



WHEN  
ASIA WAS  
THE  
WORLD

STEWART GORDON



DA CAPO PRESS  
A Member of the Perseus Books Group

## NOBLES AND NOTABLES

*Ibn Battuta, 1325–1356 CE*

In 1332 CE, the public area of the sultan of Delhi's palace consisted of several courtyards and a vast hall called Hazar Ustan, or Thousand Pillars. A contemporary observer noted, "The pillars are of painted wood and support a wooden roof, most exquisitely carved. The Sultan sits on a raised seat standing on a dais carpeted in white, with a large cushion behind him and two others as arm-rests on his left and right."<sup>1</sup> A hundred guards flanked him on the left and a hundred on the right. Immediately in front were his highest officials and behind them, more than a hundred nobles—all in silk robes. On each side was a row of judges and Muslim teachers of the city. Further back in the hall were distant relatives of the sultan, lower-ranked nobles, and military leaders.

In this setting was one whose special duty was to introduce foreigners to the sultan, Muhammad Tughluq. On this day, recently arrived Ibn Battuta from Morocco and his companions came forward with their gifts for the sultan. In the subsequent decade, Ibn Battuta saw this ceremony many times and described it in his memoirs:

The Sultan then addresses him in person with the greatest courtesy and bids him welcome. If he is a person who is worthy of honor, the Sultan takes him by the hand or embraces him, and

asks for some portion of his present. It is then placed before him, and if it consists in weapons or fabrics he turns it this way and that with his hand and expresses his approval of it, to set the donor at ease and encourage him by his gracious reception. He gives him a robe of honour and assigns him a sum of money . . . proportional to the donor's merits.<sup>2</sup>

It was a good day for both Ibn Battuta and his companions. The sultan treated them as notables and suggested suitable employment in his government. Seeing the sultan was a high-stakes gamble for Ibn Battuta. From a moneylender, he had borrowed the money for the very expensive gifts he offered the sultan and had no way to repay the loan other than the employment he sought. Still, funding of expensive presents to the sultan prior to employment was a familiar form of risk capital for traders.<sup>3</sup> Thousands of men had preceded Ibn Battuta in just such a venture.

Not yet thirty, Ibn Battuta arrived in Delhi with an entourage of nearly forty people, including male and female slaves, servants, and traveling companions. He had more than 1,000 horses, chests of fine clothes, and a string of pack animals, including camels. He had come a long way in the seven years since leaving Morocco in June 1325 CE, passionately sure that he wanted to go on pilgrimage to Mecca.

I set out alone, having neither fellow-traveller in whose companionship I might find cheer, nor caravan whose party I might join. . . . Both [my parents] and I were afflicted with sorrow at this separation. My age at the time was twenty-two years.<sup>4</sup>

Ibn Battuta set out from Morocco, fearful of the journey and in danger. Nomad bands from central Morocco and Tunisia regularly attacked caravans and even cities. Racked by fever, he joined

a small group that traveled fast to Tunis, a haven of safety. No one greeted him when they arrived.

I felt so sad at heart on account of my loneliness that I could not restrain the tears that started and wept bitterly. But one of the pilgrims, realizing the cause of my distress, came up to me with a greeting of friendly welcome, and continued to comfort me with friendly talk.<sup>5</sup>

At Tunis he joined a large caravan of pilgrims organized by one Abu Yaqub al-Susa. The coast still suffered from raids by Christian armies, as it had in the time of Abraham bin Yiju two centuries earlier. Ibn Battuta quotes a poet of the time: "How many there are who wander distraught on the land, despoiled of their goods! How many who spend their nights at sea bewailing captivity and perdition!"<sup>6</sup> The raids ruined the economy of Tunisia, and bandits were everywhere. Fortunately, the caravan included a troop of archers and was accompanied part of the way by more than 100 horsemen.

From the first, Ibn Battuta seems to have had a talent for self-promotion. Within the caravan, he managed to gain the position of *qazi*, judge and adviser on Islamic law, to a large group of Moroccan pilgrims.<sup>7</sup> Ibn Battuta came from a family of judges. He had the education and native intelligence to take advantage of such opportunities. He was not rich, but he clearly was also not poor. He contracted to marry the daughter of a magistrate from Tunis who was on the pilgrimage. She joined him at Tarabulus as the caravan continued along the North African coast. In what is now eastern Libya, he "became involved in a dispute with my father-in-law which made it necessary for me to separate from his daughter." He married again almost immediately, this time to the daughter of a scholar from Fez, presumably also in the caravan. When his bride joined him in coastal Egypt, Ibn Battuta "gave a wedding feast, at

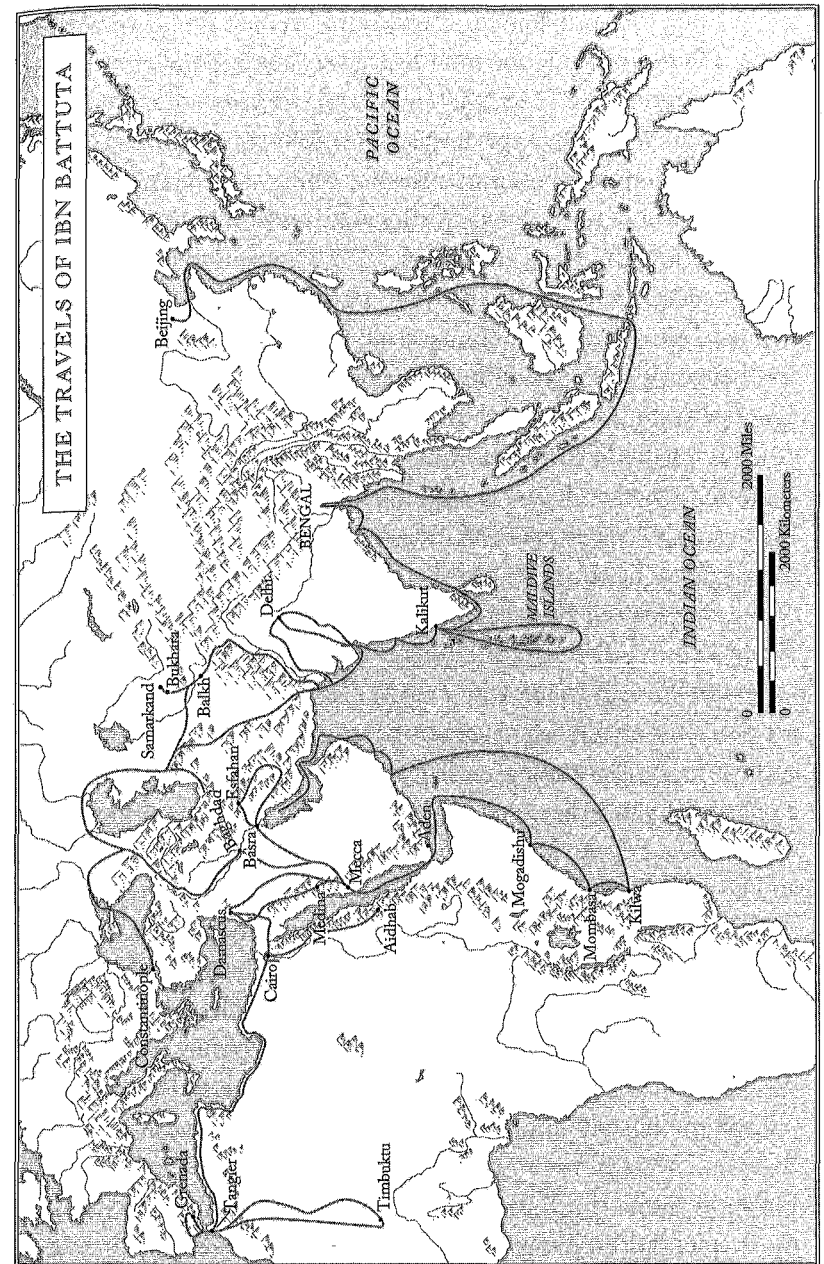
which I detained the caravan for a whole day, and entertained them all."<sup>8</sup> Neither this wife nor any children by her appear in the remainder of Ibn Battuta's four-volume autobiography. Perhaps she was another youthful folly sent back with her father to Fez.

