

## Comparison in the Period from c. 1200 to c. 1450

*The world is divided into men who have wit and no religion and men who have religion and no wit.*

— Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) (980–1037), Persian philosopher and physician

**Essential Question:** In what ways was the process of state-building in various parts of the world between c. 1200 and c. 1450 similar and different?

**B**etween c. 1200 and c. 1450, states in core areas of civilization grew larger while smaller states declined. In this way, much of the world followed the same trend of building more centralized, more powerful states. However, the process varied from place to place. In most of Asia, the military strength of the Mongols created the largest land-based empire in world history. In West Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, the religion of Islam was a key part of state-building. In Europe, trade, both internal and with the more advanced civilizations of the Middle East, had greater impact.

### State-Building and New Empires

As stronger, more centralized states rose, the influence of nomadic societies began to wane by the 15th century. During this period, new empires emerged and states around the world expanded.

- The Song Dynasty in China continued a long period of technological and cultural progress.
- The Abbasid Caliphate in the Middle East was fragmented by invaders and shifts in trade. Following it, new Muslim states arose in Africa, the Middle East, and Spain.
- In South and Southeast Asia, the Chola Kingdom and Vijayanagar Empire used trade to build strong states, while the Delhi Sultanate in northern India was more land-based.
- In Africa, the rulers of Mali created an empire that was bigger and more centrally administered than the Empire of Ghana that preceded it.
- In the Americas, the Aztecs formed a tributary empire in Mesoamerica that relied on a strong military. The Inca Empire in the Andean region



used the elaborate mit'a system as a way to support state-building. In contrast, most of the Americas lacked centralized states.

- In Europe, feudal ties declined in importance as centralized states developed. This development was clearer in the Western European kingdoms of England and France than in Eastern Europe.
- Japan, unlike most states, became more decentralized and feudal.

## The Role of Religion in State-Building

One similarity in much of the world was that religion was a vital part of state-building. To help unite a diverse population, empires and states often turned to religion to strengthen political control over their territory. One excellent example of how religion worked with state-building was in the Islamic world. Through the unifying power of shared beliefs and a use of the common language of Arabic, Islam provided the basis for the legitimacy of rulers from West Africa to Southeast Asia.

**China and East Asia** Other states also were strengthened by religion. In China, the Confucian belief system was closely tied to civil service. The Song Dynasty relied on Confucian scholars to run a powerful, enduring bureaucracy. No other state had such a well-established and extensive system for conducting government affairs across such a large territory. The ability to implement laws and carry out imperial edicts was a key part of state-building in China.

Neo-Confucianism (see Topic 1.1) spread to Korea and Japan, allowing rulers in these East Asian regions to justify and consolidate their political power as well. Similarly, rulers in South and Southeast Asia relied on Hinduism and Buddhism to aid them in strengthening their states.

**Europe** In Europe, the relationship between Roman Catholic Church and state-building was somewhat different than in most of Eurasia. At times, the Church was part of the state-building process. However, because European states were so weak for most of the Middle Ages, the Church had provided an alternative structure for organizing society. Then, between 1200 and 1450, as more powerful states emerged in France and the Holy Roman Empire, the Church sometimes became a rival power.

**Diffusion of Religion** The spread of major religions during this time period resulted in the influence of religion over wide areas. Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity all encouraged their followers to convert non-believers. Therefore, missionary activity was an important factor in the decline in the practice of local religions in places such as Sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and East Asia. In South Asia, converts to Islam increased partly as a result of military invasions by Islamic armies from Central Asia. However, Hinduism remained the predominant religion in South Asia, setting the stage for intermittent periods of conflict and tolerance between followers of Islam and Hinduism on the sub-continent. Trade networks in the Indian Ocean,



South China Sea, East and Central Asia, and across the Sahara Desert helped to spread religions as commercial activity increased.

