what ways are the activities shown in the painting idealized?
- How might you understand the inscriptions of Muhammad and Hafiz in the context of this painting?
- What details do you find most striking in Visual Source 11.2?

The Persian miniature painting in Visual Source 11.3 moves from ordinary life to religious imagination. While explicitly religious themes appear only infrequently in these paintings, the most common religious subject by far was that of the Prophet Muhammad's Night Journey, said to have taken place in 619 or 620. The Quran refers briefly to God taking the prophet "from the sacred place of worship to the far distant place of worship." This passage became the basis for a story, much embellished over the centuries, of rich and deep meaning for Muslims. In this religious narrative, Muhammad was led one night by the angel Gabriel from Mecca to Jerusalem. For the journey he was given a *buraq*, a mythical winged creature with the body of a mule or donkey and the face of a woman. Upon arriving in Jerusalem, he led prayers for an assembly of earlier prophets including Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. (See p. 477 for another illustration of Muhammad's relationship with earlier Jewish and Christian prophets.) Then, accompanied by many angels, Muhammad made his way through seven heavens into the presence of God, where, according to the Quran, "he did see some of the most profound of his Sustainer's symbols." There too Allah spoke to Muhammad about the importance of regular prayer, commanding fifty prayers a day, a figure later reduced to five on the advice of Moses.

From the beginning, Muslims have been divided on how to interpret this journey of the Prophet. For most, perhaps, it was taken quite literally as a miraculous event. Some, however, viewed it as a dream or a vision, while others understood it as the journey of Muhammad's soul but not his body. The Prophet's youngest wife, Aisha, for example, reported that "his body did not leave its place." Visual Source 11.3, dating from the early sixteenth century, is one of many representations of the Night Journey that emerged within Persian miniature painting.



Visual Source 11.3 The Night Journey of Muhammad (© British Library Board)

- How do you understand the halo of fire that surrounds the Prophet's image in the center of the painting? Notice also that a similar halo envelops the head of the angel Gabriel (in blue dress), who is leading Muhammad heavenward.
- What significance might attach to the female head of the buraq?

- What are the accompanying angels offering to the Prophet during his journey?
  - What meaning might the artist seek to convey by the image of the world below and slightly to the right of the buraq?
  - The willingness of Persian artists to represent Muhammad bodily contrasts sharply with a general Arab unwillingness to do so. Nonetheless, the Prophet's face is not shown. Why do you think Muslim artists have often been reluctant to represent the Prophet in human form? How might veiling his face address these concerns? Do you see any similarity with the controversy over icons in the Christian tradition? (See pp. 466–71.)
  - Consider finally the larger meaning of the Night Journey within Islam. What is the significance of Muhammad's encounter with earlier prophets such as Abraham, Moses, and Jesus? How does the story explain the second of the five pillars of Islam, the requirement to pray five times a day?
  - Review the discussion of the Sufi tradition of Islam on pages 485–86. How might Sufis have understood the Night Journey? How might it serve as a metaphor for the spiritual journey?
- 

## Using the Evidence: Islamic Civilization in Persian Miniature Paintings

1. **Noticing point of view:** Consider these three visual sources together with the six other photos within the chapter (pp. 475, 477, 484, 487, 494, and 498). What general impression of the Islamic world emerges? What point of view, if any, is reflected in the selection of visual sources? Do they convey a positive, negative, or neutral impression of Islamic civilization? Explain your answer with specific references to the various images.
2. **Making comparisons:** Compare these visual sources to the icons in the Visual Sources section in Chapter 10 (pp. 466–71) in terms of purpose, artistic style, and themes. In particular, how does Visual Source 11.3 and the story of the Night Journey compare to the *Ladder of Divine Ascent* (Visual Source 10.3, p. 470) as artistic representations of the spiritual quest?
3. **Using images as evidence:** In what ways can historians use these visual sources? What insights about Islamic civilization can we derive from them? How should consideration of artist/author, audience, and purpose affect historians' assessment of these paintings?





# Pastoral Peoples on the Global Stage

## The Mongol Moment

1200–1500



### Looking Back and Looking Around: The Long History of Pastoral Nomads

The World of Pastoral Societies  
The Xiongnu: An Early  
Nomadic Empire  
The Arabs and the Turks  
The Masai of East Africa

### Breakout: The Mongol Empire

From Temujin to Chinggis Khan:  
The Rise of the Mongol Empire  
Explaining the Mongol Moment

### Encountering the Mongols:

Comparing Three Cases  
China and the Mongols  
Persia and the Mongols  
Russia and the Mongols

### The Mongol Empire as a Eurasian Network

Toward a World Economy  
Diplomacy on a Eurasian Scale  
Cultural Exchange in the  
Mongol Realm  
The Plague: A Eurasian Pandemic

### Reflections: Changing Images of Nomadic Peoples

### Considering the Evidence

Documents: Perspectives on  
the Mongols  
Visual Sources: The Black Death  
and Religion in Western Europe

In 1937, the great Mongol warrior Chinggis Khan lost his soul, some seven centuries after his death. According to Mongol tradition, a warrior's soul was contained in his spirit banner, consisting of strands of hair from his best horses attached to a spear. For many centuries, Chinggis Khan's spirit banner had been housed in a Buddhist monastery in central Mongolia, where lamas (religious teachers) had tended it.<sup>1</sup> But in the 1930s, Mongolia, then under communist control and heavily dominated by Stalin's Soviet Union, launched a brutal anti-religious campaign that destroyed many monasteries and executed some 2,000 monks. In the confusion that ensued, Chinggis Khan's spirit banner, and thus his soul, disappeared.

By the end of the twentieth century, as communism faded away, the memory of Chinggis Khan, if not his spirit banner, made a remarkable comeback in the land of his birth. Vodka, cigarettes, a chocolate bar, two brands of beer, the country's best rock band, and the central square of the capital city all bore his name, while his picture appeared on Mongolia's stamps and money. Rural young people on horseback sang songs in his honor, and their counterparts in urban Internet cafés constructed Web sites to celebrate his achievements. The country organized elaborate celebrations in 2006 to mark the 800th anniversary of his founding of the Mongol Empire.

ALL OF THIS IS A REMINDER OF THE ENORMOUS AND SURPRISING role that the Mongols played in the Eurasian world of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and of the continuing echoes of that long-vanished empire. More generally, the story of the Mongols serves as

**Chinggis Khan at Prayer:** This sixteenth-century Indian painting shows Chinggis Khan at prayer in the midst of battle. He is perhaps praying to Tengri, the great sky god, on whom the Mongol conqueror based his power. (Werner Forman/Art Resource, NY)

a useful corrective to the almost exclusive focus that historians often devote to agricultural peoples and their civilizations, for the Mongols, and many other such peoples, were pastoral nomads who disdained farming while centering their economic lives around their herds of animals. Normally they did not construct elaborate cities, enduring empires, or monumental works of art, architecture, and written literature. Nonetheless, they left an indelible mark on the historical development of the entire Afro-Eurasian hemisphere, and particularly on the agricultural civilizations with which they so often interacted.

## Looking Back and Looking Around: The Long History of Pastoral Nomads

The “revolution of domestication,” beginning around 11,500 years ago, involved both plants and animals. People living in more favored environments were able to combine farming with animal husbandry and on this economic foundation generated powerful and impressive civilizations with substantial populations. But on the arid margins of agricultural lands, where productive farming was difficult or impossible, an alternative kind of food-producing economy emerged around 4000 B.C.E., focused on the raising of livestock. Peoples practicing such an economy learned to use the milk, blood, wool, hides, and meat of their animals to occupy lands that could not support agricultural societies. Some of those animals also provided new baggage and transportation possibilities. Horses, camels, goats, sheep, cattle, yaks, and reindeer were the primary animals that separately, or in some combination, enabled the construction of pastoral or herding societies. Such societies took shape in the vast grasslands of inner Eurasia and sub-Saharan Africa, in the Arabian and Saharan deserts, in the subarctic regions of the Northern Hemisphere, and in the high plateau of Tibet. Pastoralism emerged only in the Afro-Eurasian world, for in the Americas the absence of large animals that could be domesticated precluded a herding economy. But where such animals existed, their domestication shaped unique societies adapted to diverse environments.

### *The World of Pastoral Societies*

#### ■ Comparison

In what ways did pastoral societies differ from their agricultural counterparts?

Despite their many differences, pastoral societies shared several important features that distinguished them from settled agricultural communities and civilizations. Pastoral societies' generally less productive economies and their need for large grazing areas meant that they supported far smaller populations than did agricultural societies. People generally lived in small and widely scattered encampments of related kinfolk rather than in the villages, towns, and cities characteristic of agrarian civilizations. Beyond the family unit, pastoral peoples organized themselves in kinship-based groups or clans that claimed a common ancestry, usually through the male line. Related clans might on occasion come together as a tribe, which could also absorb unrelated people into the community. Although their values stressed equality and individual achievement, in some pastoral societies clans were ranked as noble or commoner,

## Snapshot Varieties of Pastoral Societies<sup>2</sup>

Region and Peoples	Primary Animals	Features
Inner Eurasian steppes (Xiongnu, Yuezhi, Turks, Uighurs, Mongols, Huns, Kipchaks)	Horses; also sheep, goats, cattle, Bactrian (two-humped) camel	Domestication of horse by 4000 B.C.E.; horseback riding by 1000 B.C.E.; site of largest nomadic empires
Southwestern and Central Asia (Seljuks, Ghaznavids, Mongol Il-khans, Uzbeks, Ottomans)	Sheep and goats; used horses, camels, and donkeys for transport	Close economic relationship with neighboring towns; provided meat, wool, milk products, and hides in exchange for grain and manufactured goods
Arabian and Saharan deserts (Bedouin Arabs, Berbers, Tuareg)	Dromedary (one-humped) camel; sometimes sheep	Camel caravans made possible long-distance trade; camel-mounted warriors central to early Arab/Islamic expansion
Grasslands of sub-Saharan Africa (Fulbe, Nuer, Turkana, Masai)	Cattle; also sheep and goats	Cattle were a chief form of wealth and central to ritual life; little interaction with wider world until nineteenth century
Subarctic Eurasia (Lapps)	Reindeer	Reindeer domesticated only since 1500 C.E.; little impact on world history
Tibetan plateau (Tibetans)	Yaks; also sheep, cashmere goats, some cattle	Tibetans supplied yaks as baggage animal for overland caravan trade; exchanged wool, skins, and milk with valley villagers and received barley in return

and considerable differences emerged between wealthy aristocrats owning large flocks of animals and poor herders. Many pastoral societies held slaves as well.

Furthermore, nomadic societies generally offered women a higher status, fewer restrictions, and a greater role in public life than their sisters in agricultural civilizations enjoyed. Everywhere women were involved in productive labor as well as having domestic responsibility for food and children. The care of smaller animals such as sheep and goats usually fell to women, although only rarely did women own or control their own livestock. Among the Mongols, the remarriage of widows carried none of the negative connotations that it did among the Chinese, and women could initiate divorce. Mongol women frequently served as political advisers and were active

in military affairs as well. A thirteenth-century European visitor, the Franciscan friar Giovanni DiPlano Carpini, recorded his impressions of Mongol women:

Girls and women ride and gallop as skillfully as men. We even saw them carrying quivers and bows, and the women can ride horses for as long as the men; they have shorter stirrups, handle horses very well, and mind all the property. [Mongol] women make everything: skin clothes, shoes, leggings, and everything made of leather. They drive carts and repair them, they load camels, and are quick and vigorous in all their tasks. They all wear trousers, and some of them shoot just like men.<sup>3</sup>

(See Document 12.5, pp. 557–59, for more on Mongol women.)

### ■ Connection

In what ways did pastoral societies interact with their agricultural neighbors?

Certainly literate observers from adjacent civilizations noticed and clearly disapproved of the freedom granted to pastoral women. Ancient Greek writers thought that the pastoralists with whom they were familiar were “women governed.” To Han Kuan, a Chinese Confucian scholar in the first century B.C.E., China’s northern nomadic neighbors “[made] no distinction between men and women.”<sup>4</sup>

The most characteristic feature of pastoral societies was their mobility. As people frequently on the move, they are often referred to as nomads because they shifted their herds in regular patterns. These movements were far from aimless wanderings, as popular images often portray them, but rather sought to systematically follow the seasonal changes in vegetation and water supply. It was a life largely dictated by local environmental conditions and based on turning grass, which people cannot eat, into usable food and energy. Nor were nomads homeless; they took their homes, often elaborate felt tents, with them. According to a prominent scholar of pastoral life, “They know where they are going and why.”<sup>5</sup>

Even though nomadic pastoralists represented an alternative to the agricultural way of life that they disdained, they were almost always deeply connected to, and often dependent on, their agricultural neighbors. Few nomadic peoples could live solely from the products of their animals, and most of them actively sought access to

the foodstuffs, manufactured goods, and luxury items available from the urban workshops and farming communities of nearby civilizations. Particularly among the nomadic peoples of inner Eurasia, this desire for the fruits of civilization periodically stimulated the creation of tribal confederations or nomadic states that could more effectively deal with the powerful agricultural societies on their borders. The Mongol Empire of the thirteenth century was but the most recent and largest in a long line of such efforts, dating back to the first millennium B.C.E.

### The Scythians

An ancient horse-riding nomadic people during the classical era, the Scythians occupied a region in present-day Kazakhstan and southern Russia. Their pastoral way of life is apparent in this detail from an exquisite gold necklace from the fourth century B.C.E. (Private Collection/Photo Boltin Picture Library/The Bridgeman Art Library)



Constructing a large state among nomadic pastoralists was no easy task. Such societies generally lacked the wealth needed to pay for the professional armies and bureaucracies that everywhere sustained the states and empires of agricultural civilizations. And the fierce independence of widely dispersed pastoral clans and tribes as well as their internal rivalries made any enduring political unity difficult to achieve. Nonetheless, charismatic leaders, such as Chinggis Khan, were periodically able to weld together a series of tribal alliances that for a time became powerful states. In doing so, they often employed the device of “fictive kinship,” designating allies as blood relatives and treating them with a corresponding respect.