Cairo, almost two centuries after Abraham bin Yiju settled there in his old age, remained a great metropolis.

It is said that in Cairo there are twelve thousand water-carriers who transport water on camels, and thirty thousand hirers of mules and donkeys, and that on its Nile there are thirty-six thousand vessels belonging to the Sultan and his subjects, which sail upstream to Upper Egypt and downstream to Alexandria and Damietta, laden with goods and commodities of all kinds. On the bank of the Nile opposite Cairo is the place known as al-Rawda which is a pleasure park and promenade, containing many beautiful gardens. The people of Cairo are fond of pleasure and amusement. I once witnessed a fete there. . . . All the merchants decorated their bazaars and had rich stuffs, ornaments and silken fabrics hung up in their shops for several days.<sup>9</sup>

On horseback, Ibn Battuta explored the towns of the Nile Delta and then, by boat, went up the Nile expecting to cross the Red Sea and complete the hajj to Mecca. It was a leisurely trip that ended at Aidhab, the same dusty port where two centuries earlier, Abraham bin Yiju disputed a 300-dirham bill from his consignee. Unfortunately, the ruling family of the Aidhab region was at war with the forces of the sultan of Cairo and regularly sank ships on the Red Sea. Ibn Battuta could go no farther and returned to Cairo by boat.

Ibn Battuta already knew that he loved travel at least as much as religious learning. During the Cairo trip, he evolved a pattern that accommodated both passions. On arrival at a city or town, he



sought out the well-known clerics and spent a few hours with them. He did not stay for months, as was common among those traveling in search of learning, but instead just listened to a sermon or had a conversation. Typical was this encounter in El Bahnasa on the Nile: "Amongst those I met there was the learned Qadi, Sharaf al-Din, a noble-minded and worthy man, and I met there also the pious sheikh Abu Bakr al-Ajmani, with whom I lodged and who made me his guest."<sup>10</sup> Ibn Battuta particularly treasured a set of letters of introduction that he received from a well-known cleric in another town along the Nile. As he traveled, Ibn Battuta kept his eyes open and learned much more than religious doctrine. He met as many of the local elite as possible, gathered stories of those he could not meet, and used everything for later stories and parables. He observed local shrines, architecture, products, and customs. Of the towns along the Nile, he noted that Bush was "the chief center of the Egyptian linen industry and exported it hence to all parts of Egypt and to Africa."<sup>11</sup> El Bahnasa was the center of the woolen industry. The town of Mallawi had eleven functioning sugar presses. "It is one of their customs never to hinder an indigent person from going into any pressing shed, so that a poor man will come with a piece of warm bread and throw it into the vat in which sugar is being cooked, and then pick it out again soaked with sugar and go off with it."<sup>12</sup>

After he left the caravan in Alexandria, Ibn Battuta entered the network of donation-supported hostels and colleges (*madrassas*) found in all Muslim cities of the time. For the Muslim elite, facilitating trade, travel, and pilgrimage were pious, prestigious, and sometimes profitable acts. On the Nile trip, Ibn Battuta praised the hostel of Sahib Taj al-Din ibn Hanna south of Cairo that was endowed to provide food for all learned travelers. And at Halab in Syria, Ibn Battuta described the mosque as "one of the most splendid buildings of its kind, its pulpit inlaid with ivory

and ebony," and the adjacent school corresponded to it "in beauty of plan and execution."<sup>13</sup>

This system of elite-supported institutions for travel and study sounds strangely like the Buddhist monasteries visited by Xuanzang (Chapter 1) and may have been modeled on them. This Islamic system of supporting those traveling in search of learning originated in Central Asia, the very area where Buddhist monasteries had supported travelers in similar pursuits for 1,000 years.<sup>14</sup> Like Buddhism, Islam demanded personal travel for spiritual development and learning.<sup>15\*</sup> Serious study meant not just the one-time pilgrimage to Mecca required of every Muslim but learning from a variety of scholars and clerics in different cities and schools.

After Ibn Battuta made his return trip down the Nile, he stayed only one night in Cairo and then set off for Mecca by the northern land route along the coast of present-day Egypt, Israel, and Lebanon. On the way to Damascus, Ibn Battuta visited Akko, Sour, Saida, and Trablousi, as well as the inland holy city of Jerusalem. By 1325 CE, Turkish forces had retaken all the crusader states along this coast, though many places were still in ruins from the wars between Christian and Muslim armies. Ibn Battuta noted the manufactures and the specialties of the towns he passed through.

We traveled next to the town of [Beirut]. It is a small place, but with fine bazaars, and its congregational mosque is of striking beauty. Fruit and iron are exported from there to Egypt.<sup>16</sup>

In his memoir, Ibn Battuta wrote eight pages describing the architectural wonder of the main mosque in Damascus, but he

\*At the time, there was a parallel tradition of Jewish scholars wandering in search of knowledge.

wrote many more pages on the people of his developing network: imams of the mosques, and teachers and notables.

There are in this mosque several "circles of instruction" in the various branches of [sacred] knowledge, while the traditionalists read the books of Tradition, sitting in high chairs, and the Qur'an-readers recite in pleasing voices morning and evening. It contains also a number of teachers of the Book of God, each of whom leans his back upon one of the pillars of the mosque, dictating to the children and making them recite. . . .<sup>17</sup>

In Damascus, Ibn Battuta attended lectures on *Sabih* (a book of the sayings of the Prophet written around 850 CE) and proudly noted that he had been formally licensed to teach the book.

If the dates given in the memoir are accurate, Ibn Battuta was a busy man. He was in Damascus for only twenty-two days. Besides listening to lectures, he married again. This union produced a son, mentioned in a chance reference later in the memoir. Ibn Battuta left his pregnant wife in Damascus and joined a huge pilgrim caravan bound for the holy cities of Medina and Mecca.

From the time of Muhammad, one pilgrimage to Mecca, known as the hajj, was an obligation of every Muslim. By the fourteenth century, the hajj was a fully organized tour. The journey from Damascus started with well-provisioned rest stops and sites associated with Muhammad but included several days of desert travel and some danger from heat and sandstorms. The caravan stopped for four days at the city of Medina, where Muhammad had preached and lived. Days were spent in visiting holy places.

We halted at the Gate of Peace to pay our respects, and prayed at the noble Garden between the tomb [of the Apostle] and the noble pulpit. We kissed the fragment that remains of the palm-

trunk that whimpered for the Apostle of God . . . which is now attached to a pillar. . . .<sup>18</sup>

Nights were spent in the city's mosques, listening to recitations of the Quran by candlelight. Incidentally, Ibn Battuta's memoir tells us that the ceiling and the gilded trim of the main mosque at Medina were made of teak, undoubtedly from the Malabar Coast of India.<sup>19</sup>

After seven days of travel with nights in well-watered villages, the caravan arrived at Mecca. Each day of the hajj had specified sacred activities in and around Mecca. Ibn Battuta and his traveling companions first went to the Ka'aba, the holiest site in Mecca.

We made around it the [sevenfold] circuit of arrival and kissed the holy Stone; we performed a prayer of two bowings at the Maqam Ibrahim and clung to the curtains of the Ka'ba . . . between the door and the Black Stone, where prayers are answered; we drank the waters of Zamzam. . . .<sup>20</sup>

Including his side trips and excursions, it had taken Ibn Battuta sixteen months to reach Mecca.

