

# Cultural Consequences of Connectivity

*I have not told half of what I saw, for I knew I would not be believed.*

—Marco Polo (1245–1324)

**Essential Question:** What were the intellectual and cultural effects of the trade networks from c. 1200 to c. 1450?

**W**hether by caravan through the Sahara or Gobi deserts or by junk or dhow on the China Sea or Indian Ocean, goods, people, and ideas traveled with relative freedom through the networks of exchange in Afro-Eurasia in the years between c. 1200 and c. 1450. One reason for this free exchange was the stability of the Mongol Empire and the protection it offered merchants and travelers. The empire reached well past former boundaries, incorporating new people, goods, and ideas within its authority. Technological developments, such as gunpowder and paper from China, were diffused by trade. Literary and artistic interactions and cultural exchanges were documented by travelers such as Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta, who told of the wonders they saw and the extraordinary people they met. The known world became a larger place.

## Religious, Cultural, and Technological Effects of Interaction

The diffusion of different religions between c. 1200 and c. 1450 had varying effects. In some cases, the arrival of a new religion served to unify people and provide justification for a kingdom's leadership. It often also influenced the literary and artistic culture of areas to which it spread, where themes, subjects, and styles were inspired by the spreading religion. In other places, it either fused or coexisted with the native religions. The interactions resulting from increased trade also led to technological innovations that helped shape the era.

**Influence of Buddhism on East Asian Culture** Buddhism came to China from its birthplace in India via the Silk Roads, and the 7th-century Buddhist monk Xuanzang helped make it popular. Monks related Buddhism to familiar Daoist principles, and in time Buddhist doctrines fused with elements of Daoist traditions to create the syncretic faith Chan Buddhism, also known as Zen Buddhism. Although some leaders in China did not want China’s native religions diminished as a result of the spread of Buddhism, Chan Buddhism remained popular among ordinary Chinese citizens. Under the Song Dynasty (960–1279), many Confucians among the scholar gentry began to adopt its ideals into their daily lives. The development of printing had made Buddhist scriptures widely available to the Confucian scholar gentry. Buddhist writers also influenced Chinese literature by writing in the vernacular rather than the formal language of Confucian scholars, a practice that became widespread.



**Source:** Nezu Art Museum, Tokyo

Detail of dusk over fisher’s village, from the handscroll “Eight Views of Xiaoxiang” by Chan Buddhist painter Mu-ch’i, c. 1250, Nezu Art Museum. Mu-ch’i is credited with starting the “sketch style” of painting that uses the fewest lines possible to suggest a subject. His work was very influential in East Asian art.

Japan and Korea, countries in China’s orbit, also adopted Buddhism, along with Confucianism. In Korea, the educated elite studied Confucian classics, while Buddhist doctrine attracted the peasants. Neo-Confucianism was another syncretic faith that originated in China, first appearing in the Tang Dynasty but developing further in the Song Dynasty. Neo-Confucianism fused rational thought with the abstract ideas of Daoism and Buddhism and became widespread in Japan and Vietnam. It also became Korea’s official state ideology.





**Spread of Hinduism and Buddhism** Through trade, the Indian religions of Hinduism and Buddhism made their way to Southeast Asia as well. The sea-based Srivijaya Empire on Sumatra was a Hindu kingdom, while the later Majapahit Kingdom on Java was Buddhist. The South Asian land-based Sinhala dynasties in Sri Lanka became centers of Buddhist study with many monasteries. Buddhism’s influence was so strong under the Sinhala dynasties that Buddhist priests often advised monarchs on matters of government. (See Topic 1.3.)

The Khmer Empire in present-day Cambodia, also known as the Angkor Kingdom, was the most successful kingdom in Southeast Asia. The royal monuments at Angkor Thom are evidence of both Hindu and Buddhist cultural influences on Southeast Asia. Hindu artwork and sculptures of Hindu gods adorned the city. Later, when Khmer rulers had become Buddhist, they added Buddhist sculptures and artwork onto buildings while keeping the Hindu artwork.

**Spread of Islam** Through merchants, missionaries, and conquests, Islam spread over a wide swath of Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. The chart below summarizes some of the cultural influences of that expansion.