Despite their limited populations, such states had certain military advantages in confronting larger and more densely populated civilizations. They could draw upon the horseback-riding and hunting skills of virtually the entire male population and some women as well. Easily transferred to the role of warrior, these skills, which were practiced from early childhood, were an integral part of pastoral life. But what sustained nomadic states was their ability to extract wealth, through raiding, trading, or extortion, from agricultural civilizations such as China, Persia, and Byzantium. As long as that wealth flowed into pastoral states, rulers could maintain the fragile alliances among fractious clans and tribes. When it was interrupted, however, those states often fragmented.

Pastoral nomads interacted with their agricultural neighbors not only economically and militarily but also culturally as they “became acquainted with and tried on for size all the world and universal religions.”<sup>6</sup> At one time or another, Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, and several forms of Christianity all found a home somewhere among the nomadic peoples of inner Eurasia. So did Manichaeism, a religious tradition born in third-century Persia and combining elements of Zoroastrian, Christian, and Buddhist practice. (See Visual Sources: Art, Religion, and Cultural Exchange in Central Asia, pp. 367–77 in Chapter 8, for cultural exchanges involving Central Asian nomadic peoples.) Usually conversion was a top-down process as nomadic elites and rulers adopted a foreign religion for political purposes, sometimes changing religious allegiance as circumstances altered. Nomadic peoples, in short, did not inhabit a world totally apart from their agricultural and civilized neighbors.

Surely the most fundamental contribution of pastoralists to the larger human story was their mastery of environments unsuitable for agriculture. Through the creative use of their animals, they brought a version of the food-producing revolution and a substantial human presence to the arid grasslands and desert regions of Afro-Eurasia. As the pastoral peoples of the Inner Asian steppes learned the art of horseback riding, by roughly 1000 B.C.E., their societies changed dramatically. Now they could accumulate and tend larger herds of horses, sheep, and goats and move more rapidly over a much wider territory. New technologies, invented or adapted by pastoral societies, added to the mastery of their environment and spread widely across the Eurasian steppes, creating something of a common culture in this vast region. These innovations included complex horse harnesses, saddles with iron stirrups, a small compound bow that could be fired from horseback, various forms of armor, and new kinds of swords. Agricultural peoples were amazed at the centrality of the



The Xiongnu Confederacy

### ■ Significance

In what ways did the Xiongnu, Arabs, and Turks make an impact on world history?

horse in pastoral life. As one observer noted, “From their horses, by day and night every one of that [nomadic] nation buys and sells, eats and drinks, and bowed over the narrow neck of the animal relaxes in a sleep so deep as to be accompanied by many dreams.”<sup>7</sup>

## *The Xiongnu: An Early Nomadic Empire*

What enabled pastoral peoples to make their most visible entry onto the stage of world history was the military potential of horse-back riding, and of camel riding somewhat later. Their mastery of

mounted warfare made possible a long but intermittent series of nomadic empires across the steppes of inner Eurasia and elsewhere. For 2,000 years, those states played a major role in Eurasian history and represented a standing challenge to and influence upon the agrarian civilizations on their borders.

During the classical era, one such large-scale nomadic empire was associated with the people known as the Xiongnu, who lived in the Mongolian steppes north of China (see Chapter 9). Provoked by Chinese penetration of their territory, the Xiongnu in the third and second centuries B.C.E. created a huge military confederacy that stretched from Manchuria deep into Central Asia. Under the charismatic leadership of Modun (reigned 210–174 B.C.E.), the Xiongnu Empire effected a revolution in nomadic life. Earlier fragmented and egalitarian societies were now transformed into a far more centralized and hierarchical political system in which power was concentrated in a divinely sanctioned ruler and differences between “junior” and “senior” clans became more prominent. “All the people who draw the bow have now become one family,” declared Modun. Tribute, exacted from other nomadic peoples and from China itself, sustained the Xiongnu Empire and forced the Han dynasty emperor Wen to acknowledge, unhappily, the equality of people he regarded as barbarians. “Our two great nations,” he declared, no doubt reluctantly, “the Han and the Xiongnu, stand side by side.”<sup>8</sup>

Although it subsequently disintegrated under sustained Chinese counterattacks, the Xiongnu Empire created a model that later Turkic and Mongol empires emulated. Even without a powerful state, various nomadic or seminomadic peoples played a role in the collapse of already weakened classical Chinese and Roman empires and the subsequent rebuilding of those civilizations (see Chapter 4).

## *The Arabs and the Turks*

It was during the era of third-wave civilizations (500–1500 C.E.) that nomadic peoples made their most significant mark on the larger canvas of world history. Arabs, Berbers, Turks, and Mongols—all of them of nomadic origin—created the largest and most influential empires of that postclassical millennium. The most expansive religious tradition of the era, Islam, derived from a largely nomadic people, the Arabs, and

was carried to new regions by another nomadic people, the Turks. In that millennium, most of the great civilizations of outer Eurasia—Byzantium, Persia, India, and China—had come under the control of previously nomadic people, at least for a time. But as pastoral nomads entered and shaped the arena of world history, they too were transformed by the experience.

The first and most dramatic of these nomadic incursions came from Arabs. In the Arabian Peninsula, the development of a reliable camel saddle somewhere between 500 and 100 B.C.E. enabled nomadic Bedouin (desert-dwelling) Arabs to fight effectively from atop their enormous beasts. With this new military advantage, they came to control the rich trade routes in incense running through Arabia. Even more important, these camel nomads served as the shock troops of Islamic expansion, providing many of the new religion's earliest followers and much of the military force that carved out the Arab Empire. Although intellectual and political leadership came from urban merchants and settled farming communities, the Arab Empire was in some respects a nomadic creation that subsequently became the foundation of a new and distinctive civilization.

Even as the pastoral Arabs encroached on the world of Eurasian civilizations from the south, Turkic-speaking nomads were making inroads from the north. Never a single people, various Turkic-speaking clans and tribes migrated from their homeland in Mongolia and southern Siberia generally westward and entered the historical record as creators of a series of nomadic empires between 552 and 965 C.E., most of them lasting little more than a century. Like the Xiongnu Empire, they were fragile alliances of various tribes headed by a supreme ruler known as a *kaghan*, who was supported by a faithful corps of soldiers called “wolves,” for the wolf was the mythical ancestor of Turkic peoples. From their base in the steppes, these Turkic states confronted the great civilizations to their south—China, Persia, Byzantium—alternately raiding them, allying with them against common enemies, trading with them, and extorting tribute payments from them. Turkic language and culture spread widely over much of Inner Asia, and elements of that culture entered the agrarian civilizations. In the courts of northern China, for example, yogurt thinned with water, a drink derived from the Turks, replaced for a time the traditional beverage of tea, and at least one Chinese poet wrote joyfully about the delights of snowy evenings in a felt tent.<sup>9</sup>

A major turning point in the history of the Turks occurred with their conversion to Islam between the tenth and fourteenth centuries. This extended process represented a major expansion of the faith and launched the Turks into a new role as the third major carrier of Islam, following the Arabs and the Persians. It also brought the Turks into an increasingly important position within the heartland of an established Islamic civilization as they migrated southward into the Middle East. There they served first as slave soldiers within the Abbasid caliphate, and then, as the caliphate declined, they increasingly took political and military power themselves. In the Seljuk Turkic Empire of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, centered in Persia and present-day Iraq, Turkic rulers began to claim the Muslim title of *sultan* (ruler)



rather than the Turkic *kaghan*. Although the Abbasid caliph remained the formal ruler, real power was exercised by Turkic sultans.

Not only did Turkic peoples become Muslims themselves, but they carried Islam to new areas as well. Their invasions of northern India solidly planted Islam in that ancient civilization. In Anatolia, formerly ruled by Christian Byzantium, they brought both Islam and a massive infusion of Turkic culture, language, and people, even as they created the Ottoman Empire, which by 1500 became one of the great powers of Eurasia (see pp. 584–86). In both places, Turkic dynasties governed and would continue to do so well into the modern era. Thus Turkic people, many of them at least, had transformed themselves from pastoral nomads to sedentary farmers, from creators of steppe empires to rulers of agrarian civilizations, and from polytheistic worshippers of their ancestors and various gods to followers and carriers of a monotheistic Islam.

### *The Masai of East Africa*

#### ■ Comparison

Did the history and society of the East African Masai people parallel that of Asian nomads?

In East African history as well, the relationship between nomads and settled farmers worked itself out over many centuries, although solid historical information in this case largely dates to after 1500. Unlike Inner Asia, no large states or chiefdoms developed among either agricultural or pastoral peoples in present-day Kenya and Tanzania. Instead the nomadic cattle-keeping Masai and their settled agricultural neighbors found another way to bind their people together beyond the ties of village and clan. Adolescent boys from a variety of villages or lineages were initiated together in a ritual that often included circumcision, an experience that produced a profound bond among them. This ceremony created an “age-set,” which then moved through a series of “age-grades” or ranks, from warrior through elder, during their lives. Such a system provided an alternative to the state as a means of mobilizing young men for military purposes, for integrating outsiders into the community, and for establishing a larger social identity. (See Document 2.2, pp. 71–73).

Sharp distinctions and strong views separated people practicing agricultural and pastoral ways of living. From the viewpoint of the Masai, who composed songs and poems in honor of their cattle, pastoralism was a vastly superior way of life, whereas farming was seen as demeaning and as destroying land that could be much better used for grazing. Farmers were fit only to provide beer, wives, and occasionally food for herding peoples. Conversely, agricultural peoples often saw the Masai as arrogant, aggressive, and lazy, stubbornly unwilling to engage in the hard work of cultivation or even to eat the products of the land.<sup>10</sup> Such views paralleled those that the Chinese and Xionghu held of one another.

But ways of life were hardly static in East Africa. Earlier in their history, the proudly pastoral Masai had in fact raised sorghum and millet, fully abandoning cultivation only in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as they

The Masai of East Africa



migrated southward from the upper Nile Valley into the more arid regions of central Kenya. Later several Masai groups returned to agriculture after bitter conflicts in the mid-nineteenth century drove them to the periphery of Masai territory. Furthermore, the Masai, while trumpeting the superiority of their culture, were altogether willing to admit others into its charmed circle, much like the Chinese in relation to surrounding barbarians. Outsiders could become Masai, and many did so by obtaining a herd of cattle, by joining a Masai age-set, by learning the language, or by giving a



woman in marriage to a Masai man and receiving “bride-wealth” in cattle in return.

The Masai were also dependent on those practicing other ways of life. Although they despised hunters as “poor people without cattle,” the Masai relied on them for animal skins, bows and arrows, shields, and, most of all, honey, which was required in their ritual ceremonies. They were even more involved with neighboring agricultural peoples. Despite a great deal of mutual raiding and warfare, that relationship also involved substantial economic exchange as women conducted frequent trade to supplement the diet of milk, meat, and blood derived from their cattle. Elaborate peace negotiations after periods of conflict, frequent intermarriage, and occasional military alliances against a common enemy also brought the Masai into close contact with nearby farmers, such as the Gikuyu. And in times of desperation owing to drought or disease, the Masai might find refuge with hunters or farmers with whom they had long-established relationships.<sup>11</sup>

The prestige and the military success of the Masai encouraged those agricultural societies to borrow elements of Masai culture, such as hairstyles, shield decorations, terms referring to cattle, and the name for their high god. Farming societies also adopted elements of Masai military organization, the long Masai spear, and the practice of drinking cow’s milk before battle.<sup>12</sup> Peaceful interaction and mutual dependence as well as conflict and hostility characterized the relationship of nomadic herders and settled farmers in East Africa, much as it did in Eurasia.

## Breakout: The Mongol Empire

Of all the pastoral peoples who took a turn on the stage of world history, the Mongols made the most stunning entry. Their thirteenth-century breakout from Mongolia gave rise to the largest land-based empire in all of human history, stretching from the Pacific coast of Asia to Eastern Europe (see Map 12.1). This empire joined

### The Masai

This contemporary Masai woman from Tanzania is milking goats while carrying a child on her back, in much the same fashion as her ancestors have done for centuries. (The Africa Image Library, photographersdirect.com. Photographer: Ariadne Van Zandbergen)



### Map 12.1 The Mongol Empire

Encompassing much of Eurasia, the Mongol Empire was divided into four khanates after the death of Chinggis Khan.

the nomadic peoples of the inner Eurasian steppes with the settled agricultural civilizations of outer Eurasia more extensively and more intimately than ever before. It also brought the major civilizations of Eurasia—Europe, China, and the Islamic world—into far more direct contact than in earlier times. Both the enormous destructiveness of the process and the networks of exchange and communication that it spawned were the work of the Mongols, numbering only about 700,000 people. It was another of history's unlikely twists.

For all of its size and fearsome reputation, the Mongol Empire left a surprisingly modest cultural imprint on the world it had briefly governed. Unlike the Arabs, the Mongols bequeathed to the world no new religion or civilization. Whereas the Islamic community offered a common religious home for all converts—conquerors and conquered alike—the Mongols never tried to spread their own faith among subject peoples. At the level of family life, that religion centered on rituals invoking the

ancestors, which were performed around the hearth. Rulers sometimes consulted religious specialists, known as *shamans*, who might predict the future, offer sacrifices, and communicate with the spirit world, and particularly with Tengri, the supreme sky god of the Mongols. There was little in this tradition to attract outsiders, and in any event the Mongols proved uninterested in religious imperialism.