On the hajj, Ibn Battuta met men from all over the Muslim world. He met one Mansard bin Shaik of Medina, whom he encountered twice subsequently, once in Syria and once in Bukhara. Another fellow pilgrim was named Ali bin Hujr al-Umawi. He came from Granada in Spain, and later Ibn Battuta offered him patronage in Delhi.<sup>21</sup>

Most pilgrims returned to their lives after the week of holy activities at Mecca. Ibn Battuta, however, stayed, studied, and made contacts. During his year in Mecca, Ibn Battuta met the man who served as senior ambassador from the sultan of Delhi and regularly traveled between India and Mecca with donations from the Indian court. He also came across a fellow jurist who was a friend of his

father's from his hometown of Tauja, Morocco. These men were only a sample of tens of thousands who traveled far and found employment as teachers, judges, clerics, administrators, and soldiers.

By the twelfth century there existed—for the first time—a world largely without borders for educated men. These were men who felt at home everywhere within the vast region stretching from Spain to the port cities of China. Their skills in law and religious teaching were equally applicable and equally desired across the whole Muslim world. Many cities attracted these learned travelers, and they made their mark in their adopted homes. Ibn Battuta found that the “controller of the judicial administration” at Medina was from Tunis, where his own family was still well connected. Scholars at Medina included men from Fez, Cairo, and Granada. Among the notable scholars of Damascus, one was from Seville, Spain, and another from Marrakech, Morocco. At Mashed, in southern Iraq, the religious and political head of the city had a brother who lived and worked in Spain and Gibraltar. Near Shiraz, in Persia, Ibn Battuta visited the hostel of Shaikh Abu Iasq, which received money from patrons ranging all the way from the Middle East to coastal India to China.<sup>22</sup>

Overall, the number of people who traveled to find employment was large, probably in the hundreds of thousands. At the time, there were more than a dozen Islamic capital cities and hundreds of smaller cities, any of which might offer employment.

After a year in Mecca, Ibn Battuta joined the caravans again, consumed by the desire to “travel through the earth.”<sup>23</sup> Soon he spent less time in donation-supported hostels and more in the company of kings and nobles. He learned courtly manners and customs. He left Baghdad and joined the entourage of Sultan Abu Sa'id, in order “to see the ceremonial observed by the king of al-'Iraq in his journeying and encamping.”<sup>24</sup> This sultan was a fifth-generation descendant of the empire builder Genghis Khan (1162–1222) and ruled much of the Middle East at the time. Ibn

Battuta watched the daily ceremony of this great Mongol king: the processions, musicians, soldiers, banners, and ritual of attendance by the nobles, noting their “handsome robes.”

He accompanied the king for almost two weeks, next traveled with one of the king's nobles for ten days, then returned to the king's camp, “where the amir told the sultan about me and introduced me into his presence.” Ibn Battuta was ready with a stock of stories when “he asked me about my country.” Ibn Battuta came away from the interview with “a robe and a horse” and “provisions and mounts” for the whole of his next trip.<sup>25</sup> More important, the sultan wrote letters of introduction to the governors of Baghdad and two other cities on his route.

Ibn Battuta was suitably impressed by the ceremony of the camp and train of Sultan Abu Sa'id.

[On setting out] each of the amirs comes up with his troops, his drums and his standards, and halts in a position that has been assigned . . . either on the left wing or the right wing. When they all have taken up their positions and their rank are set in perfect order, the king mounts, and the drums, trumpets, and fifes are sounded for departure.<sup>26</sup>

Over the next six years, Ibn Battuta honed his courtly skills in Persia, Constantinople, the Crimea, the Caucasus, and what is today Uzbekistan and Afghanistan. He learned how to make a courtly greeting from horseback and on foot. He knew the names and origins of the fine fabrics of the day, which is evident in such descriptions as “a tunic of Egyptian linen, a furred mantle of Jerusalem stuff” and “kamkha, which are silken fabrics manufactured at Baghdad, Tabriz, Nishapur, and in China.”<sup>27\*</sup> Kingly

\*Ibn Battuta was upset when he met a king who was not attired in suitably luxurious clothes.

presents of fine robes made him suitable for court. He found that whether he attended a Muslim, a Christian, or an animist court, courtly presents were similar across much of Asia. Such gifts included silk robes, jeweled weapons, gold, horses, and slaves. In a year or two, Ibn Battuta became something of a connoisseur of horses—and slave girls. He received and gave several slave girls as gifts and bought several more on his circuitous route from Damascus to Delhi. The purchase of concubines for personal pleasure was yet another aspect of slavery in the Asian world. The memoir names none of these girls, nor do they seem important to Ibn Battuta's entourage. He described his traveling companions with more detail and more affection.

In Damascus, across Turkey and Persia, and in India, Ibn Battuta occasionally stayed in guesthouses of various Sufi orders. Who were these Sufis? Unlike other Muslims, Sufis believed (and still believe) that there is the possibility of direct, ecstatic experience of God and that their special practices—dancing, chanting, poetry, numerology, and mystical allusions—put one in a state where this might happen. This direct experience of God was more important than daily prayers and Sharia law, though most Sufis follow convention as a practical requirement of living in a Muslim world.

In the beginning, Sufi centers consisted of single teachers who took up residence at an existing guesthouse or caravan stop and instructed men who came and went in search of knowledge. A few of these teachers developed their own methods, which students maintained and developed after the teacher's death. Soon, in various cities where students settled, one found places where the method was taught, including rest houses for students. As might be expected, a bureaucracy quickly developed to support these institutions, giving rise to endowments, officials, initiation, rules and regulations, and ties to a designated center of the teachings. Many offices became hereditary and their endowments became government sponsored.<sup>28</sup> Well before Ibn Battuta's time, Sunni branches

of Islam accepted Sufi teachings as complementary (rather than threatening) to their own more legalistic approach. By the fourteenth century, some Sufi orders were more than five centuries old, but new ones occasionally appeared around a particularly dynamic teacher.

Some Sufi orders developed only regionally, such as in North Africa or Persia, but many spread to cities of the Middle East, Central Asia, and into India. The Sufi orders really came into their own after the fall of Baghdad to the Mongols in 1258 CE. The caliphate, the central institution of Islam, was no more. Seventy-five years later, when Ibn Battuta traveled, chains of Sufi rest houses and schools were the strongest remaining large-scale institutions of Islam.

In his travels, Ibn Battuta soon discovered that like kingly presents, much of kingly ceremony was shared across Asia, and even beyond. In several courts he noticed the custom of presenting and chewing betel leaf and areca nut. Although the leaf and nut were native to India, the custom had spread through all courts of the Middle East and the east coast of Africa. Betel from the hand of a king was one of the highest honors a man could receive.<sup>29</sup> Ibn Battuta would later encounter the kingly presentation of betel throughout Southeast Asia and southern China. Kings were also surrounded by a host of common royal symbols, such as the parasol, the fly-whisk standard, and drums. These symbols and ceremonies transcended language, region, and religion.

Soon, Ibn Battuta was able to tell one king about another, information kings eagerly sought. Every king was surrounded by rivals, factions, squabbling nobles, and a necessary but unwieldy bureaucracy. Kings particularly wanted to know about the successful strategies, symbols, and ceremonies in other courts. Ibn Battuta's conversations with kings were, in a sense, the management seminars of the day; Ibn Battuta was a particularly successful management consultant. The king of Yemen asked Ibn Battuta



about the sultan of Morocco, "and about the king of Egypt, the king of al-'Iraq, and the king of Lurs, and I answered all the questions that he asked concerning them. His vazier [the vizier, a high executive officer] was in his presence, and the king commanded him to treat me honourably and arranged for my lodging."<sup>30</sup>