Cultural Influences of Islam in Afro-Eurasia	
Region	Influences
Africa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Swahili</b> language is a blend of Bantu and Arabic and is still widely spoken today.</li> <li>• Timbuktu became a center of Islamic learning.</li> <li>• Leaders of African states deepened Islamic ties through pilgrimages to Mecca.</li> </ul>
South Asia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Before Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism were popular.</li> <li>• After Islam arrived, Buddhists converted more readily than Hindus because they were disillusioned by the corruption among Buddhist priests.</li> <li>• With its emphasis on equality, Islam also attracted lower-caste Hindus.</li> <li>• Architecture blended Hindu designs with Islamic patterns.</li> <li>• <b>Urdu</b> language had influences from Sanskrit-based Hindi, as well as from Arabic and Farsi, a Persian language.</li> <li>• Bhakti poets and missionaries sought links between Hinduism and Islam.</li> </ul>
Southeast Asia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Muslim rulers on Java combined Mughal Indian features, local traditions, and Chinese-Buddhist and Confucian traits.</li> <li>• Traditional Javanese stories, puppetry, and poetry absorbed Muslim characters and techniques.</li> </ul>

**Scientific and Technological Innovations** Along with religion, science and technology traveled the trade routes. Islamic scholars translated Greek literary classics into Arabic, saving the works of Aristotle and other Greek



thinkers from oblivion. Scholars also brought back mathematics texts from India and techniques for papermaking from China. They studied medicine from ancient Greeks, Mesopotamians, and Egyptians, making advances in hospital care, including surgery. (See Topic 1.2.)

Improvements in agricultural efficiency, such as the use of Champa rice, spread from India to Vietnam and China. With a reliable food supply, the population grew, as did cities and industries, such as the production of porcelain, silk, steel, and iron. Papermaking reached Europe from China in the 13th century and along with printing technology helped lead to a rise in literacy.

Seafaring technology improved with **lateen sails**, the **stern rudder**, the **astrolabe**, and the **magnetic compass** as Chinese, Indian, and Southwest Asians expanded their knowledge of astronomy and other aspects of the natural world. Production of gunpowder and guns spread from China and influenced warfare as well.

Thanks, in part, to the writing of Marco Polo, historians have a good picture of the city of **Hangzhou** in China. It shows how trade supported urbanization. Hangzhou was large—it was home to about one million people—but other Chinese cities were larger. Chang’an had about two million people. However, Hangzhou was the center of culture in southern China, the home of poets such as Lu Yu and Xin Qiji, and other writers and artists. Located at the southern end of the Grand Canal, it was also a center of trade. Like other important cities of the era, such as Novgorod in Russia, Timbuktu in Africa, and Calicut in India, the city grew and prospered as its merchants exchanged goods. This trade brought diversity to Hangzhou, including a thriving community of Arabs.

Other cities on the trade routes that grew and thrived included **Samarkand** and **Kashgar**. (See Topic 2.1.) They were both known as centers of Islamic scholarship, bustling markets, and sources for fresh water and plentiful food for merchants traveling the Silk Roads.

#### Factors Contributing to Growth of Cities

- Political stability and decline of invasions
- Safe and reliable transportation
- Rise of commerce
- Plentiful labor supply
- Increased agricultural output

**Declining Cities** Kashgar, however, declined after a series of conquests by nomadic invaders and in 1389–90 was ravaged by Tamerlane. (See Topic 2.2.) Another once-thriving city, the heavily walled **Constantinople** in present-day Turkey, also suffered a series of traumatic setbacks. Mutinous Crusader armies weakened Constantinople after an attack in the Fourth Crusade in 1204 (see Topic 1.6), and in 1346 and 1349, the bubonic plague killed about half of the people in Constantinople. After a 53-day siege, the city finally fell to the Ottomans in 1453, an event some historians believe marks the end of the High



Middle Ages. (Connect: Describe the relationship between urban growth in Europe and later urban decline. (See Topic 1.6.)