The Mongols offered the majority of those they conquered little more than the status of defeated, subordinate, and exploited people, although people with skills were put to work in ways useful to Mongol authorities. Unlike the Turks, whose languages and culture flourish today in many places far from the Turkic homeland, Mongol culture remains confined largely to Mongolia. Furthermore, the Mongol Empire, following in the tradition of Xiongnu and Turkic state building, proved to be “the last, spectacular bloom of pastoral power in Inner Eurasia.”<sup>13</sup> Some Mongols themselves became absorbed into the settled societies they conquered. After the decline and disintegration of the Mongol Empire, the tide turned against the pastoralists of inner Eurasia, who were increasingly swallowed up in the expanding Russian or Chinese empires. Nonetheless, while it lasted and for a few centuries thereafter, the Mongol Empire exercised an enormous impact throughout the entire Eurasian world.

### Snapshot Key Moments in Mongol History

	Birth of Temujin	1162
	Temujin gains title of Chinggis Khan (“universal ruler”)	1206
	Reign of Chinggis Khan	1206–1227
	Beginning of Mongol conquests	1209
	Conquest of China	1209–1279
	Initial assault on Persia	1219–1221
	Conquest of Russia	1237–1240
	Attacks in Eastern Europe; then withdrawal	1241–1242
	Mongol seizure of Baghdad	1258
	Khubilai Khan as ruler of China	1271–1294
	Failed Mongol attacks on Japan	1274, 1281
	Conversion of Il-khan Ghazan to Islam	1295
	High point of plague in Europe	1348–1350
	Ming dynasty established; end of Mongol rule in China	1368
	End of “Mongol yoke” in Russia; Moscow emerges as center of a Russian state	1480

## *From Temujin to Chinggis Khan: The Rise of the Mongol Empire*

### ■ Description

Identify the major steps in the rise of the Mongol Empire.

World historians are prone to focus attention on large-scale and long-term processes of change in explaining “what happened in history,” but in understanding the rise of the Mongol Empire, most scholars have found themselves forced to look closely at the role of a single individual—Temujin (1162–1227), later known as Chinggis Khan (universal ruler). The twelfth-century world into which he was born found the Mongols an unstable and fractious collection of tribes and clans, much reduced from a somewhat earlier and more powerful position in the shifting nomadic alliances in what is now Mongolia. “Everyone was feuding,” declared a leading Mongol shaman. “Rather than sleep, they robbed each other of their possessions. . . . There was no respite, only battle. There was no affection, only mutual slaughter.”<sup>14</sup>

The early life of Temujin showed few signs of a prominent future. The boy’s father had been a minor chieftain of a noble clan, but he was murdered by tribal rivals before Temujin turned ten, and the family was soon deserted by other members of the clan. As social outcasts, Temujin’s small family, headed by his resourceful mother, was forced to live by hunting, fishing, and gathering wild foods. Without livestock, they had fallen to the lowest level of nomadic life. In these desperate circumstances, Temujin’s remarkable character came into play. His personal magnetism and courage and his inclination to rely on trusted friends rather than ties of kinship allowed him to build up a small following and to ally with a more powerful tribal leader. This alliance received a boost from Chinese patrons, who were always eager to keep the nomads divided. Military victory over a rival tribe resulted in Temujin’s recognition as a chief in his own right with a growing band of followers.

Temujin’s rise to power amid the complex tribal politics of Mongolia was a surprise to everyone. It took place among shifting alliances and betrayals, a mounting string of military victories, the indecisiveness of his enemies, a reputation as a leader generous to friends and ruthless to enemies, and the incorporation of warriors from defeated tribes into his own forces. In 1206, a Mongol tribal assembly recognized Temujin as Chinggis Khan, supreme leader of a now unified Great Mongol Nation (see Document 12.1, pp. 550–52). It was a remarkable achievement, but one little noticed beyond the highland steppes of Mongolia. That would soon change.

The unification of the Mongol tribes raised an obvious question: What was Chinggis Khan to do with the powerful army he had assembled? Without a common task, the new and fragile unity of the Mongols would surely dissolve into quarrels and chaos; and without external resources to reward his followers, Chinggis Khan would be hard-pressed to maintain his supreme position. Both considerations pointed in a single direction—expansion, particularly toward China, long a source of great wealth for nomadic peoples.<sup>15</sup>

In 1209, the first major attack on the settled agricultural societies south of Mongolia set in motion half a century of a Mongol world war, a series of military campaigns, massive killing, and empire building without precedent in world history. In the process, Chinggis Khan, followed by his sons and grandsons (Ogodei, Mongke,

and Khubilai), constructed an empire that contained China, Korea, Central Asia, Russia, much of the Islamic Middle East, and parts of Eastern Europe (see Map 12.1). “In a flash,” wrote a recent scholar, “the Mongol warriors would defeat every army, capture every fort, and bring down the walls of every city they encountered. Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus would soon kneel before the dusty boots of illiterate young Mongol horsemen.”<sup>16</sup>

Various setbacks—the Mongols’ withdrawal from Eastern Europe (1242), their defeat at Ain Jalut in Palestine at the hands of Egyptian forces (1260), the failure of their invasion of Japan owing to two typhoons (1274, 1281), and the difficulty of penetrating the tropical jungles of Southeast Asia—marked the outer limits of the Mongol Empire. But what an empire it was! How could a Mongol confederation, with a total population of less than 1 million people and few resources beyond their livestock, assemble an imperial structure of such staggering transcontinental dimensions?

### *Explaining the Mongol Moment*

Like the Roman Empire but far more rapidly, the Mongol Empire grew of its own momentum without any grand scheme or blueprint for world conquest. Each fresh victory brought new resources for making war and new threats or insecurities that seemed to require further expansion. As the empire took shape and certainly by the end of his life, Chinggis Khan had come to see his career in terms of a universal mission. “I have accomplished a great work,” he declared, “uniting the whole world in one empire.”<sup>17</sup> Thus the Mongol Empire acquired an ideology in the course of its construction.

What made this “great work” possible? The odds seemed overwhelming, for China alone, after all, outnumbered the Mongols 100 to 1 and possessed incomparably greater resources. Nor did the Mongols enjoy any technological superiority over their many adversaries. They did, however, enjoy the luck of good timing, for China was divided, having already lost control of its northern territory to the nomadic Jurchen people, while the decrepit Abbasid caliphate, once the center of the Islamic world, had shrunk to a fraction of its earlier size. But clearly, the key to the Mongols’ success lay in their army. According to one scholar, “Mongol armies were simply better led, organized, and disciplined than those of their opponents.”<sup>18</sup> In an effort to diminish a divisive tribalism, Chinggis Khan reorganized the entire social structure of the Mongols into military units of 10, 100, 1,000, and 10,000 warriors, an arrangement that allowed for effective command and control. Conquered tribes especially were broken up and their members scattered among these new units, which enrolled virtually all nomadic men and supplied the cavalry forces of Mongol armies. A highly prestigious imperial guard, also recruited across tribal lines, marked the further decline of the old tribalism as a social revolution, imposed from above by Chinggis Khan, reshaped Mongol society.

An impressive discipline and loyalty to their leaders characterized Mongol military forces, and discipline was reinforced by the provision that should any members of a unit desert in battle, all were subject to the death penalty. More positively, loyalty

#### ■ Explanation

What accounts for the political and military success of the Mongols?

was cemented by the leaders' willingness to share the hardships of their men. "I eat the same food and am dressed in the same rags as my humble herdsmen," wrote Chinggis Khan. "I am always in the forefront, and in battle I am never at the rear."<sup>19</sup> (See Document 12.2, pp. 553–54.) Such discipline and loyalty made possible the elaborate tactics of encirclement, retreat, and deception that proved decisive in many a battle. Furthermore, the enormous flow of wealth from conquered civilizations benefited all Mongols, though not equally. Even ordinary Mongols could now dress in linens and silks rather than hides and felt, could own slaves derived from the many prisoners of war, and had far greater opportunities to improve their social position in a constantly expanding empire.

To compensate for their own small population, the Mongols incorporated huge numbers of conquered peoples into their military forces. "People who lived in felt tents"—mostly Mongol and Turkic nomads—were conscripted en masse into the cavalry units of the Mongol army, while settled agricultural peoples supplied the infantry and artillery forces. As the Mongols penetrated major civilizations, with their walled cities and elaborate fortifications, they quickly acquired Chinese techniques and technology of siege warfare. Some 1,000 Chinese artillery crews, for example, took part in the Mongol invasion of distant Persia. Beyond military recruitment, Mongols demanded that their conquered people serve as laborers, building roads and bridges and ferrying supplies over long distances. Artisans, craftsmen, and skilled people generally were carefully identified, spared from massacre, and often sent to distant regions of the empire where their services were required.

### A Mongol Warrior

Horseback-riding skills, honed in herding animals and adapted to military purposes, were central to Mongol conquests, as illustrated in this Ming-dynasty Chinese painting of a mounted Mongol archer. (Victoria and Albert Museum, London/V&A Images)



A French goldsmith, captured by Mongol forces in Hungary, wound up as a slave in the Mongol capital of Karakorum, where he constructed an elaborate silver fountain that dispensed wine and other intoxicating drinks.

A further element in the military effectiveness of Mongol forces lay in a growing reputation for a ruthless brutality and utter destructiveness. Chinggis Khan's policy was clear: "whoever submits shall be spared, but those who resist, they shall be destroyed with their wives, children and dependents . . . so that the others who hear and see should fear and not act the same."<sup>20</sup> The Central Asian kingdom of Khwarizm, whose ruler had greatly offended Chinggis Khan by murdering and mutilating Mongol envoys and merchants, was among the first, but by no means the last, to feel the full

effects of Mongol terror. City after city was utterly destroyed, and enemy soldiers were passed out in lots to Mongol troops for execution, while women and skilled craftsmen were enslaved. Unskilled civilians served as human shields for attacks on the next city or were used as human fill in the moats surrounding those cities.

One scholar explained such policies in this way: “Extremely conscious of their small numbers and fearful of rebellion, Chinggis often chose to annihilate a region’s entire population, if it appeared too troublesome to govern.”<sup>21</sup> These policies also served as a form of psychological warfare, a practical inducement to surrender for those who knew of the Mongol terror. Historians continue to debate the extent and uniqueness of the Mongols’ brutality, but their reputation for unwavering harshness proved a military asset.

Underlying the purely military dimensions of the Mongols’ success was an impressive ability to mobilize both the human and material resources of their growing empire. Elaborate census taking allowed Mongol leaders to know what was available to them and made possible the systematic taxation of conquered people. An effective system of relay stations, about a day’s ride apart, provided rapid communication across the empire and fostered trade as well. Marco Polo, the Venetian trader who traveled through Mongol domains in the thirteenth century, claimed that the Mongols maintained some 10,000 such stations, together with 200,000 horses available to authorized users. The beginnings of a centralized bureaucracy with various specialized offices took shape in the new capital of Karakorum. There scribes translated official decrees into the various languages of the empire, such as Persian, Uighur, Chinese, and Tibetan.

Other policies appealed to various groups among the conquered peoples of the empire. Interested in fostering commerce, Mongol rulers often offered merchants 10 percent or more above their asking price and allowed them the free use of the relay stations for transporting their goods. In administering the conquered regions, Mongols held the highest decision-making posts, but Chinese and Muslim officials held many advisory and lower-level positions in China and Persia respectively. In religious matters, the Mongols welcomed and supported many religious traditions—Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, Daoist—as long as they did not become the focus of political opposition. This policy of religious toleration allowed Muslims to seek converts among Mongol troops and afforded Christians much greater freedom than they had enjoyed under Muslim rule.<sup>22</sup> Toward the end of his life and apparently feeling his approaching death, Chinggis Khan himself summoned a famous Daoist master from China and begged him to “communicate to me the means of preserving life.” One of his successors, Mongke, arranged a debate among representatives of several religious faiths, after which he concluded: “Just as God gave different fingers to the hand, so has He given different ways to men.”<sup>23</sup> Such economic, administrative, and religious policies provided some benefits and a place within the empire—albeit subordinate—for many of its conquered peoples.



## Encountering the Mongols: Comparing Three Cases

The Mongol moment in world history represented an enormous cultural encounter between nomadic pastoralists and the settled civilizations of Eurasia. Differences among those civilizations—Confucian China, Muslim Persia, Christian Russia—ensured considerable diversity as this encounter unfolded across a vast realm. The process of conquest, the length and nature of Mongol rule, the impact on local people, and the extent of Mongol assimilation into the cultures of the conquered—all this and more varied considerably across the Eurasian domains of the empire. The experiences of China, Persia, and Russia provide brief glimpses into several expressions of this massive clash of cultures.