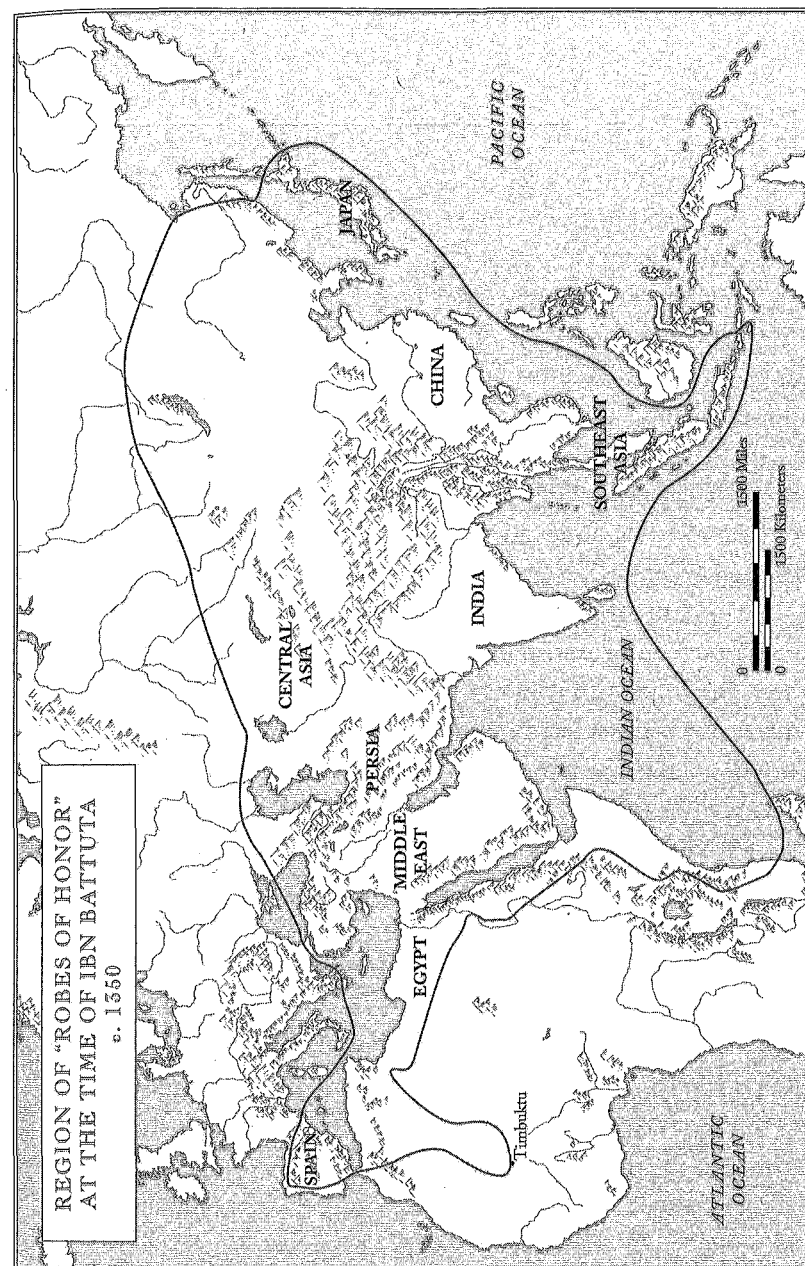
Ibn Battuta also traveled to the east coast of Africa and found it connected by religion, trade, and custom to the Asian world. The main cities were Mogadishu, Kilwa, Mombasa, and Zanzibar and all were Muslim. Their economies were based on the export, mainly to India, of slaves, gold, and horses and the import of Indian cotton. African ivory was imported all over the Asian world. Ibn Battuta found the people exotic, but the customs were familiar. The sultan of Mogadishu presented betel and robes of honor to Ibn Battuta, about which he noted:

[T]heirs consist of a silk wrapper which one ties around his waist in place of drawers (for they have no acquaintance with these), a tunic of Egyptian linen with an embroidered border, a furred mantle of Jerusalem stuff, and an Egyptian turban with an embroidered edge.<sup>31</sup>

Deep in Central Asia, Ibn Battuta met a sultan and received similar gifts for his stories of kings.

After I had saluted him he sat down and asked me about myself and my journey, and whom I had met of sultans; I answered all of his questions and after a short stay he went away and sent a horse with a saddle and a robe.<sup>32</sup>

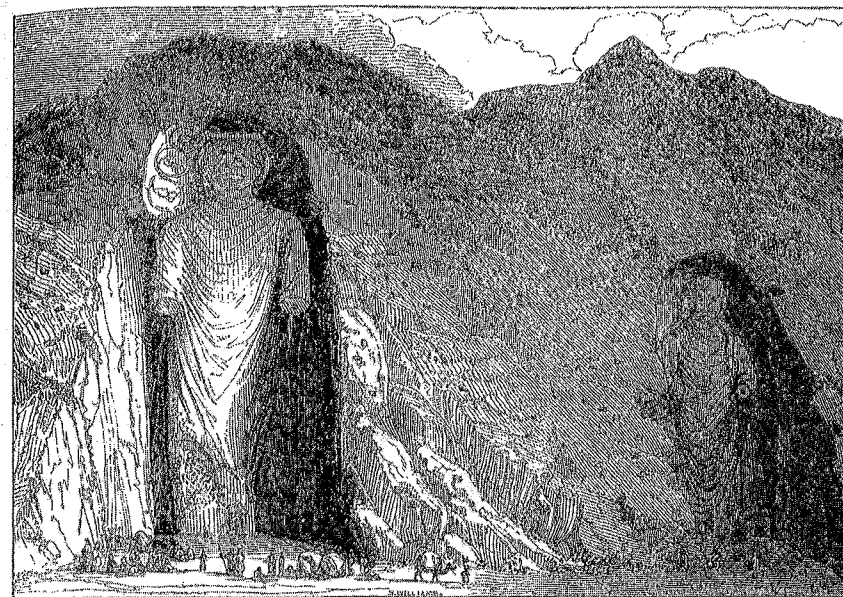
It was from kings that Ibn Battuta gradually acquired horses, robes, gold, and furs. His entourage grew as he received slaves and accepted companions into his train.



This, then, is the background to Ibn Battuta's entourage of forty people, over 1,000 horses, and chests of fine robes with which he arrived at Delhi. He had become a "notable," had stories to tell, ceremonies to describe, and reasonable expectations of kingly patronage. Ibn Battuta was, at that point, 55,000 silver dirhams in debt for his gifts to the sultan, but the gamble was beginning to look like it would pay off. In India, like many other soldiers, clerics, and judges, Ibn Battuta found more than patronage—he found employment. The sultan of Delhi hired him as one of the chief judges of the city, and he filled this well-paid post through famine, factional conflict, and court intrigue for nine years.<sup>33</sup> Ibn Battuta could fill this post, though he knew no local language, because Sharia law across the whole of the Muslim world was essentially the same.<sup>34</sup> His duties to the king also included management of the benevolent endowment of a prominent mausoleum.<sup>35</sup>

In 1341 CE, Ibn Battuta left Delhi for the last time on a diplomatic mission to transport robes, gold, slaves, and other presents from the sultan of Delhi to the emperor of China. The entourage traveled southwest across India to Cambay, a major port in Gujarat. Ibn Battuta reports that the presents were lost in a shipwreck. Present-day scholars doubt the authenticity of this mission; there is no corroborating evidence in Chinese or Indian records.