### Factors Contributing to Decline of Cities

- Political instability and invasions
- Disease
- Decline of agricultural productivity

**Effects of the Crusades** Knowledge of the world beyond Western Europe increased as Crusaders encountered both the Byzantine and Islamic cultures. The encounters also increased demand in Europe for newfound wares from the East. In opening up to global trade, however, Western Europeans also opened themselves to disease. The plague, referred to as the **Black Death**, was introduced to Europe by way of trading routes. A major epidemic broke out between 1347 and 1351. Additional outbreaks occurred over the succeeding decades. As many as 25 million people in Europe may have died from the plague. With drastically reduced populations, economic activity declined in Europe. In particular, a shortage of people to work on the land had lasting effects on the feudal system. Also, exposure to new ideas from Byzantium and the Muslim world would contribute to the Renaissance and the subsequent rise of secularism.



Source: Hangzhou City Gate, China (1906), Public Domain

The pagoda behind the gate is a common Buddhist building design in China.

## Travelers' Tales

As exchange networks intensified and literacy spread as a result of paper and printing technology, an increasing number of travelers within Afro-Eurasia wrote about their journeys for eager readers.

**Marco Polo** In the late 13th century, **Marco Polo**, an Italian native from Venice, visited the court of Kublai Khan (see Topic 2.2). Chinese cities impressed Polo. After Polo returned to Italy in 1295, he wrote a book about his travels. However, many Europeans refused to believe his descriptions of China's size, wealth, and wonders. Only when other Europeans followed Polo's route to China did people widely accept that China was prosperous and innovative. Polo's captivating descriptions of the customs of the people he met intrigued Europeans. Polo wrote extensively about the high levels of urbanization he saw in the 13th century. Polo's point of view as a merchant kept him focused on trade-related matters.

They use paper money as currency. The men as well as the women are fair-skinned and handsome. Most of them always dress themselves in silk, as a result of the vast quantities of that material produced in Hangzhou, exclusive of what the merchants import from other provinces.

**Ibn Battuta** He was just 21 years old, **Ibn Battuta** (1304–1353), a Muslim scholar from Morocco, set out to see the world he read about.

I set out alone, having neither fellow-traveller in whose companionship I might find cheer, nor caravan whose part I might join, but swayed by an overmastering impulse within me and a desire long-cherished in my bosom to visit these illustrious sanctuaries.

Over 30 years, Ibn Battuta traveled through Central Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, China, Spain, North Africa, and Mali, mainly to Muslim lands. After telling his tales to the Sultan of Morocco, Battuta was told to “dictate an account of the cities which he had seen in his travel, and of the interesting events which had clung to his memory, and that he should speak of those whom he had met of the rulers of countries, of their distinguished men of learning, and of their pious saints.” His book *A Gift to Those Who Contemplate the Wonders of Cities and the Marvels of Traveling* provides a wealth of detail about the places he visited and their cultures. Unlike Polo, Battuta had the point of view of a Muslim devoted to his faith. His journey was in large part to learn as much as he could about Islam and its people and accomplishments.

**Margery Kempe** English mystic **Margery Kempe** (c. 1373–c. 1440), whose *The Book of Margery Kempe* was one of the earliest autobiographies in English, if not the first, could neither read nor write. She dictated her book to scribes who wrote down her descriptions of her pilgrimages to Jerusalem, Rome, Germany, and Spain. She does relate details of her travel experiences, such as being so overcome by the sight of Jerusalem as she approached it that she nearly fell off her donkey. However, her book is also significant because it is a firsthand account of a middle-class medieval woman's life. Kempe conveys both the intense spiritual visions and feelings of her mystical experiences and the trials of everyday life for a woman with 14 children.



**KEY TERMS BY THEME**

**ENVIRONMENT:** Disease  
Black Death

**CULTURE:** Travel Writers  
Marco Polo  
Ibn Battuta  
Margery Kempe

**CULTURE:** Language  
Swahili  
Urdu

**TECHNOLOGY:** Nautical  
Improvements  
lateen sail  
stern rudder  
astrolabe  
magnetic compass

**SOCIETY:** Cities  
Hangzhou  
Samarkand  
Kashgar  
Constantinople