### *China and the Mongols*

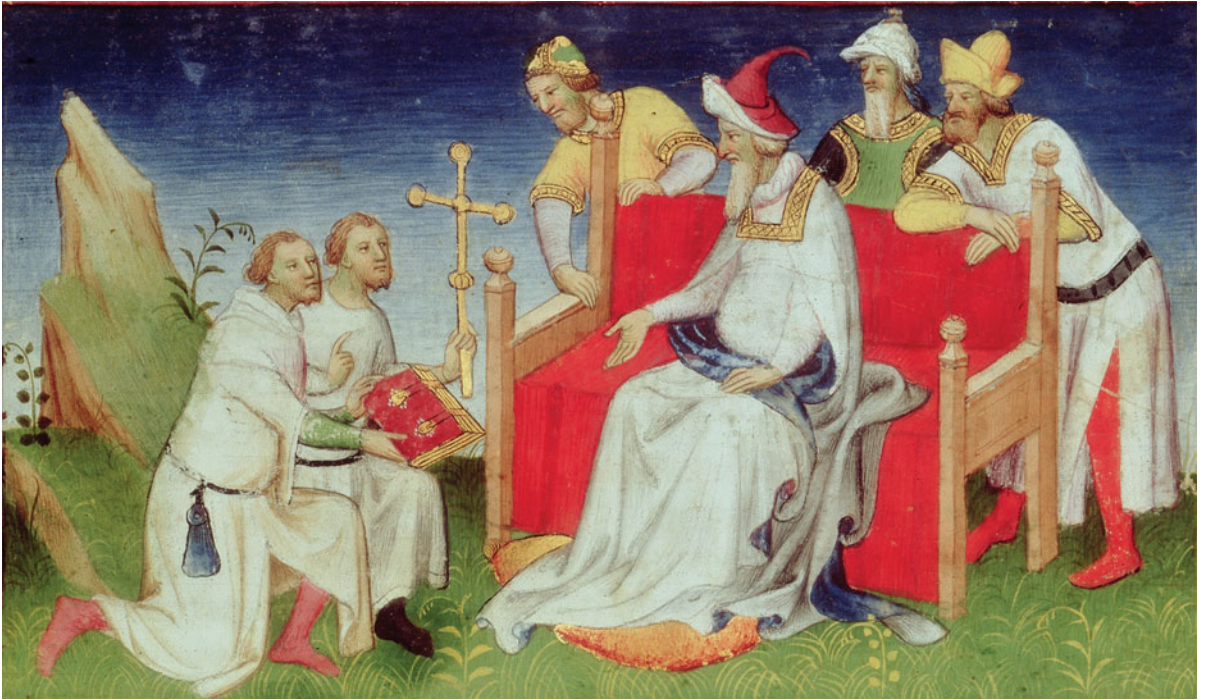
#### ■ Change

How did Mongol rule change China? In what ways were the Mongols changed by China?

Long the primary target for nomadic steppe-dwellers in search of agrarian wealth, China proved the most difficult and extended of the Mongols' many conquests, lasting some seventy years, from 1209 to 1279. The invasion began in northern China, which had been ruled for several centuries by various dynasties of nomadic origin, and was characterized by destruction and plunder on a massive scale. Southern China, under the control of the native Song dynasty, was a different story, for there the Mongols were far less violent and more concerned to accommodate the local population. Landowners, for example, were guaranteed their estates in exchange for their support or at least their neutrality. By whatever methods, the outcome was the unification of a divided China, a treasured ideal among educated Chinese. This achievement persuaded many of them that the Mongols had indeed been granted the Mandate of Heaven and, despite their foreign origins, were legitimate rulers. (See Document 12.4, pp. 555–57, for a positive Chinese view of their Mongol rulers.)

Having acquired China, what were the Mongols to do with it? One possibility, apparently considered by the Great Khan Ögödei in the 1230s, was to exterminate everyone in northern China and turn the country into pastureland for Mongol herds. That suggestion, fortunately, was rejected in favor of extracting as much wealth as possible from the country's advanced civilization. Doing so meant some accommodation to Chinese culture and ways of governing, for the Mongols had no experience with the operation of a complex agrarian society.

That accommodation took many forms. The Mongols made use of Chinese administrative practices, techniques of taxation, and their postal system. They gave themselves a Chinese dynastic title, the Yuan, suggesting a new beginning in Chinese history. They transferred their capital from Karakorum in Mongolia to what is now Beijing, building a wholly new capital city there known as Khanbalik, the "city of the khan." Thus the Mongols were now rooting themselves solidly on the soil of a highly sophisticated civilization, well removed from their homeland on the steppes.



Khubilai Khan, the grandson of Chinggis Khan and China's Mongol ruler from 1271 to 1294, ordered a set of Chinese-style ancestral tablets to honor his ancestors and posthumously awarded them Chinese names. Many of his policies evoked the values of a benevolent Chinese emperor as he improved roads, built canals, lowered some taxes, patronized scholars and artists, limited the death penalty and torture, supported peasant agriculture, and prohibited Mongols from grazing their animals on peasants' farmland. Mongol khans also made use of traditional Confucian rituals, supported the building of some Daoist temples, and were particularly attracted to a Tibetan form of Buddhism, which returned the favor with strong political support for the invaders.

Despite these accommodations, Mongol rule was still harsh, exploitative, foreign, and resented. The Mongols did not become Chinese, nor did they accommodate every aspect of Chinese culture. Deep inside the new capital, the royal family and court could continue to experience something of steppe life. There, animals roamed freely in large open areas, planted with steppe grass. Many of the Mongol elite much preferred to live, eat, sleep, and give birth in the traditional tents that sprouted everywhere. In administering the country, the Mongols largely ignored the traditional Chinese examination system and relied heavily on foreigners, particularly Muslims from Central Asia and the Middle East, to serve as officials, while keeping the top decision-making posts for themselves. Few Mongols learned Chinese, and Mongol

#### Marco Polo and Khubilai Khan

In ruling China, the Mongols employed in high positions a number of Muslims and a few Europeans, such as Marco Polo, shown here kneeling before Khubilai Khan in a painting from the fifteenth century. (Ms 2810 f.5, Nicolo and Marco Polo before the Great Khan [vellum], Boucicaud Master, [fl. 1390–1430, and workshop]/Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, France/The Bridgeman Art Library)

law discriminated against the Chinese, reserving for them the most severe punishments. In social life, the Mongols forbade intermarriage and prohibited Chinese scholars from learning the Mongol script. Mongol women never adopted foot binding and scandalized the Chinese by mixing freely with men at official gatherings and riding to the hunt with their husbands. Furthermore, the Mongols honored and supported merchants and artisans far more than Confucian bureaucrats had been inclined to do.

However one assesses Mongol rule in China, it was brief, lasting little more than a century. By the mid-fourteenth century, intense factionalism among the Mongols, rapidly rising prices, furious epidemics of the plague, and growing peasant rebellions combined to force the Mongols out of China. By 1368, rebel forces had triumphed, and thousands of Mongols returned to their homeland in the steppes. For several centuries, they remained a periodic threat to China, but during the Ming dynasty that followed, the memory of their often brutal and alien rule stimulated a renewed commitment to Confucian values and practices and an effort to wipe out all traces of the Mongols' impact.

### *Persia and the Mongols*

#### ■ Comparison

How was Mongol rule in Persia different from that in China?

A second great civilization conquered by the Mongols was that of an Islamic Persia. There the Mongol takeover was far more abrupt than the extended process of conquest in China. A first invasion (1219–1221), led by Chinggis Khan himself, was followed thirty years later by a second assault (1251–1258) under his grandson Hulegu, who became the first *il-khan* (subordinate khan) of Persia. More destructive than the conquest of Song dynasty China, the Mongol offensive against Persia and Iraq had no precedent in their history, although Persia had been repeatedly attacked, from the invasion of Alexander the Great to that of the Arabs. The most recent incursion had featured Turkic peoples, but they had been Muslims, recently converted, small in number, and seeking only acceptance within the Islamic world. The Mongols, however, were infidels in Muslim eyes, and their stunning victory was a profound shock to people accustomed to viewing history as the progressive expansion of Islamic rule. Furthermore, Mongol military victory brought in its wake a degree of ferocity and slaughter that simply had no parallel in Persian experience. The Persian historian Juwayni described it in fearful terms:

Every town and every village has been several times subjected to pillage and massacre and has suffered this confusion for years so that even though there be generation and increase until the Resurrection the population will not attain to a tenth part of what it was before.<sup>24</sup>

The sacking of Baghdad in 1258, which put an end to the Abbasid caliphate, was accompanied by the massacre of more than 200,000 people, according to Hulegu himself.

Beyond this human catastrophe lay the damage to Persian and Iraqi agriculture and to those who tilled the soil. Heavy taxes, sometimes collected twenty or thirty times a year and often under torture or whipping, pushed large numbers of peasants off their land. Furthermore, the in-migration of nomadic Mongols, together with their immense herds of sheep and goats, turned much agricultural land into pasture and sometimes into desert. In both cases, a fragile system of underground water channels that provided irrigation to the fields was neglected, and much good agricultural land was reduced to waste. Some sectors of the Persian economy gained, however. Wine production increased because the Mongols were fond of alcohol, and the Persian silk industry benefited from close contact with a Mongol-ruled China. In general, though, even more so than in China, Mongol rule in Persia represented “disaster on a grand and unparalleled scale.”<sup>25</sup>

Nonetheless, the Mongols in Persia were themselves transformed far more than their counterparts in China. They made extensive use of the sophisticated Persian bureaucracy, leaving the greater part of government operations in Persian hands. During the reign of Ghazan (1295–1304), they made some efforts to repair the damage caused by earlier policies of ruthless exploitation, by rebuilding damaged cities and repairing neglected irrigation works. Most important, the Mongols who conquered Persia became Muslims, following the lead of Ghazan, who converted to Islam in 1295. No such widespread conversion to the culture of the conquered occurred in China or in Christian Russia. Members of the court and Mongol elites learned at least some Persian, unlike most of their counterparts in China. A number of Mongols also turned to farming, abandoning their nomadic ways, while some married local people. When the Mongol dynasty of Hulegu’s descendants collapsed in the 1330s for lack of a suitable heir, the Mongols were not driven out of Persia as they had been from China. Rather they and their Turkic allies simply disappeared, assimilated into Persian society. From a Persian point of view, the barbarians had been civilized.

## *Russia and the Mongols*

When the Mongol military machine rolled over Russia between 1237 and 1240, it encountered a relatively new third-wave civilization, located on the far eastern fringe of Christendom (see Chapter 10). Whatever political unity this new civilization of Kievan Rus had earlier enjoyed was now gone, and various independent princes proved unable to unite even in the face of the Mongol onslaught. Although they had interacted extensively with nomadic people of the steppes north of the Black Sea, nothing had prepared them for the Mongols.

The devastation wrought by the Mongol assault matched or exceeded anything experienced by the Persians or the Chinese. City after city fell to Mongol forces, which were now armed with the catapults and battering rams adopted from Chinese or Muslim sources. The slaughter that sometimes followed was described in horrific terms by Russian chroniclers, although twentieth-century historians often regard such

### ■ Comparison

What was distinctive about the Russian experience of Mongol rule?



### Mongol Russia

This sixteenth-century painting depicts the Mongol burning of the Russian city of Ryazan in 1237. Similar destruction awaited many Russian towns that resisted the invaders. (Sovfoto/Eastfoto)

accounts as exaggerated. (See Document 12.3, pp. 554–55, for one such account.) From the survivors and the cities that surrendered early, laborers and skilled craftsmen were deported to other Mongol lands or sold into slavery. A number of Russian crafts were so depleted of their workers that they did not recover for a century or more.

If the ferocity of initial conquest bore similarities to the experiences of Persia, Russia's incorporation into the Mongol Empire was very different. To the Mongols, it was the Kipchak Khanate, named after the Kipchak Turkic-speaking peoples north of the Caspian and Black seas, among whom the Mongols had settled. To the Russians, it was the "Khanate of the Golden Horde." By whatever name, the Mongols had conquered Russia, but they did not occupy it as they had China and Persia. Because there were no garrisoned cities, permanently stationed administrators, or Mongol settlement, the Russian experience of Mongol rule was quite different than elsewhere. From the Mongol point of view, Russia had little to offer. Its economy was not nearly as developed as that of more established civilizations; nor was it located on major international trade

routes. It was simply not worth the expense of occupying. Furthermore, the availability of extensive steppe lands for pasturing their flocks north of the Black and Caspian seas meant that the Mongols could maintain their preferred nomadic way of life, while remaining in easy reach of Russian cities when the need arose to send further military expeditions. They could dominate and exploit Russia from the steppes.

And exploit they certainly did. Russian princes received appointment from the khan and were required to send substantial tribute to the Mongol capital at Sarai, located on the lower Volga River. A variety of additional taxes created a heavy burden, especially on the peasantry, while continuing border raids sent tens of thousands of Russians into slavery. The Mongol impact was highly uneven, however. Some Russian princes benefited considerably because they were able to manipulate their role as tribute collectors to grow wealthy. The Russian Orthodox Church likewise flourished under the Mongol policy of religious toleration, for it received exemption from many taxes. Nobles who participated in Mongol raids earned a share of the loot. Some cities, such as Kiev, resisted the Mongols and were devastated, while oth-

ers collaborated and were left undamaged. Moscow in particular emerged as the primary collector of tribute for the Mongols, and its princes parlayed this position into a leading role as the nucleus of a renewed Russian state when Mongol domination receded in the fifteenth century.

The absence of direct Mongol rule had implications for the Mongols themselves, for they were far less influenced by or assimilated within Russian cultures than their counterparts in China and Persia had been. The Mongols in China had turned themselves into a Chinese dynasty, with the khan as a Chinese emperor. Some learned calligraphy, and a few came to appreciate Chinese poetry. In Persia, the Mongols had converted to Islam, with some becoming farmers. Not so in Russia. There “the Mongols of the Golden Horde were still spending their days in the saddle and their nights in tents.”<sup>26</sup> They could dominate Russia from the adjacent steppes without in any way adopting Russian culture. Even though they remained culturally separate from Russia, eventually the Mongols assimilated to the culture and the Islamic faith of the Kipchak people of the steppes, and in the process they lost their distinct identity and became Kipchaks.