Ibn Battuta, for whatever reasons, could not return to Delhi and traveled down the west coast of India to Malabar. At Cambay, Honar (near Mumbai), Kalikut, and Cochin, he found branches of Sufi orders. Local followers and their lay supporters used these cities as a trading network to the Middle East. At Mangalore, he found the spice trade just as active as it was two centuries earlier in the time of Abraham bin Yiju (Chapter 5). "This is the town at which most of the merchants from Fars [Persia] and al-Yaman [Yemen] disembark, and pepper and ginger are exceedingly abundant there."<sup>36</sup> Unlike Abraham's letters, Ibn Battuta's memoir



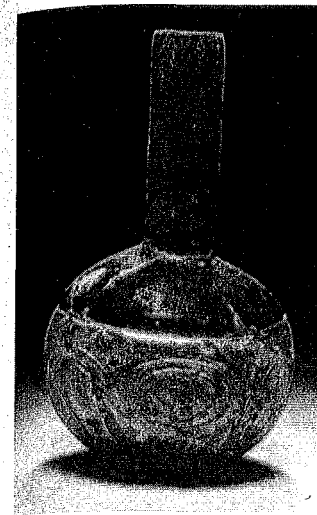
A nineteenth century engraving of the Bamian Buddhas showing the sculptures largely intact. They were destroyed by the Taliban in 2001 CE. (Alexander Burnes, *Travels into Bokhara* [London: J. Murray, 1834])



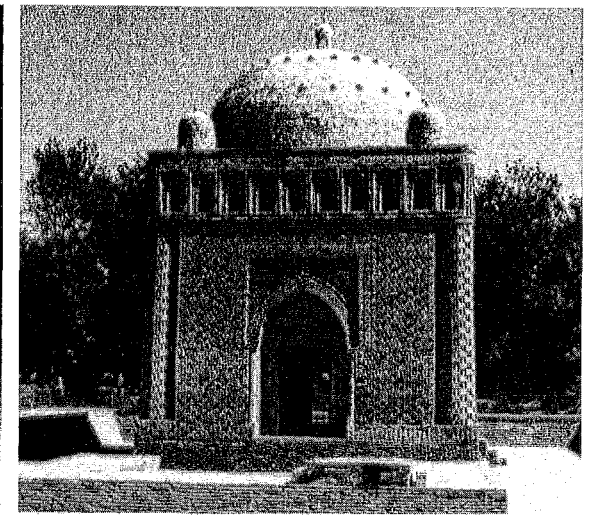
Ruins of the Nalanda Monastery, where Xuanzang studied and copied texts for five years. The small cubicles are monks' cells. (American Institute of Indian Studies. AR 020800)



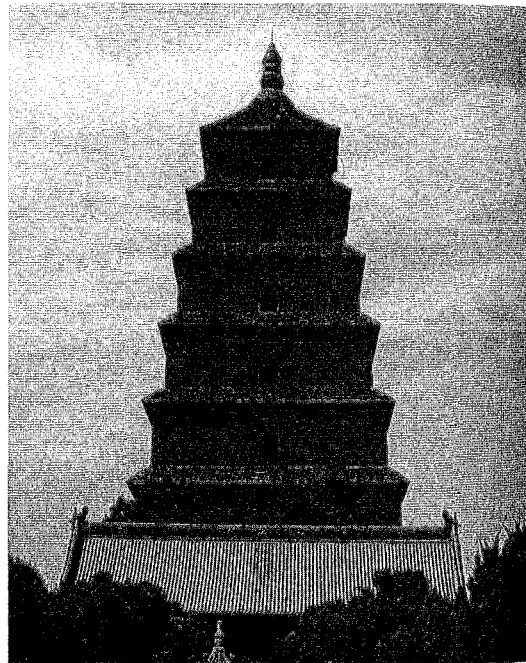
A wall painting of Xuanzang's expedition on its way back to China. Note the white elephant carrying precious Buddhist texts. Located on Xuanzang's route in a cave at the Dunhuang Buddhist monastery, the scene was probably painted within a century after his travels. (The Lo Collection)



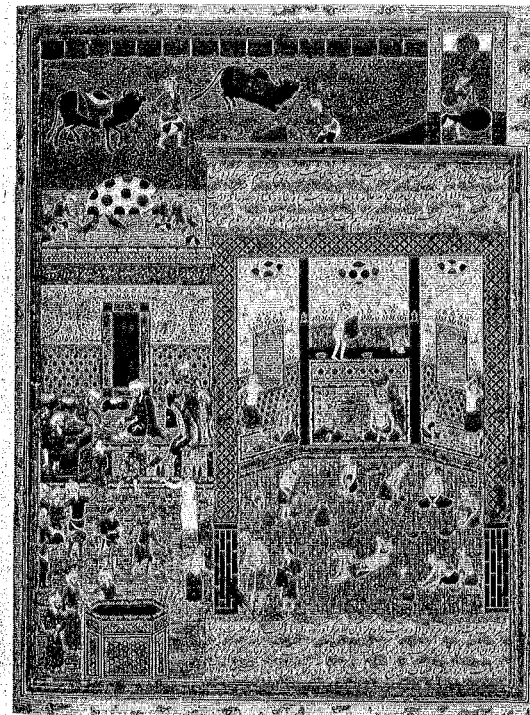
An elegant glass flask of the type used by courtiers like Ibn Fadlan in sophisticated Baghdad. (*Glass Flask, Eastern Mediterranean, 11th Century, Los Angeles County Museum M.45.3.44*)



Tomb of Ismaili Samani in Bukhara. It was standing when Ibn Fadlan's entourage passed in 921, when Ibn Sina studied there in the eleventh century, when Ibn Battuta visited in the fourteenth century, and when Babur attacked the city in the fifteenth century. (Photograph by Galen F. Frysinger. USED BY PERMISSION.)



The Wild Goose pagoda built in 652 CE at Changan to house the texts Xuanzang brought from India. (Asian Studies Program, University of Florida)



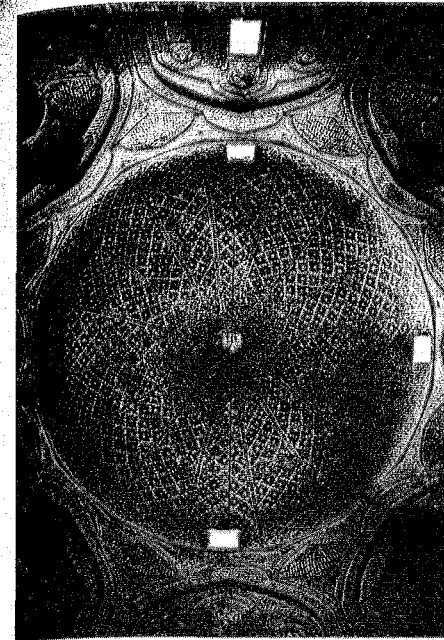
A bathhouse typical of Muslim cities across the Asian world, from Spain to India. Ibn Fadlan appreciated one in the far reaches of the Caucasus, even though his beard froze from cold on his way back to his lodgings. (*Firdawsi Receiving Wages in a Bathhouse, Page from a Manuscript of the Shahnama [Book of Kings, c. 1550-1575], Los Angeles County Museum M.73.5.591*)



The Astrolabe of Ahmad and Muhammad of Esfahan, dated 984 CE. The earliest extant astrolabe, it calculates the position of thirty-seven stars for five different latitudes. Similar tenth century instruments are known from the Middle East and Spain and are typical of the flowering of scientific knowledge in the ninth through the thirteenth century Asian world. (The Museum of Science, Oxford)

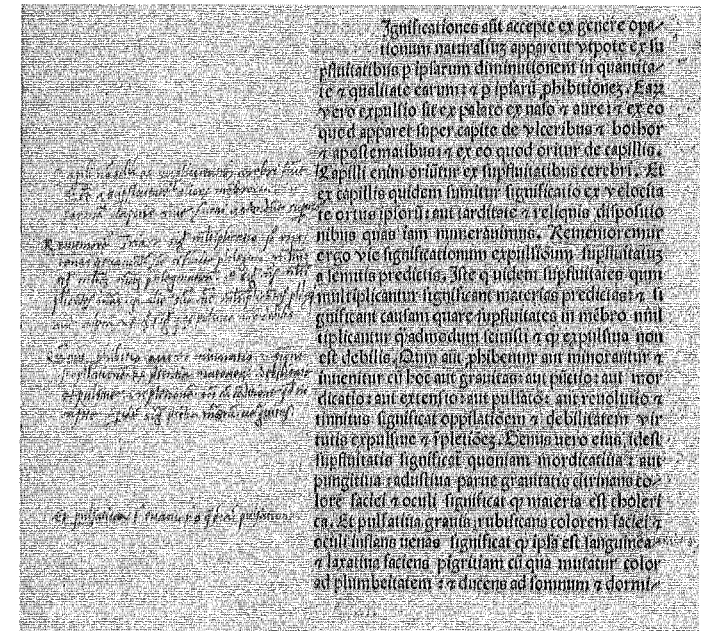


Written on paper, rather than older materials, this beautiful Koran is from the time of Ibn Sina. Paper had arrived from China only two centuries earlier, but local inventors quickly discovered that pounded linen made a superior product—smooth, supple, and tough. (Koran transcribed by Ibn al-Banwab, Baghdad, 1000–1001 Chester Beatty Library, Dublin Is. 1431, fol. 286r)



The dome of the Ardestan mosque built around the time Ibn Sina was in Hamdan, some 400 miles to the west. The dome is a superb early example of complex brickwork, probably based on the new mathematics developing in the region. (Photograph by Sussan Babaie, University of Michigan.)