## State-Building Through Trade

Fueled by increased trade, cross-cultural exchanges of technology and innovation increased. Innovations in crop production, such as Champa rice that spread from Vietnam to China, helped the Song Dynasty feed and sustain a growing population. The resulting effect, a larger and more urban citizenry, supported the development of China's manufacturing capability—the largest in the world at the time. Porcelain, silk, steel, and iron production all increased during this time. Together, these changes built the Song into the strongest state in China since the time of the Han a millennium earlier.

Paper manufacturing, invented in China in the 2nd century B.C.E., made its way across Eurasia, reaching Europe around the 13th century. The resulting printed material led to increased literacy rates across Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. The focus on intellectual thought and learning led to advances in mathematics and medicine, especially in Islamic centers of learning such as the House of Wisdom in Bagdad.

Europe benefited from exchanges with the Middle East, and through it with the rest of Asia. Not all contact between Europe and Asia was peaceful. Muslims had conquered Spain by force in the 8th century and Christian crusaders attempted to seize lands they considered holy in the Middle East beginning around 1100. The Mongols fostered the transfer of knowledge, but only after they carried out brutal conquests. All of these contacts with Asia contributed to state-building in Europe. Between 1200 and 1450, the process was small and slow, held back by the manorial system and serfdom, but it was noticeable. After 1450, state-building would increase in speed and significance in Europe.

## The Impact of Nomadic Peoples

Nomadic peoples played a key role in the process of state building between c. 1200 and 1450. The Mongols, a pastoral people from the steppes of Central Asia, ruled over significant areas of Asia and Eastern Europe during the 13th century. (For more on the Mongols, see Topic 2.2.) The political stability resulting from Mongol dominance allowed trade across Eurasia to greatly expand. Cross-cultural interactions and transfers intensified and some of the first direct contacts between Europe and China since the classical period occurred, also facilitated by Mongol rule.

Similar to the Mongols, Turkish peoples, also from the Central Asian steppes, increased their dominance over large land-based empires in the eastern Mediterranean, Persia, and South Asia that lasted well past 1450. However, unlike the Mongols, who built their empire initially as a coordinated campaign by unified Mongol clans, different Turkish groups built separate empires. The Seljuk and Ottoman Turks became dominant

forces in the Mediterranean region while another Turkish group established an empire located in Persia and the surrounding territories.

The creation of these empires would be among the last major impacts of the interaction between settled and nomadic peoples. The role of nomads in commerce and cross-cultural exchange diminished as they were replaced by organized groups of merchants and trading companies.

## Patriarchy and Religion

Social organization in most cultures remained patriarchal. However, cultures varied. While religion often reinforced the power of men, its record was mixed. For example, convent life for Christians in Europe and in Jainist and Buddhist religious communities in South Asia provided women with opportunities for learning and leadership. In contrast, in China, women lost some independence as the custom of foot binding became more common.

Four Types of State-Building, c. 1200–c. 1450		
Processes	Description	Examples
<b>Emergence of New States</b>	States arise in land once controlled by another empire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mamluk Empire (formerly Abbasid territory)</li> <li>• Seljuk Empire (formerly Abbasid territory)</li> <li>• Delhi Sultanate (formerly Gupta territory)</li> </ul>
<b>Revival of Former Empires</b>	New leadership continues or rebuilds a previous empire with some innovations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Song Dynasty (based on the Han Dynasty)</li> <li>• Mali Empire (based on the Ghana Kingdom)</li> <li>• Holy Roman Empire (based on the Roman Empire)</li> </ul>
<b>Synthesis of Different Traditions</b>	A state adapts foreign ideas to local conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Japan (Chinese and Japanese)</li> <li>• Delhi Sultanate (Islamic and Hindu)</li> <li>• Neo-Confucianism</li> </ul>
<b>Expansion in Scope</b>	An existing state expands its influence through conquest, trade, or other means	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aztecs in Mesoamerica</li> <li>• Incas in South America</li> <li>• City-states in East Africa</li> <li>• City-states in Southeast Asia</li> </ul>