Despite this domination from a distance, “the impact of the Mongols on Russia was, if anything, greater than on China and Iran [Persia],” according to a leading scholar.<sup>27</sup> Russian princes, who were more or less left alone if they paid the required tribute and taxes, found it useful to adopt the Mongols’ weapons, diplomatic rituals, court practices, taxation system, and military draft. Mongol policies facilitated, although not intentionally, the rise of Moscow as the core of a new Russian state, and that state made good use of the famous Mongol mounted courier service, which Marco Polo had praised so highly. Mongol policies also strengthened the hold of the Russian Orthodox Church and enabled it to penetrate the rural areas more fully than before. Some Russians, seeking to explain their country’s economic backwardness and political autocracy in modern times, have held the Mongols responsible for both conditions, though most historians consider such views vastly exaggerated.

Divisions among the Mongols and the growing strength of the Russian state, centered now on the city of Moscow, enabled the Russians to break the Mongols’ hold by the end of the fifteenth century. With the earlier demise of Mongol rule in China and Persia, and now in Russia, the Mongols had retreated from their brief but spectacular incursion into the civilizations of outer Eurasia. Nonetheless, they continued to periodically threaten these civilizations for several centuries, until their homelands were absorbed into the expanding Russian and Chinese empires. But the Mongol moment in world history was over.

## The Mongol Empire as a Eurasian Network

During the postclassical millennium, Chinese culture and Buddhism provided a measure of integration among the peoples of East Asia; Christianity did the same for Europe, while the realm of Islam connected most of the lands in between. But

it was the Mongol Empire, during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, that brought all of these regions into a single interacting network. It was a unique moment in world history and an important step toward the global integration of the modern era.

### *Toward a World Economy*

#### ■ Connection

In what ways did the Mongol Empire contribute to the globalization of the Eurasian world?

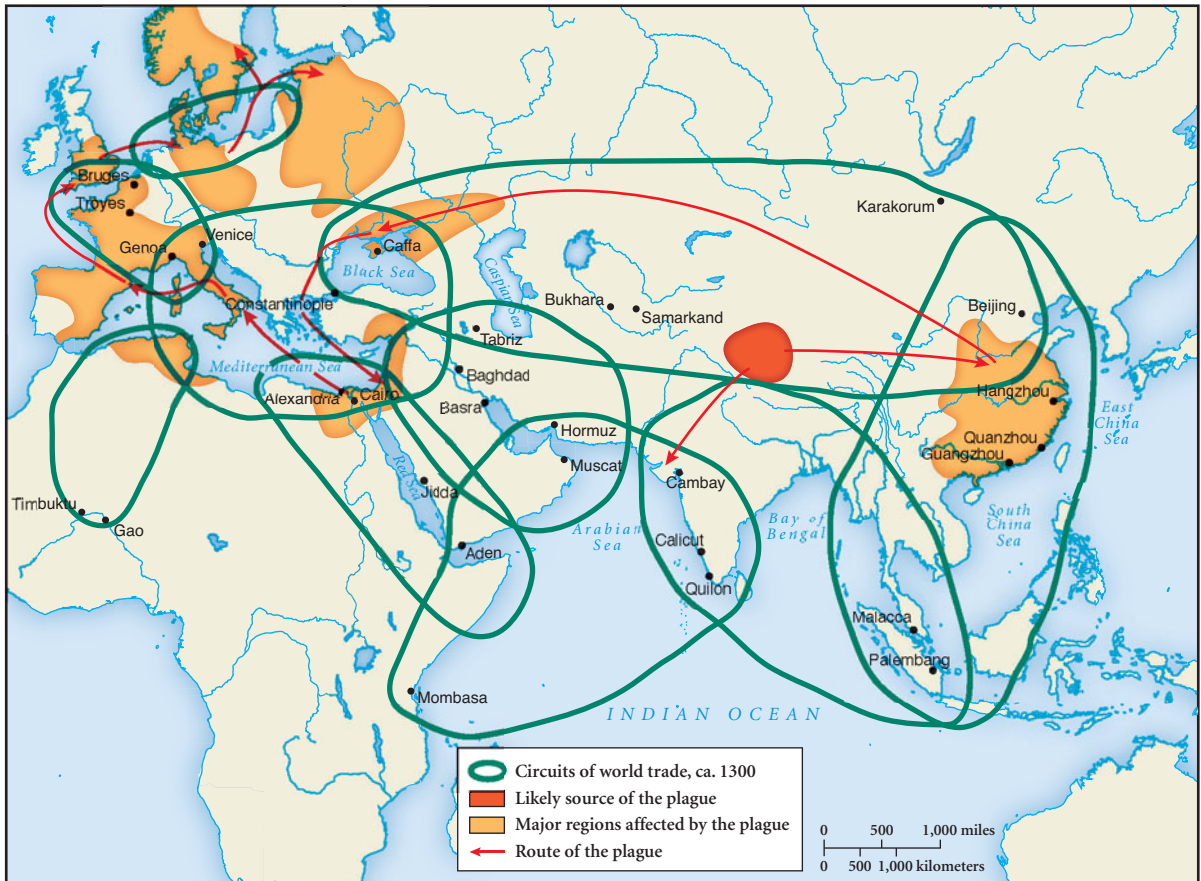
The Mongols themselves produced little of value for distant markets, nor were they active traders. Nonetheless, they consistently promoted international commerce, largely so that they could tax it and thus extract wealth from more developed civilizations. The Great Khan Ogodei, for example, often paid well over the asking price in order to attract merchants to his capital of Karakorum. The Mongols also provided financial backing for caravans, introduced standardized weights and measures, and gave tax breaks to merchants.

In providing a relatively secure environment for merchants making the long and arduous journey across Central Asia between Europe and China, the Mongol Empire brought the two ends of the Eurasian world into closer contact than ever before and launched a new phase in the history of the Silk Roads. Marco Polo was only the most famous of many European merchants, mostly from Italian cities, who made their way to China through the Mongol Empire. So many traders attempted the journey that guidebooks were published with much useful advice about the trip. Merchants returned with tales of rich lands and prosperous commercial opportunities, but what they described were long-established trading networks of which Europeans had been largely ignorant.

The Mongol trading circuit was a central element in an even larger commercial network that linked much of the Afro-Eurasian world in the thirteenth century (see Map 12.2). Mongol-ruled China was the fulcrum of this vast system, connecting the overland route through the Mongol Empire with the oceanic routes through the South China Sea and Indian Ocean. Here, some historians have argued, lay the beginnings of those international economic relationships that have played such a major role in the making of the modern world.

### *Diplomacy on a Eurasian Scale*

Not only did the Mongol Empire facilitate long-distance commerce, but it also prompted diplomatic relationships from one end of Eurasia to the other. As their invasion of Russia spilled over into Eastern Europe, Mongol armies destroyed Polish, German, and Hungarian forces in 1241–1242 and seemed poised to march on Central and Western Europe. But the death of the Great Khan Ogodei required Mongol leaders to return to Mongolia, and Western Europe lacked adequate pasture for Mongol herds. Thus Western Europe was spared the trauma of conquest, but fearing the possible return of the Mongols, both the pope and European rulers dispatched delegations to the Mongol capital, mostly led by Franciscan friars. They hoped to



**Map 12.2** Trade and Disease in the Fourteenth Century

The Mongol Empire played a major role in the commercial integration of the Eurasian world as well as in the spread of the plague across this vast area.

learn something about Mongol intentions, to secure Mongol aid in the Christian crusade against Islam, and, if possible, to convert Mongols to Christianity.

These efforts were largely in vain, for no alliance or widespread conversion occurred. In fact, one of these missions came back with a letter for the pope from the Great Khan Guyuk, demanding that Europeans submit to him. “But if you should not believe our letters and the command of God nor hearken to our counsel,” he warned, “then we shall know for certain that you wish to have war. After that we do not know what will happen.”<sup>28</sup> Perhaps the most important outcome of these diplomatic probings was the useful information about lands to the east that European missions brought back. Those reports contributed to a dawning European awareness of a wider world, and they have certainly provided later historians with much useful information about the Mongols (see Document 12.5, pp. 557–59). Somewhat later, in 1287, the il-khanate of Persia sought an alliance with European powers to



take Jerusalem and crush the forces of Islam, but the Persian Mongols' conversion to Islam soon put an end to any such anti-Muslim coalition.

Within the Mongol Empire itself, close relationships developed between the courts of Persia and China. They regularly exchanged ambassadors, shared intelligence information, fostered trade between their regions, and sent skilled workers back and forth. Thus political authorities all across Eurasia engaged in diplomatic relationships with one another to an unprecedented degree.

### *Cultural Exchange in the Mongol Realm*

Accompanying these transcontinental economic and diplomatic relationships was a substantial exchange of peoples and cultures. Mongol policy forcibly transferred many thousands of skilled craftsmen and educated people from their homelands to distant parts of the empire, while the Mongols' religious tolerance and support of merchants drew missionaries and traders from afar. The Mongol capital at Karakorum was a cosmopolitan city with places of worship for Buddhists, Daoists, Muslims, and Christians. Actors and musicians from China, wrestlers from Persia, and a jester from Byzantium provided entertainment for the Mongol court. Persian and Arab doctors and administrators were sent to China, while Chinese physicians and engineers found their skills in demand in the Islamic world.

This movement of people facilitated the exchange of ideas and techniques, a process actively encouraged by Mongol authorities. A great deal of Chinese technology and artistic conventions—such as painting, printing, gunpowder weapons, compass navigation, high-temperature furnaces, and medical techniques—flowed westward. Acupuncture, for example, was poorly received in the Middle East because it required too much bodily contact for Muslim taste, but Chinese techniques for diagnosing illness by taking the pulse of patients proved quite popular, as they involved minimal body contact. Muslim astronomers brought their skills and knowledge to China because Mongol authorities wanted “second opinions on the reading of heavenly signs and portents” and assistance in constructing accurate calendars, so necessary for ritual purposes.<sup>29</sup> Plants and crops likewise circulated within the Mongol domain. Lemons and carrots from the Middle East found a welcome reception in China, while the Persian Il-Khan Ghazan sent envoys to India, China, and elsewhere to seek “seeds of things which are unique in that land.”<sup>30</sup>

Europeans arguably gained more than most from these exchanges, for they had long been cut off from the fruitful interchange with Asia, and in comparison to the Islamic and Chinese worlds, they were less technologically developed. Now they could reap the benefits of much new technology, new crops, and new knowledge of a wider world. And almost alone among the peoples of Eurasia, they could do so without having suffered the devastating consequences of Mongol conquest. In these circumstances, some historians have argued, lay the roots of Europe's remarkable rise to global prominence in the centuries that followed.

## The Plague: A Eurasian Pandemic

Any benefits derived from participation in Mongol networks of communication and exchange must be measured alongside the Eurasian catastrophe known as the “plague” or the “pestilence” and later called the Black Death. Originating most likely in Central Asia, the bacteria responsible for the disease spread across the trade routes of the vast Mongol Empire in the early fourteenth century (see Map 12.2). Carried by rodents and transmitted by fleas to humans, the plague erupted initially in 1331 in northeastern China and had reached the Middle East and Western Europe by 1347. One lurid but quite uncertain story has the Mongols using catapults to hurl corpses infected with the plague into the Genoese city of Caffa in the Crimea.

The disease itself was associated with swelling of the lymph nodes, most often in the groin; terrible headaches; high fever; and internal bleeding just below the skin. Infected people generally died within a few days.

In the densely populated civilizations of China, the Islamic world, and Europe as well as in the steppe lands of the nomads, the plague claimed enormous numbers of human victims, causing a sharp contraction in Eurasian population for a century or more. Chroniclers reported rates of death that ranged from 50 to 90 percent of the affected population, depending on the time and place. A recent study suggests that about half of Europe’s people perished during the initial outbreak of 1348–1350.<sup>31</sup> A fifteenth-century Egyptian historian wrote that within a month of the plague’s arrival in 1349, “Cairo had become an abandoned desert.... Everywhere one heard lamentations and one could not pass by any house without being overwhelmed by the howling.”<sup>32</sup> The Middle East generally had lost perhaps one-third of its population by the early fifteenth century.<sup>33</sup> The intense first wave of the plague was followed by periodic visitations over the next several centuries, although India and sub-Saharan Africa were much less affected than other regions of the eastern hemisphere.

But in those places where it struck, the plague left thoughtful people grasping for language with which to describe a horror of such unprecedented dimensions. One Italian man, who had buried all five of his children with his own hands, wrote in 1348 that “so many have died that everyone believes it is the end of the world.”<sup>34</sup> Another Italian, the Renaissance

### ■ Change

Disease changes societies. How might this argument apply to the plague?

#### The Plague

This illustration depicts a European doctor visiting a patient with the plague. Notice that the doctor and others around the bedside cover their noses to prevent infection. During the Black Death, doctors were often criticized for refusing to treat dying patients, as they feared for their own lives. (The Granger Collection, New York)



scholar Francesco Petrarck, was equally stunned by the impact of the Black Death; he wrote to a friend in 1349:

When at any time has such a thing been seen or spoken of? Has what happened in these years ever been read about: empty houses, derelict cities, ruined estates, fields strewn with cadavers, a horrible and vast solitude encompassing the whole world? Consult historians, they are silent; ask physicians, they are stupefied; seek the answers from philosophers, they shrug their shoulders, furrow their brows, and with fingers pressed against their lips, bid you be silent. Will posterity believe these things, when we who have seen it can scarcely believe it...?<sup>35</sup>

In the Islamic world, the famous historian Ibn Khaldun, who had lost both of his parents to the plague, also wrote about it in apocalyptic terms:

Civilization in both the East and the West was visited by a destructive plague which devastated nations and caused populations to vanish. It swallowed up many of the good things of civilization and wiped them out... It was as if the voice of existence had called out for oblivion and restriction, and the world responded to its call.<sup>36</sup>

(See Visual Sources: The Black Death and Religion in Western Europe, pp. 560–67, for more on religious response to the plague in Europe.)