Ibn Sina's *Cannon of medical information*, in Latin translation, was one of the most widely used books in medieval Europe. This version was printed in 1476 CE, less than thirty years after the Gutenberg Bible. Note the handwritten commentary in the margins by a medieval doctor. (University of Michigan, Special Collections, Incum.129)





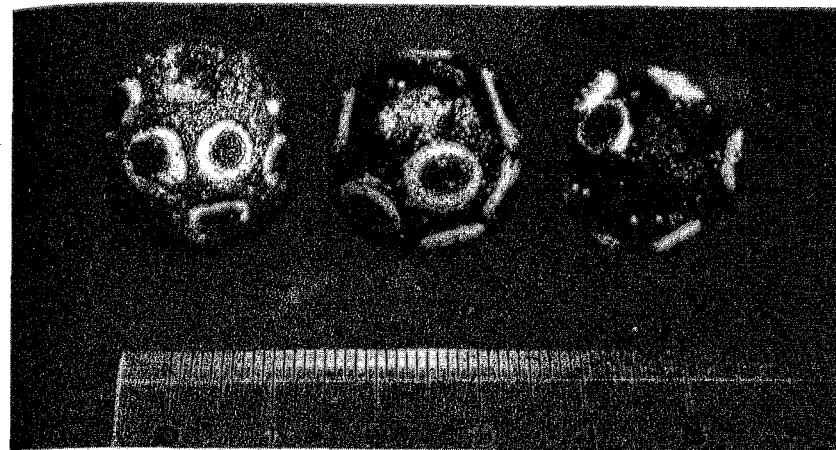
The decorated reverse side of a Chinese mirror which lay on the floor of the Java Sea for a thousand years before being excavated from the Intan Shipwreck. (Photo by Michael Flecker.)



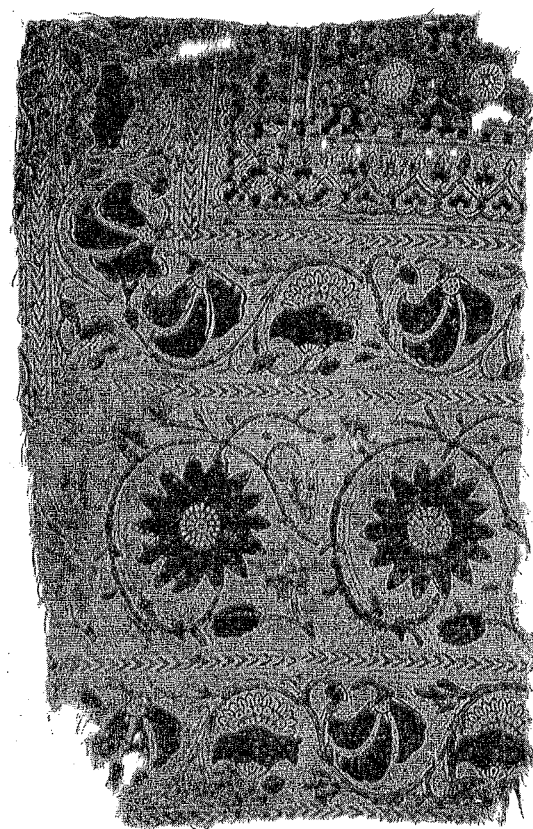
Buddhist Tantric ritual object known as a Vajra (handheld lightning bolt). This and other Buddhist objects were on the way from Bengal to Java and formed part of the Intan shipwreck horde. (Photo by Michael Flecker.)



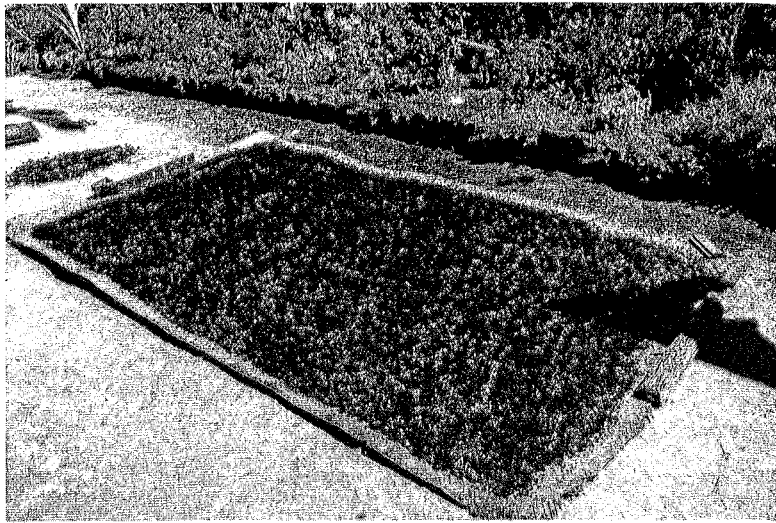
Chinese silver ingots from the Intan shipwreck. Note the Chinese characters on the central piece, which give a government guarantee of the purity of the silver. (Photo by Michael Flecker.)



"Eye" beads, manufactured in the Middle East and found in the Intan shipwreck off the Java Coast. Such beads have been highly valued in Southeast Asia for more than two thousand years and were routinely traded for incense, spices, and medicines. (Photo by Michael Flecker.)



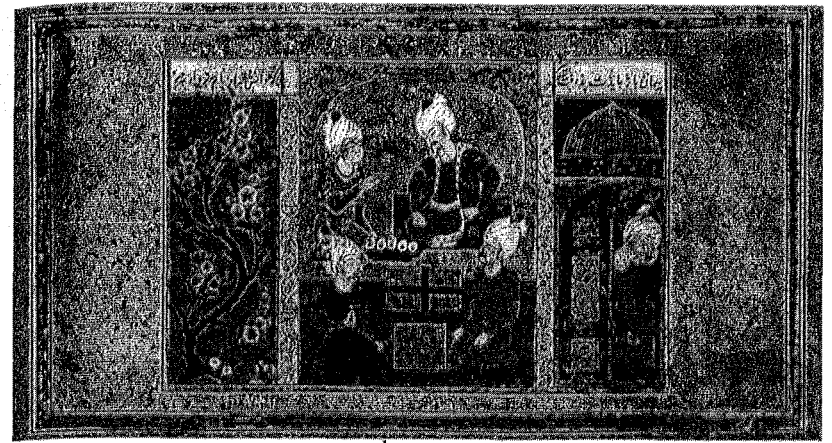
Printed cotton from Gujarat on the west coast of India that was excavated near the Cairo Geniza. Similar patterns have been found in Indonesia, suggesting a sophisticated production and trade in these textiles that spanned Asia. The earliest examples date from the twelfth century, the time of Abraham bin Yiju, (Kelsey Museum, University of Michigan. Gujarat Floral, Chevron and Vine, Acc#000.09.4139. Ann Arbor.)



As in the time of Abraham bin Yiju, freshly picked pepper berries must dry in the sun for three days before packing and shipping. (Photo by the author.)