Beyond its immediate devastation, the Black Death worked longer-term changes in European society, the region where the plague's impact has been most thoroughly studied. Labor shortages following the initial outburst provoked sharp conflict between scarce workers, who sought higher wages or better conditions, and the rich, who resisted those demands. A series of peasant revolts in the fourteenth century reflected this tension, which also undermined the practice of serfdom. That labor shortage also may have fostered a greater interest in technological innovation and created, at least for a time, more employment opportunities for women. Thus a resilient European civilization survived a cataclysm that had the power to destroy it. In a strange way, that catastrophe may have actually fostered its future growth.

Whatever its impact in particular places, the plague also had larger consequences. Ironically, that human disaster, born of the Mongol network, was a primary reason for the demise of that network in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Population contracted, cities declined, and the volume of trade diminished all across the Mongol world. By 1350, the Mongol Empire itself was in disarray, and within a century the Mongols had lost control of Chinese, Persian, and Russian civilizations. The Central Asian trade route, so critical to the entire Afro-Eurasian world economy, largely closed.

This disruption of the Mongol-based land routes to the east, coupled with a desire to avoid Muslim intermediaries, provided incentives for Europeans to take to the sea in their continuing efforts to reach the riches of Asia. Their naval technology gave them military advantages on the seas, much as the Mongols' skill with the bow and their mobility on horseback gave these nomads a decisive edge in land battles.

As Europeans penetrated Asian waters in the sixteenth century, they took on, in some ways, the role of the Mongols in organizing and fostering world trade and in creating a network of communication and exchange over an even larger area. Like the Mongols, Europeans were people on the periphery of the major established civilizations: they too were economically less developed in comparison to Chinese and Islamic civilizations, and both were prone to forcibly plundering the wealthier civilizations they encountered.<sup>37</sup> Europeans, of course, brought far more of their own culture and many more of their own people to the societies they conquered, as Christianity, European languages, settler societies, and western science and technology took root within their empires. Although their imperial presence lasted far longer and operated on a much larger scale, European actions at the beginning of their global expansion bore some resemblance to those of their Mongol predecessors. They were, as one historian put it, “the Mongols of the seas.”<sup>38</sup>

## Reflections: Changing Images of Nomadic Peoples

Until recently, nomads generally received bad press in history books. Normally they entered the story only when they were threatening or destroying established civilizations. In presenting a largely negative image of pastoral peoples, historians were reflecting the long-held attitudes of literate elites in the civilizations of Eurasia. Fearing and usually despising nomadic peoples, educated observers in China, the Middle East, and Europe often described them as bloodthirsty savages or barbarians, bringing only chaos and destruction in their wake. Han Kuan, a Chinese scholar of the first century B.C.E., described the Xiongnu people as “abandoned by Heaven . . . in foodless desert wastes, without proper houses, clothed in animal hides, eating their meat uncooked and drinking blood.”<sup>39</sup> To the Christian Saint Jerome (340–420 C.E.), the nomadic Huns “filled the whole earth with slaughter and panic alike as they flitted hither and thither on their swift horses.”<sup>40</sup> Almost a thousand years later, the famous Arab historian Ibn Khaldun described nomads in a very similar fashion: “It is their nature to plunder whatever other people possess.”<sup>41</sup>

Because nomadic peoples generally did not have written languages, the sources available to historians came from less-than-unbiased observers in adjacent agricultural civilizations. Furthermore, in the long-running conflict across the farming/pastoral frontier, agricultural civilizations ultimately triumphed. Over the centuries, some nomadic or barbarian peoples, such as the Germanic tribes of Europe and the Arabs, created new civilizations. Others, such as the Turkic and Mongol peoples, took over existing civilizations or were encompassed within established agrarian empires. By the early twentieth century, and in most places much earlier, nomadic peoples everywhere had lost their former independence and had often shed their nomadic life as well. Since “winners” usually write history, the negative views of nomads held by agrarian civilizations normally prevailed.

Reflecting more inclusive contemporary values, historians in recent decades have sought to present a more balanced picture of nomads' role in world history, emphasizing what they created as well as what they destroyed. These historians have highlighted the achievements of nomadic peoples, such as their adaptation to inhospitable environments; their technological innovations; their development of horse-, camel-, or cattle-based cultures; their role in fostering cross-cultural exchange; and their state-building efforts.

A less critical or judgmental posture toward the Mongols may also owe something to the “total wars” and genocides of the twentieth century, in which the mass slaughter of civilians became a strategy to induce enemy surrender. During the cold war, the United States and the Soviet Union were prepared, apparently, to obliterate each other's entire population with nuclear weapons in response to an attack. In light of this recent history, Mongol massacres may appear a little less unique. Historians living in the glass houses of contemporary societies are perhaps more reluctant to cast stones at the Mongols. In understanding the Mongols, as in so much else, historians are shaped by the times and circumstances of their own lives as much as by “what really happened” in the past.

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## Second Thoughts

### What's the Significance?

To assess your mastery of the material in this chapter, visit the **Student Center** at [bedfordstmartins.com/strayer](http://bedfordstmartins.com/strayer).

pastoralism	Temujin/Chinggis Khan	Kipchak Khanate/Golden
Xiongnu	the Mongol world war	Horde
Modun	Yuan dynasty China	Black Death/plague
Turks	Khubilai Khan	
Masai	Hulegu	

### Big Picture Questions

1. Prior to the rise of the Mongols, in what ways had pastoral peoples been significant in world history?
2. What accounts for the often negative attitudes of settled societies toward the pastoral peoples living on their borders? Why have historians often neglected pastoral peoples' role in world history?
3. In what ways did the Mongol Empire resemble other empires, and in what ways did it differ from them? Why did it last a relatively short time?
4. In what different ways did Mongol rule affect the Islamic world, Russia, China, and Europe?
5. How would you define both the immediate and the long-term significance of the Mongols in world history?
6. How would you assess the perspective of this chapter toward the Mongols? Does it strike you as negative and critical of the Mongols, as bending over backward to portray them in a positive light, or as a balanced presentation?

### Next Steps: For Further Study

John Aberth, *The First Horseman: Disease in Human History* (2007). A global study of the history of disease, with a fine chapter on the Black Death.

Thomas Allsen, *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia* (2001). A history of cultural exchange within the Mongol realm, particularly between China and the Islamic world.

Thomas J. Barfield, *The Nomadic Alternative* (1993). An anthropological and historical survey of pastoral peoples on a global basis.

Carter Finley, *The Turks in World History* (2005). The evolution of Turkic-speaking people, from their nomadic origins to the twentieth century.

Jack Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World* (2004). A lively, well-written, and balanced account of the world the Mongols made and the legacy they left for the future.

“The Mongols in World History,” <http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/mongols>. A wonderful resource on the Mongols generally, with a particular focus on their impact in China.

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For Web sites and additional documents related to this chapter, see **Make History** at [bedfordstmartins.com/strayer](http://bedfordstmartins.com/strayer).

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# Documents

## Considering the Evidence: Perspectives on the Mongols



How did the Mongols understand themselves and the enormous empire they had created? How did the peoples who were forcibly incorporated within that empire or threatened by it view the Mongols? In studying the Mongol phenomenon, historians use documents that reflect both the Mongols' perception of themselves and the perspectives of outsiders. The first two documents derive from Mongol sources, while the final three represent views from Russian, Chinese, and Western European observers (see Map 12.1, p. 530).

Sorting through these various perceptions of the Mongols raises questions about the kinds of understandings—or misunderstandings—that arise as culturally different peoples meet, especially under conditions of conquest. These documents also require reflection on the relative usefulness of sources that come from the Mongols themselves as well as those that derive from the victims of Mongol aggression.

### Document 12.1

## Mongol History from a Mongol Source

The major literary work to emerge from the Mongols themselves, widely known as *The Secret History of the Mongols*, was written a decade or two after the death in 1227 of Chinggis Khan. The unknown author of this work was clearly a contemporary of the Great Khan and likely a member of the royal household. The first selection discusses the Mongol practice of *anda*, a very close relationship between two unrelated men. Although they later broke with one another, the *anda* relationship of Temujin, the future Chinggis Khan, and his friend Jamughu was important in Temujin's rise to power. The second selection from the *Secret History* describes the process by which Temujin was elevated to the rank of Chinggis Khan, the ruler of a united Mongol nation, while the third recounts the reflections of Ogodei, Chinggis Khan's son and successor, probably toward the end of his reign, which lasted from 1229 to 1241.

- How would you describe the *anda* relationship?
- What does the *Secret History* suggest about the nature of political authority and political relationships among the Mongols?

- What did Ogodei regard as his greatest achievements and his most notable mistakes?
- What evidence do the selections from the *Secret History* provide that the author was an insider?

## *The Secret History of the Mongols*

ca. 1240

### Anda: Temujin and Jamugha

Temujin and Jamugha pitched their tents in the Khorkonagh Valley.  
 With their people united in one great camp, the two leaders decided they should renew their friendship, their pledge of anda.  
 They remembered when they'd first made that pledge, and said, "We should love one another again." That first time they'd met Temujin was eleven years old. . . .  
 So Temujin and Jamugha said to each other: "We've heard the elders say, 'When two men become anda their lives become one. One will never desert the other and will always defend him.' This is the way we'll act from now on. We'll renew our old pledge and love each other forever."  
 Temujin took the golden belt he'd received in the spoils from Toghtoga's defeat and placed it around Anda Jamugha's waist. Then he led out the Merkid chief's warhorse, a light yellow mare with black mane and tail, and gave it to Anda Jamugha to ride. Jamugha took the golden belt he'd received in the spoils from Dayir Usun's defeat and placed it around the waist of Anda Temujin. Then he led out the whitish-tan warhorse of Dayir Usun

and had Anda Temujin ride on it. Before the cliffs of Khuldaghar in the Khorkhonagh Valley, beneath the Great Branching Tree of the Mongol, they pledged their friendship and promised to love one another. They held a feast on the spot and there was great celebration. Temujin and Jamugha spent that night alone, sharing one blanket to cover them both.

Temujin and Jamugha loved each other for one year, and when half of the second year had passed they agreed it was time to move camp. . . .

### Temujin Becomes Chinggis Khan

Then they moved the whole camp to the shores of Blue Lake in the Gurelgu Mountains. Altan, Khuchar, and Sacha Beki conferred with each other there, and then said to Temujin: "We want you to be khan. Temujin, if you'll be our khan we'll search through the spoils for the beautiful women and virgins, for the great palace tents, for the young virgins and loveliest women, for the finest geldings and mares. We'll gather all these and bring them to you. When we go off to hunt for wild game we'll go out first to drive them together for you to kill. We'll drive the wild animals of the steppe together so that their bellies are touching.

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Source: Paul Kahn, *The Secret History of the Mongols: The Origin of Chingis Khan* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), 44–45, 48–49, 192–93.



We'll drive the wild game of the mountains together  
 so that they stand leg to leg.  
 If we disobey your command during battle  
 take away our possessions, our children, and wives.  
 Leave us behind in the dust,  
 cutting off our heads where we stand and letting  
 them fall to the ground.  
 If we disobey your counsel in peacetime  
 take away our tents and our goods, our wives, and  
 our children.  
 Leave us behind when you move,  
 abandoned in the desert without a protector.”  
 Having given their word,  
 having taken this oath,  
 they proclaimed Temujin khan of the Mongol  
 and gave him the name Chingis Khan. . . .

### Reflections of Ogodei

Then Ogodei Khan spoke these words:  
 “Since my father the Khan passed away  
 and I came to sit on his great throne,  
 what have I done?  
 I went to war against the people of Cathay<sup>o</sup> and I  
 destroyed them.  
 For my second accomplishment  
 I established a network of post stations  
 so that my words are carried across the land with  
 great speed.  
 Another of my accomplishments has been  
 to have my commanders dig wells in the desert  
 so that there would be pasture and water for the  
 people there.  
 Lastly I placed spies and agents among all the  
 people of the cities.  
 In all directions I've brought peace to the Nation  
 and the people,  
 making them place their feet on the ground;  
 making them place their hands on the earth.  
 Since the time of my father the Khan  
 I added these four accomplishments to all that  
 he did.

<sup>o</sup>Cathay: China.

But also since my father passed away  
 and I came to sit on his great throne  
 with the burden of all the numerous people on  
 my shoulders  
 I allowed myself to be conquered by wine.  
 This was one of my mistakes.  
 Another of my mistakes was to listen to a woman  
 with no principles  
 and because of her  
 take away the daughters who belonged to my  
 Uncle Odchigin.  
 Even though I'm the Khan,  
 the Lord of the Nation,  
 I have no right to go against established principle,  
 so this was my mistake.  
 Another mistake was to secretly harm Dokholkhu.  
 If you ask, 'Why was this wrong?'  
 I would say that to secretly harm Dokholkhu,  
 a man who had served his proper lord, my father  
 the Khan,  
 performing heroic deeds in his service, was a  
 mistake.  
 Now that I've done this  
 who'll perform heroic deeds in my service?  
 So now I admit that I was wrong and didn't  
 understand.  
 I secretly harmed a man who had served my  
 father the Khan,  
 someone who deserved my protection.  
 Then my last mistake was to desire too much,  
 to say to myself,  
 'I'm afraid that all the wild game born under  
 Heaven  
 will run off toward the land of my brothers.'  
 So I ordered earthen walls to be built  
 to keep the wild game from running away,  
 but even as these walls were being built  
 I heard my brothers speaking badly of me.  
 I admit that I was wrong to do this.  
 Since the time of my father the Khan  
 I've added four accomplishments to all that  
 he'd done  
 and I've done four things which I admit were  
 wrong.”

## Document 12.2

## A Letter from Chinggis Khan

Document 12.2 comes from a remarkable letter that Chinggis Khan sent to an elderly Chinese Daoist master named Changchun in 1219, requesting a personal meeting with the teacher. Changchun in fact made the arduous journey to the camp of Chinggis Khan, then located in Afghanistan, where he stayed with the Mongol ruler for almost a year, before returning to China.

- Why did Chinggis Khan seek a meeting with Changchun?
- How does Chinggis Khan define his life's work? What is his image of himself?
- How would you describe the tone of Chinggis Khan's letter to Changchun? What does the letter suggest about Mongol attitudes toward the belief systems of conquered peoples?
- How do Documents 12.1 and 12.2 help explain the success of the Mongols' empire-building efforts?
- What core Mongol values do these documents suggest?

## CHINGGIS KHAN

*Letter to Changchun*

1219

Heaven has abandoned China owing to its haughtiness and extravagant luxury. But I, living in the northern wilderness, have not inordinate passions. I hate luxury and exercise moderation. I have only one coat and one food. I eat the same food and am dressed in the same tatters as my humble herdsmen. I consider the people my children, and take an interest in talented men as if they were my brothers. . . . At military exercises I am always in the front, and in time of battle am never behind. In the space of seven years I have succeeded in accomplishing a great work, and uniting the whole world into one empire. I have not myself distinguished qualities. But the government of the [Chinese] is inconstant, and

therefore Heaven assists me to obtain the throne. . . . All together have acknowledged my supremacy. It seems to me that since the remote time . . . such an empire has not been seen. . . . Since the time I came to the throne I have always taken to heart the ruling of my people; but I could not find worthy men to occupy [high offices]. . . . With respect to these circumstances I inquired, and heard that thou, master, hast penetrated the truth. . . . For a long time thou has lived in the caverns of the rocks, and hast retired from the world; but to thee the people who have acquired sanctity repair, like clouds on the paths of the immortals, in innumerable multitudes. . . . But what shall I do? We are separated by mountains and plains of great extent, and I cannot meet thee. I can only descend from the throne and stand by the side. I have fasted and washed. I have ordered my adjutant . . . to prepare an escort and a cart for thee.

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Source: E. Bretschneider, *Mediaeval Researches from Eastern Asiatic Sources* (London, 1875), 37–39.

Do not be afraid of the thousand *li*.<sup>o</sup> I implore thee to move thy sainted steps. Do not think of the extent of the sandy desert. Commiserate the people

<sup>o</sup>*li*: a great distance.

in the present situation of affairs, or have pity upon me, and communicate to me the means of preserving life. I shall serve thee myself. I hope that at least thou wilt leave me a trifle of thy wisdom. Say only one word to me and I shall be happy.

### Document 12.3

## A Russian View of the Mongols

The initial impression of the Mongol impact in many places was one of utter devastation, destruction, and brutality. Document 12.3 offers a Russian commentary from that perspective drawn from the *Chronicle of Novgorod*, one of the major sources for the history of early Russia.

- How did the Russian writer of the *Chronicle* account for what he saw as the disaster of the Mongol invasion?
- Can you infer from the document any additional reasons for the Mongol success?
- Beyond the conquest itself, what other aspects of Mongol rule offended the Russians?
- To what extent was the Mongol conquest of Russia also a clash of cultures?

## The Chronicle of Novgorod

1238

That same year [1238] foreigners called Tartars<sup>o</sup> came in countless numbers, like locusts, into the land of Ryazan, and on first coming they halted at the river Nukhla, and took it, and halted in camp there. And thence they sent their emissaries to the *Knyazes*<sup>o</sup> of Ryazan, a sorceress and two men with her, demanding from them one-tenth of everything: of men and *Knyazes* and horses—of everything

<sup>o</sup>Tartars: Mongols.

<sup>o</sup>Knyazes: Princes.

Source: Robert Mitchell and Nevill Forbes, trans., *The Chronicle of Novgorod, 1016–1471* (New York: AMS Press, 1970; repr. from the edition of 1914, London), 81–83, 88.

one-tenth. And the *Knyazes* of Ryazan, Gyurgi, Ingvor's brother, Oleg, Roman Ingvorevich, and those of Murom and Pronsk, without letting them into their towns, went out to meet them to Voronazh. And the *Knyazes* said to them: "Only when none of us remain then all will be yours."... And the *Knyazes* of Ryazan sent to Yuri of Volodimir asking for help, or himself to come. But Yuri neither went himself nor listened to the request of the *Knyazes* of Ryazan, but he himself wished to make war separately. But it was too late to oppose the wrath of God.... Thus also did God before these men take from us our strength and put into us perplexity and thunder and dread and trembling for our sins. And then the pagan foreigners surrounded Ryazan and fenced it in with a stockade.... And the Tartars took the town on

December 21, and they had advanced against it on the 16th of the same month. They likewise killed the *Knyaz* and *Knyaginya*, and men, women, and children, monks, nuns and priests, some by fire, some by the sword, and violated nuns, priests' wives, good women and girls in the presence of their mothers and sisters. But God saved the Bishop, for he had departed the same moment when the troops invested the town. And who, brethren, would not lament over this, among those of us left alive when they suffered this bitter and violent death? And we, indeed, having seen it, were terrified and wept with sighing day and night over our sins, while we sigh every day and night, taking thought for our possessions and for the hatred of brothers.

...The pagan and godless Tartars, then, having taken Ryazan, went to Volodimir... And when the lawless ones had already come near and set up battering rams, and took the town and fired it on Friday before Sexagesima Sunday, the *Knyaz* and *Knyaginya* and *Vladyka*, seeing that the town was on fire and that the people were already perishing, some by fire

and others by the sword, took refuge in the Church of the Holy Mother of God and shut themselves in the Sacristy. The pagans breaking down the doors, piled up wood and set fire to the sacred church; and slew all, thus they perished, giving up their souls to God... And Rostov and Suzhdal went each its own way. And the accursed ones having come thence took Moscow, Pereyaslavi, Yurev, Dmitrov, *Volok*, and Tver; there also they killed the son of Yaroslav. And thence the lawless ones came and invested Torzhok on the festival of the first Sunday in Lent. They fenced it all round with a fence as they had taken other towns, and here the accursed ones fought with battering rams for two weeks. And the people in the town were exhausted and from Novgorod there was no help for them; but already every man began to be in perplexity and terror. And so the pagans took the town, and slew all from the male sex even to the female, all the priests and the monks, and all stripped and reviled gave up their souls to the Lord in a bitter and a wretched death, on March 5... Wednesday in Easter week.

#### Document 12.4

### Chinese Perceptions of the Mongols

Chinese responses to Mongol rule varied considerably. To some, of course, the Mongols were simply foreign conquerors and therefore illegitimate as Chinese rulers. Marco Polo, who was in China at the time, reported that some Mongol officials or their Muslim intermediaries treated Chinese “just like slaves,” demanding bribes for services, ordering arbitrary executions, and seizing women at will—all of which generated outrage and hostility. Document 12.4 illustrates another side to Chinese perception of the Mongols. It comes from a short biography of a Mongol official named Menggu, which was written by a well-educated Chinese scholar on the occasion of Menggu's death. Intended to be inscribed on stone and buried with the Mongol officer, it emphasizes the ways in which Menggu conformed to Chinese ways of governing. Such obituaries were an established form of Chinese historical writing, usually commissioned by the children of the deceased.

- Why might Menggu's children have requested such a document and asked a Chinese scholar to compose it? What does this suggest about Mongol attitudes to Chinese culture?

- What features of Menggu’s governance did this Chinese author appreciate? In what ways did Menggu’s actions and behavior reflect Confucian values? What might the writer have omitted from his account?
- What might inspire a highly educated Chinese scholar to compose such a flattering public tribute to a Mongol official?
- Why might historians be a bit skeptical about this document? Which statements might be most suspect?

## *Epitaph for the Honorable Menggu*

1274

Emperor Taizu [Chinggis Khan] received the mandate of Heaven and subjugated all regions. When Emperor Taizong [Ogodei Khan] succeeded, he revitalized the bureaucratic system and made it more efficient and organized. At court, one minister supervised all the officials and helped the emperor rule. In the provinces, commanderies and counties received instructions from above and saw that they got carried out. Prefects and magistrates were as a rule appointed only after submitting [to the Mongols]. Still one Mongol, called the governor, was selected to supervise them. The prefects and magistrates all had to obey his orders. . . .

In the fourth month of 1236, the court deemed Menggu capable of handling Zhangde, so promoted him. . . . to be its governor. . . . Because regulations were lax, the soldiers took advantage of their victory to plunder. Even in cities and marketplaces, some people kept their doors closed in the daytime. As soon as Menggu arrived, he took charge. Knowing the people’s grievances, he issued an order, “Those who oppress the people will be dealt with according to the law. Craftsmen, merchants, and shopkeepers, you must each go about your work with your doors open, peaceably attending to your business without fear. Farmers, you must be content with your lands and exert yourselves diligently according to the seasons. I will instruct or punish those who mistreat

you.” After this order was issued, the violent became obedient and no one any longer dared violate the laws. Farmers in the fields and travelers on the roads felt safe, and people began to enjoy life.

In the second month of 1238, Wang Rong, prefect of Huaizhou, rebelled. The grand preceptor and prince ordered Menggu to put down this rebellion, telling him to slaughter everyone. Menggu responded, “When the royal army suppresses rebels, those who were coerced into joining them ought to be pardoned, not to mention those who are entirely innocent.” The prince approved his advice and followed it. When Wang Rong surrendered, he was executed but the region was spared. The residents, with jugs of wine and burning incense, saw Menggu off tearfully, unable to bear his leaving. Forty years later when he was put in charge of Henei, the common people were delighted with the news, saying, “We will all survive—our parents and relatives through marriage all served him before.”

In 1239 locusts destroyed all the vegetation in Xiang and Wei, so the people were short of food. Menggu reported this to the great minister Quduqu, who issued five thousand piculs of army rations to save the starving. As a consequence no one had to flee or starve. . . .

At that time [1247] the harvest failed for several years in a row, yet taxes and labor services were still exacted. Consequently, three or four of every ten houses was vacant. Menggu ordered the officials to travel around announcing that those who returned to their property would be exempt from

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Source: Patricia Buckley Ebrej, ed. and trans., *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook* (New York: Free Press, 1991), 192–94.

taxes and services for three years. That year seventeen thousand households returned in response to his summons. . . .

When there was a drought in 1263, Menggu prayed for rain and it rained. That year he was given the title Brilliant and August General and made governor of Zhongshan prefecture. In 1270 he was transferred and became governor of Hezhong prefecture. In the spring of 1274 he was allowed to wear the golden tiger tablet in recognition of his long and excellent service, his incorruptibility, and the repute in which he was held where he had served. . . .

The house where Menggu lived when he governed Zhangde nearly forty years ago, and the fields from which he obtained food then, were just adequate to keep out the wind and rain and supply enough to eat. When he died there were no estates or leftover wealth to leave his sons or grandsons. Therefore they had to model themselves on him and concentrate on governing in a way that would bring peace and safety, show love for the people, and benefit all. They have no need to be ashamed even if compared to the model officials of the Han and Tang dynasties.

### Document 12.5

## Mongol Women through European Eyes

Document 12.5 provides some insight into the roles of Mongol women and men through the eyes of a European observer, William of Rubruck (1220–1293). A Flemish Franciscan friar, William was one of several emissaries sent to the Mongol court by the pope and the king of France. They hoped that these diplomatic missions might lead to the conversion of the Mongols to Christianity, perhaps an alliance with the Mongols against Islam, or at least some useful intelligence about Mongol intentions. While no agreements with the Mongols came from these missions, William of Rubruck left a detailed account of Mongol life in the mid-thirteenth century, which included observations about the domestic roles of men and women.

- How does William of Rubruck portray the lives of Mongol women? What was the class background of the Mongol women he describes?
- What do you think he would have found most upsetting about the position of women in Mongol society?
- Based on this account, how might you compare the life of Mongol women to that of women in more established civilizations, such as China, Europe, or the Islamic world?

WILLIAM OF RUBRUCK

*Journey to the Land of the Mongols*

ca. 1255

The matrons<sup>o</sup> make for themselves most beautiful (luggage) carts. . . . A single rich Mo'al or Tartar<sup>o</sup> has quite one hundred or two hundred such carts with coffers. Baatu<sup>o</sup> has twenty-six wives, each of whom has a large dwelling, exclusive of the other little ones which they set up after the big one, and which are like closets, in which the sewing girls live, and to each of these (large) dwellings are attached quite two hundred carts. And when they set up their houses, the first wife places her dwelling on the extreme west side, and after her the others according to their rank, so that the last wife will be in the extreme east; and there will be the distance of a stone's throw between the yurt of one wife and that of another. The *ordu*<sup>o</sup> of a rich Mo'al seems like a large town, though there will be very few men in it.

When they have fixed their dwelling, the door turned to the south, they set up the couch of the master on the north side. The side for the women is always the east side. . . . on the left of the house of the master, he sitting on his couch his face turned to the south. The side for the men is the west side. . . . on the right. Men coming into the house would never hang up their bows on the side of the woman.

It is the duty of the women to drive the carts, get the dwellings on and off them, milk the cows, make butter and *gruit*,<sup>o</sup> and to dress and sew skins, which they do with a thread made of tendons. They divide the tendons into fine shreds, and then twist them

into one long thread. They also sew the boots, the socks, and the clothing. They never wash clothes, for they say that God would be angered, and that it would thunder if they hung them up to dry. They will even beat those they find washing [their clothes]. Thunder they fear extraordinarily; and when it thunders they will turn out of their dwellings all strangers, wrap themselves in black felt, and thus hide themselves till it has passed away. Furthermore, they never wash their bowls, but when the meat is cooked they rinse out the dish in which they are about to put it with some of the boiling broth from the kettle, which they pour back into it. They [the women] also make the felt and cover the houses.