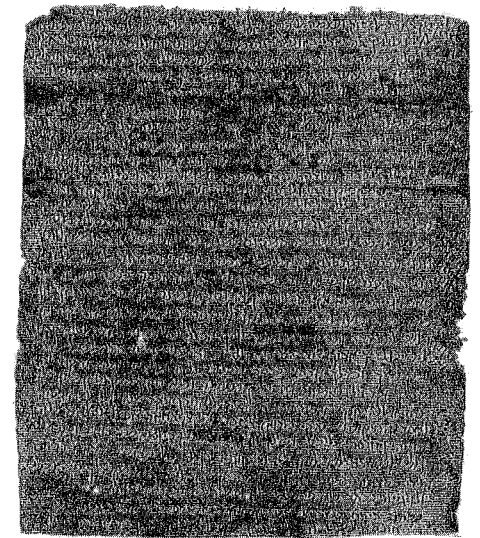


Solomon Schechter working on the Cairo Geniza documents, shortly after the opening of the repository in the 1890s. Of the more than 140,000 documents found, some 40,000 concern everyday life and trade. (Cambridge University Library T-S 10 J10.15 Recto.)

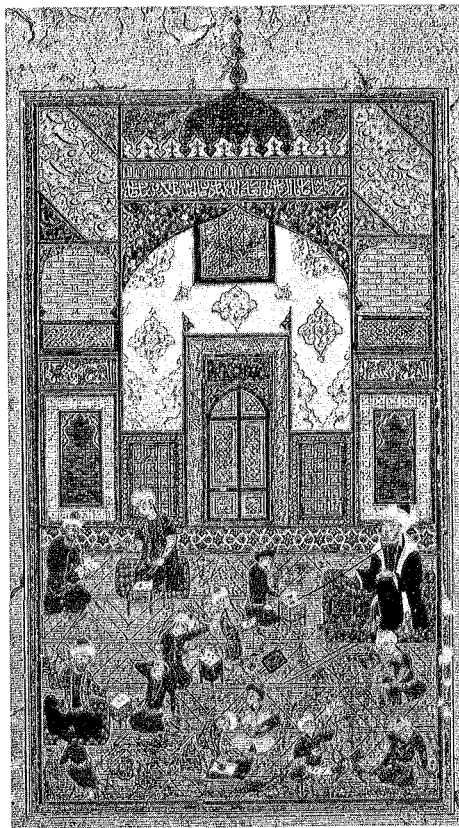


Chess was played throughout the Asian world, by the famous, such as Ghenghis Khan, and the ordinary, such as Abraham bin Yiju, the pepper trader. (*The Vizier Buzurgmehr Showing the Game of Chess to King Khusraw Anushirwan, Page from a Manuscript of the Shahnama [Book of Kings] Turkey, 1525-1575. Los Angeles County Museum M.73.5.586*)

In this letter, Abraham bin Yiju desperately inquired about the circumstances of his brothers and sisters who had been kidnapped from Tunisia to Christian Sicily. Against all odds, the letter did reach them and Abraham eventually rescued them all. (Taylor-Schechter Collection, Cambridge University Library)



Blue and white Chinese floor tiles of the Jewish Synagogue, Cochin, India. (Photo by the author.)



Teaching institutions like this were found in cities from Spain to China. Ibn Sina studied in a similar school in Bukhara and Ibn Battuta stayed in such schools during his early travels in the Middle East. (A School Scene, Painting from a Manuscript of Yusuf and Zulaykh Jami. Iran, Bukhara, 1564-1565/A.H. 972. Los Angeles County Museum M.73.5.440)

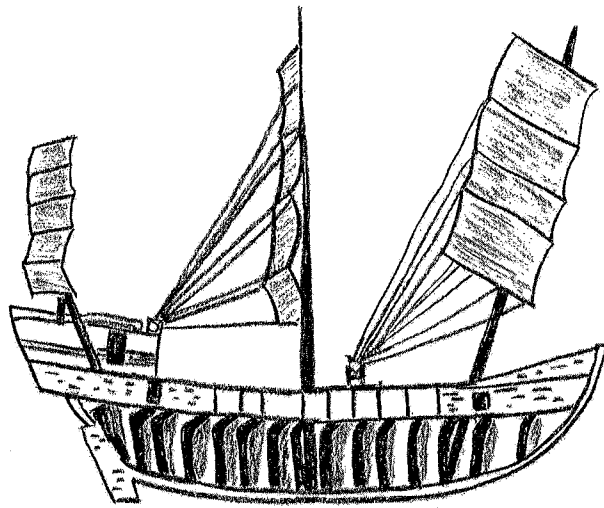
Among the millions upon millions of Muslims who have made the required pilgrimage to Mecca were Ibn Battuta in the fourteenth century and Ma Huan in the seventeenth century. ("The Mount of Mercy." *Aramco* Photo Archive, 3511 005.JPG)



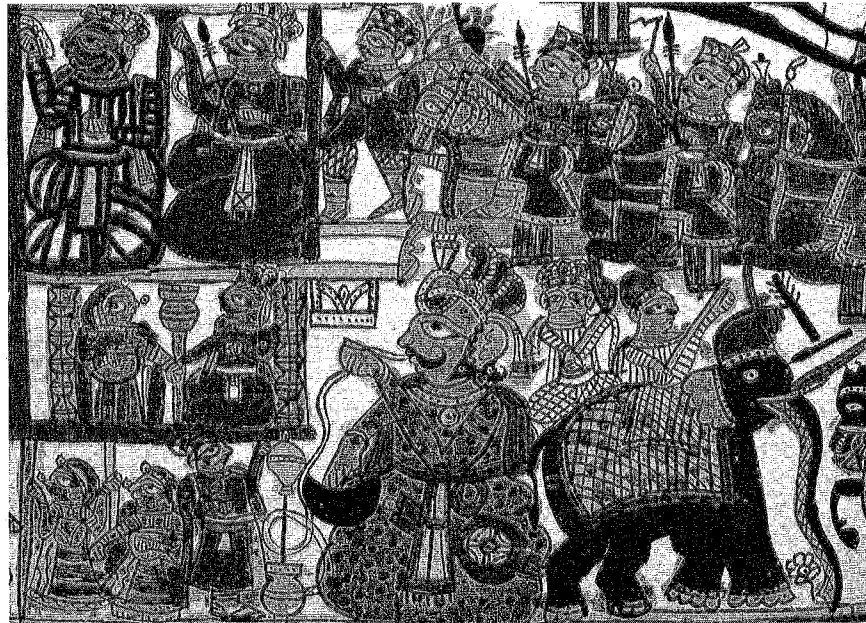
The complex tiles of the Blue Mosque of Tabriz in northwest Iran. The mosque was built in 1455, about a century and a half after Ibn Battuta passed through the city. He was impressed with the trading wealth, some of which was channeled into this mosque. Subsequent earthquakes have destroyed much of the building. (Photograph by Sussan Babaie, University of Michigan.)



A pillared hall of public audience at Delhi, perhaps similar to the scene Ibn Battuta encountered. This image is from three centuries later. (Los Angeles County Museum AC 1992.94.1)

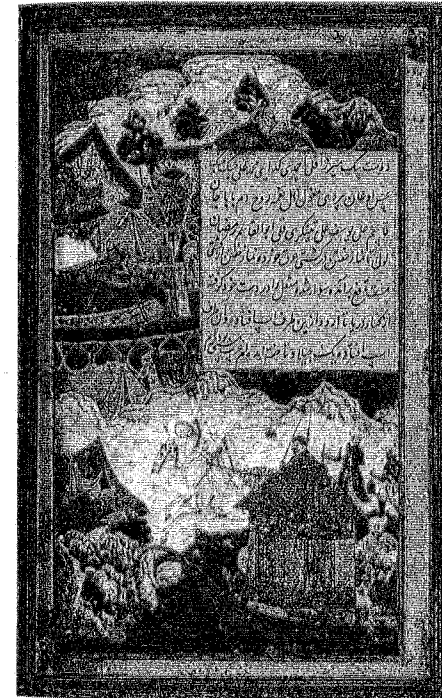


Cutaway drawing of a mid-twelfth century Chinese seagoing ship almost 100 feet long and 30 feet wide. Based on a wreck discovered in Houzhou, Fujian province. Note the bulkheads that divided the hold. Ibn Battuta saw larger versions of this type of ship on the Malabar Coast of India in the fourteenth century. (Sketch by the author of a model in the Overseas Communication Museum, Quanzhou, PRC)



A performance scroll, in the tradition seen by Ma Huan and Tomé Pires. This version is modern, from Rajasthan, India. At night, the performer holds up a lamp to illuminate a scene on the scroll and tells the corresponding portion of the story. (Collection of the author.)