The men make bows and arrows, manufacture stirrups and bits, make saddles, do the carpentering on their dwellings and the carts; they take care of the horses, milk the mares, churn the *cosmos* or mare's milk, make the skins in which it is put; they also look after the camels and load them. Both sexes look after the sheep and goats, sometimes the men, other times the women, milking them.

They dress skins with a thick mixture of sour ewe's milk and salt. When they want to wash their hands or head, they fill their mouths with water, which they let trickle onto their hands, and in this way they also wet their hair and wash their heads.

As to their marriages, you must know that no one among them has a wife unless he buys her; so it sometimes happens that girls are well past marriageable age before they marry, for their parents always keep them until they sell them. . . . Among them no widow marries, for the following reason: they believe that all who serve them in this life shall serve them in the next, so as regards a widow they believe that she will always return to her first husband after death. Hence this shameful custom prevails among them, that sometimes a son takes to wife all his father's wives, except his own mother; for the *ordu* of the father and mother always belongs to the youngest son, so it is he who must provide for all his

<sup>o</sup> **matrons:** married women.

<sup>o</sup> **Mo'al or Tartar:** Mongol.

<sup>o</sup> **Baatu:** grandson of Chinggis Khan.

<sup>o</sup> **ordu:** residence.

<sup>o</sup> **gruit:** sour curd.

Source: *The Journey of William of Rubruck*. . . , translated from the Latin and edited, with an introductory notice, by William Woodville Rockhill (London: Hakluyt Society, 1900), chaps 2, 7.

father's wives . . . and if he wishes it, he uses them as wives, for he esteems not himself injured if they return to his father after death. When then anyone has made a bargain with another to take his daughter, the father of the girl gives a feast, and the girl flees to her

relatives and hides there. Then the father says: "Here, my daughter is yours: take her wheresoever you find her." Then he searches for her with his friends till he finds her, and he must take her by force and carry her off with a semblance of violence to his house.

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## Using the Evidence: Perspectives on the Mongols

1. **Assessing sources:** What are the strengths and limitations of these documents for understanding the Mongols? Taking the position of their authors into account, what exaggerations, biases, or misunderstandings can you identify in these sources? What information seems credible and what should be viewed more skeptically?
2. **Characterizing the Mongols:** Based on these documents and on the text of Chapter 12, write an essay assessing the Mongol moment in world history. How might you counteract the view of many that the Mongols were simply destructive barbarians? How do your own values affect your understanding of the Mongol moment?
3. **Considering self-perception and practice:** How would you describe the core values of Mongol culture? (Consider their leaders' goals, attitudes toward conquered peoples, duties of rulers, views of political authority, role of women.) To what extent were these values put into practice in acquiring and ruling their huge empire? And in what ways were those values undermined or eroded as that empire took shape?



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# Visual Sources

## Considering the Evidence: The Black Death and Religion in Western Europe



Among the most far-reaching outcomes of the Mongol moment in world history was the spread all across Eurasia and North Africa of that deadly disease known as the plague or the Black Death. While the Mongols certainly did not cause the plague, their empire facilitated the movement not only of goods and people but also of the microorganisms responsible for this pestilence (see Map 12.2, p. 543 and pp. 545–47). The impact of the Black Death was catastrophic almost everywhere it struck, but it is from Western Europe that our most detailed accounts and illustrations have survived about how people responded to that calamity.

Religion permeated the cultural world of Western Europe in the fourteenth century. The rituals of the Roman Catholic Church attended the great passages of life such as birth, marriage, and death, while the major themes of Christian teaching—sin and repentance, salvation and heaven, the comfort available through Jesus, Mary, and the saints—shaped most people’s outlook on life and the world. It is hardly surprising, then, that many people would turn to religion in their efforts to understand and cope with a catastrophe of such immense proportions.

Seeking the aid of parish priests, invoking the intercession of the Virgin Mary, participating in religious processions and pilgrimages, attending mass regularly, increasing attention to private devotion—these were among the ways that beleaguered people sought to tap the resources of faith to alleviate the devastating impact of the plague. From Church leaders, the faithful heard a message of the plague as God’s punishment for sins. An Italian layman reflected this understanding when he wrote *A History of the Plague* in 1348. There he pictured God witnessing the world “sinking and sliding into all kinds of wickedness.” In response, “the quivering spear of the Almighty, in the form of the plague, was sent down to infect the whole human race.”<sup>42</sup>

Accompanying such ideas were religiously based attacks on prostitutes, homosexuals, and Jews, people whose allegedly immoral behavior or alien beliefs had invited God’s retribution. In Florence alone, some 17,000 men were accused of sodomy during the fifteenth century. Jews, who were sometimes held responsible for deliberately spreading the disease, were subject to terrible perse-

cution, including the destruction of synagogues, massacres, burnings, expulsion, and seizure of property. Although several popes and kings defended them, many Jews fled to Poland, where authorities welcomed their urban and commercial skills, leading to a flourishing Jewish culture there in the several centuries that followed.

The most well-known movement reflecting an understanding of the plague as God's judgment on a sinful world was that of the flagellants, whose name derived from the Latin word *flagella*, "whips." The practice of flagellation, whipping oneself or allowing oneself to be whipped, had a long tradition within the Christian world and elsewhere as well. Flagellation served as a penance for sin and as a means of identifying with Christ, who was himself whipped prior to his crucifixion. It reemerged as a fairly widespread practice, especially in Germany, between 1348 and 1350 in response to the initial outbreak of the plague. Its adherents believed that perhaps the terrible wrath of God could be averted by performing this extraordinary act of atonement or penance. Groups of flagellants moved from city to city, where they called for repentance, confessed their sins, sang hymns, and participated in ritual dances, which climaxed in whipping themselves with knotted cords sometimes embedded with iron points. Visual Source 12.1 is a contemporary representation of the flagellants in the town of Doornik in the Netherlands in 1349. The text at the bottom reads in part:

In [1349] it came to pass that on the day of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin (Aug. 15) some 200 persons came here from Bruges about noon. . . . [I]mmediately the whole town was filled with curiosity as to why these folk had come. . . . Meantime the folk from Bruges prepared to perform their ceremonies which they called "penance." The inhabitants of both sexes, who had never before seen any such thing, began to imitate the actions of the strangers, to torment themselves also by the penitential exercises and to thank God for this means of penance which seemed to them most effectual.

- Flagellation was but one form of penance. What other forms of self-inflicted punishment for sin are suggested in the image?
- What is the significance of the Christ on the cross that precedes the flagellants?
- Does the procession seem spontaneous or organized? Do Church authorities appear to have instigated or approved this procession?
- How might the flagellants have understood their own actions?
- Church authorities generally opposed the flagellant movement. Why do you think they did so?



**Visual Source 12.1** The Flagellants (Private Collection/The Bridgeman Art Library)

While many people certainly turned to religion for solace in the face of the unimaginable disaster of the Black Death, others found traditional Christian rituals and teachings of little use or difficult to reconcile with the overwhelming realities of the disease. For some the plague prompted an orgy of hedonism, perhaps to affirm life in the face of endless death or simply to live to the full in what time remained to them. A contemporary Italian observer noted, “As they wallowed in idleness, their dissolution led them into the sin of gluttony, into banquets, taverns, delicate foods, and gambling. The rushed headlong into lust.”<sup>43</sup> In 1394 a representative of the pope threatened excommunication for those who practiced debauchery in the graveyards.

Among the deepest traumas inflicted by the plague was its interference with proper Christian rituals surrounding death and dying, practices that were believed to assist the dead to achieve eternal rest and the living to accept their loss and find hope for reunion in heaven. Priests were scarce and sometimes refused to administer last rites, fearing contact with the dying. The sheer numbers of dead were overwhelming. City authorities at times ordered quick burials in mass graves to avoid the spread of the disease. A French observer in 1348 wrote, “No relatives, no friends showed concern for what might be happening. No priest came to hear the confessions of the dying, or to administer the sacraments



**Visual Source 12.2** Burying the Dead (Bibliothèque Royale de Belgique, Brussels, Belgium/The Bridgeman Art Library)

to them.”<sup>44</sup> The fourteenth-century Italian poet Boccaccio echoed those sentiments: “[T]here were no tears or candles or mourners to honor the dead; in fact no more respect was accorded to dead people than would nowadays be shown toward dead goats.”<sup>45</sup> Visual Source 12.2, published in 1352, illustrates a burial of plague victims of 1349 in the city of Tournai in what is now Belgium.

- How does this visual source support or contradict the written accounts excerpted above?
- How would you characterize the burial scene in this visual source?
- How does it differ from what an image of a proper Christian burial might contain? How might survivors of the plague have regarded such a burial?

The initial and subsequent outbreaks of the plague in Western Europe generated an understandable preoccupation with death, which was reflected in the art of the time. A stained-glass window in a church in Norwich, England, from about 1500 personified Death as a chess player contesting with a high Church official. A type of tomb called a cadaver tomb included a sculpture of the deceased as a rotting cadaver, sometimes with flesh-eating worms emerging from the body. An inscription on one such tomb in the Canterbury Cathedral in England explained the purpose of the image:

Whoever you be who will pass by, I ask you to remember,  
You will be like me after you die,  
For all [to see]: horrible, dust, worms, vile flesh.<sup>46</sup>



**Visual Source 12.3** A Culture of Death (St. Nicolair’s Church, Tallinn, now the Niguliste Museum. Photo: Visual Connection Archive)

This intense awareness of the inevitability of death and its apparent indiscriminate occurrence was also expressed in the Dance of Death, which began in France in 1348 as a ritual intended to prevent the plague or to cure the afflicted. During the performance people would periodically fall to the ground, allowing others to trample on them. By 1400 such performances took place in a number of parish churches and subsequently in more secular settings. The Dance of Death also received artistic expression in a variety of poems, paintings, and sketches. The earliest of the paintings dates from 1425 and depicts dozens of people—from an emperor, king, pope, and bishop to a merchant, peasant, and an infant—each dancing with skeletal figures enticing them toward death. Visual Source 12.3 reproduces a portion of one of these Dance of Death paintings, originally created by the German artist Berndt Notke in 1463 and subsequently restored and reproduced many times.

In the inscriptions at the bottom of the painting, each living character addresses a skeletal figure, who in turn makes a reply. Here is the exchange between the empress (shown in a red dress at the far right of the image) and Death. First, the empress speaks:

I know, Death means me!  
 I was never terrified so greatly!  
 I thought he was not in his right mind,  
 after all, I am young and also an empress.  
 I thought I had a lot of power,  
 I had not thought of him  
 or that anybody could do something against me.  
 Oh, let me live on, this I implore you!

And then Death replies:

Empress, highly presumptuous,  
I think, you have forgotten me.  
Fall in! It is now time.  
You thought I should let you off?  
No way! And were you ever so much,  
You must participate in this play,  
And you others, everybody—  
Hold on! Follow me, Mr Cardinal!<sup>47</sup>

- How is the status of each of the various living figures—from left to right: the pope, the emperor, the empress—depicted?
- What does the white sheet around each of the death images represent? What do their expressions suggest about their attitude toward the living?
- Notice that the living figures face outward toward the viewer rather than toward the entreating death figures on either side of them. What might this mean?
- Does the portrayal of death pictured here reflect Christian views of death or does it challenge them?
- How is the exchange between the empress and Death reflected in the painting?

The horrific experience of the Black Death also caused some people to question fundamental Christian teachings about the mercy and benevolence of God or even of his power to affect the outcome of the plague. A late-fourteenth-century clergyman in England expressed the dismay that many must have felt:

For God is deaf nowadays and will not hear us  
And for our guilt, he grinds good men to dust.<sup>48</sup>

In a similar vein, the fourteenth-century Italian Renaissance scholar Francesco Petrarch questioned why God's vengeance had fallen so hard on the people of his own time: "While all have sinned alike, we alone bear the lash." He asked whether it was possible "that God does not care for mortal men." In the end, Petrarch dismissed that idea but still found God's judgments "inscrutable and inaccessible to human senses."<sup>49</sup> Thus the Black Death eroded more optimistic thirteenth-century Christian views, based on the ideas of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, that human rationality could penetrate the mind of God.

Efforts to interpret Visual Source 12.4, a fifteenth-century English painting, raise similar issues to those expressed by Petrarch.



**Visual Source 12.4** In the Face of Catastrophe—Questioning or Affirming the Faith (HIP/Art Resource, New York)

- Why is the death figure smiling?
- How does this skeletal figure differ from the ones in Visual Source 12.3?
- How are the priest and the Christ figure depicted? What possible interpretations of their gestures can you imagine?
- Notice that the death figure spears the dying person in the side, an action that evokes the biblical account of Jesus being speared in his side during his crucifixion. What might the artist have sought to convey by such a reference?

- The captions, from top to bottom, read: Christ figure: “Tho it be late ere thou mercie came: yet mercie thou shalt have.” Priest figure: “Commit thy body to the grave: pray Christ thy soul to save.” Death figure: “I have sought thee many a day: for to have thee to my pray.” How do these captions influence your understanding of the painting?
  - Would you characterize the overall message of this painting as one of hopefulness, despair, or something else? What elements in the painting might support each of these conclusions?
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## Using the Evidence: The Black Death and Religion in Western Europe

1. **Assessing motives:** Do you think the artists who created these visual sources sought to reinforce traditional Christian teachings or to challenge them?
2. **Using art as evidence:** What do these visual sources tell you about the impact of and responses to the plague in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Western Europe?
3. **Connecting past and present:** Considering the various ways that people sought to avert, cope with, or explain the plague in these visual sources, what parallels to the human responses to crises or catastrophes in more recent centuries or in our own time can you identify?