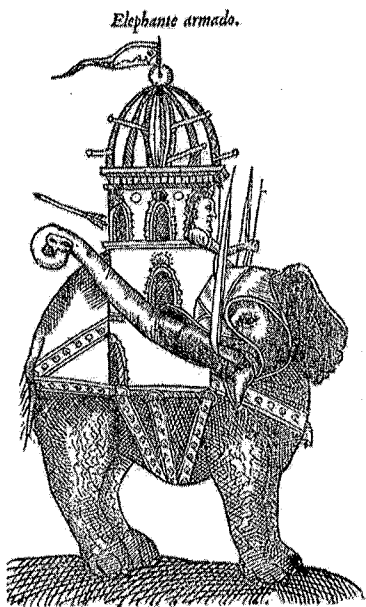
Battle scene showing the use of the reverse-curve bow from horseback. Note that the rider controls his horse with his knees. (*Battle Scene and Text (recto), Text (verso)*, Folio from a *Shahnama (Book of Kings)*, Delhi, early seventeenth century. Los Angeles County Museum AC1993.187.1)



Babur returns at night from a drinking party. As Babur notes in his memoirs, some of his parties became so riotous that they had to be broken up and the comrades sent to their tents. (*Illustrated Version of the Baburnama* commissioned by Akbar, 1589. Sackler Gallery S 1986.231)

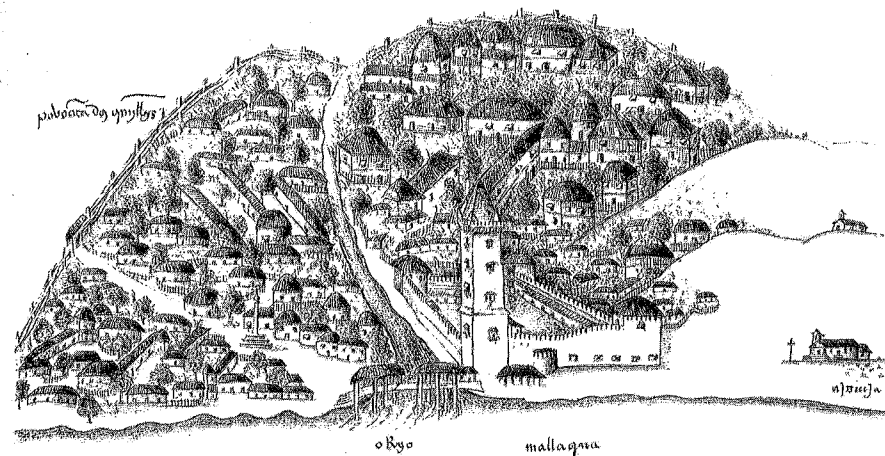


Babur attacks India in 1507. Note the horse armor and the bow and arrows, typical of steppe armies of the time. (Folio from a *Baburnama*. Delhi, circa 1589–1590. Los Angeles County Museum M.91.348.1)



Elephante armado.

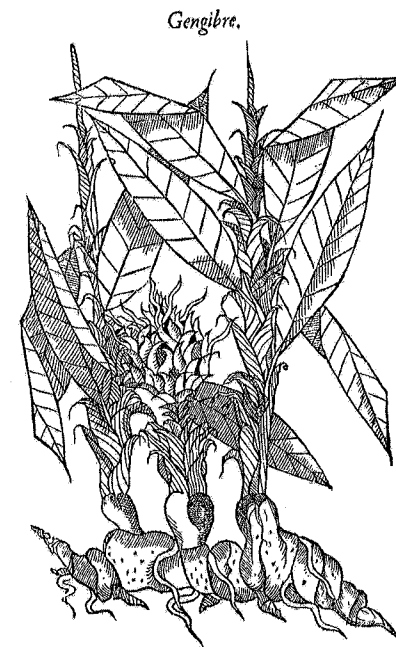
War elephants typical of armies Babur fought in India in the sixteenth century. A Portuguese artist who may not have actually seen such elephants drew this picture. (Christobal Acosta, *Tractado de las drogas y medicinas de las Indias orientales* [Venetia: F. Ziletti, 1585]. In the Rare Book Collection of the Museums Collection, University of Michigan.)



View of Malacca, three decades after Tomé Pires lived there. Note the new fort and watchtower and the movable wall across the river's mouth. (Gaspar Correa, *Lendas da India* [Lisboa: Da Academia real das ciencias, 1858–66])



View of a Malabar fort built soon after the arrival of the Portuguese. The gunports show that cannon was already in use by non-European powers. (Photograph by author.)

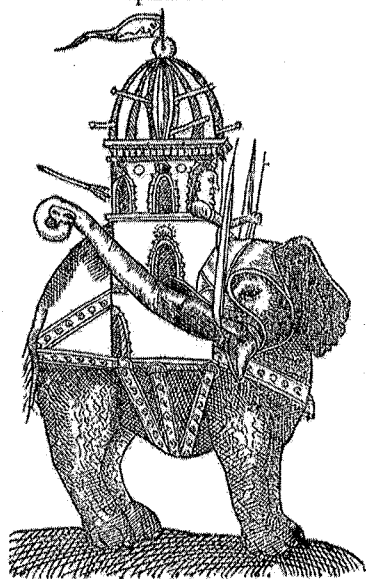


Ginger, as illustrated in the first Portuguese treatise on tropical medicines, 1530. (Gaspar Correa, *Lendas da India* [Lisboa: Da Academia real das ciencias, 1858–66] University of Michigan.)

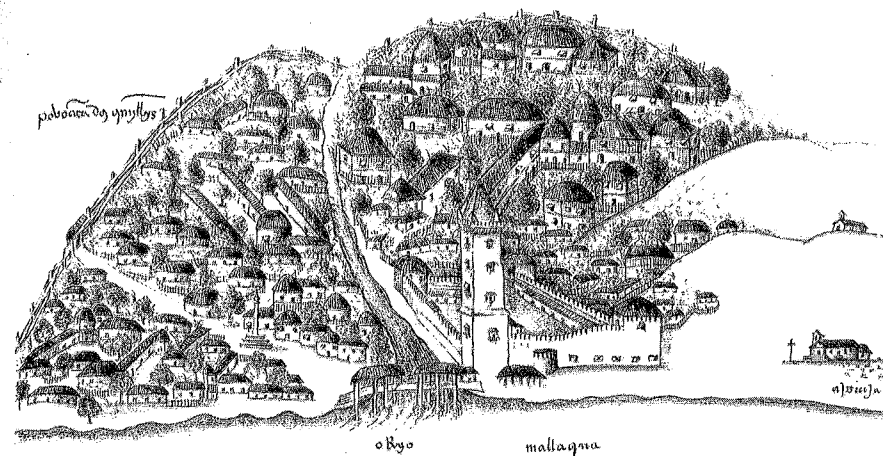
Babur attacks India in 1507. Note the horse armor and the bow and arrows, typical of steppe armies of the time. (Folio from a *Baburnama*. Delhi, circa 1589–1590. Los Angeles County Museum M.91.348.1)



Elephant armado.



War elephants typical of armies Babur fought in India in the sixteenth century. A Portuguese artist who may not have actually seen such elephants drew this picture. (Christobal Acosta, *Tractado de las drogas y medidinas de las Indias orientales* [Venetia: F. Ziletti, 1585]. In the Rare Book Collection of the Museums Collection, University of Michigan.)



View of Malacca, three decades after Tomé Pires lived there. Note the new fort and watchtower and the movable wall across the river's mouth. (Gaspar Correa, *Lendas da Índia* [Lisboa: Da Academia real das ciencias, 1858–66])

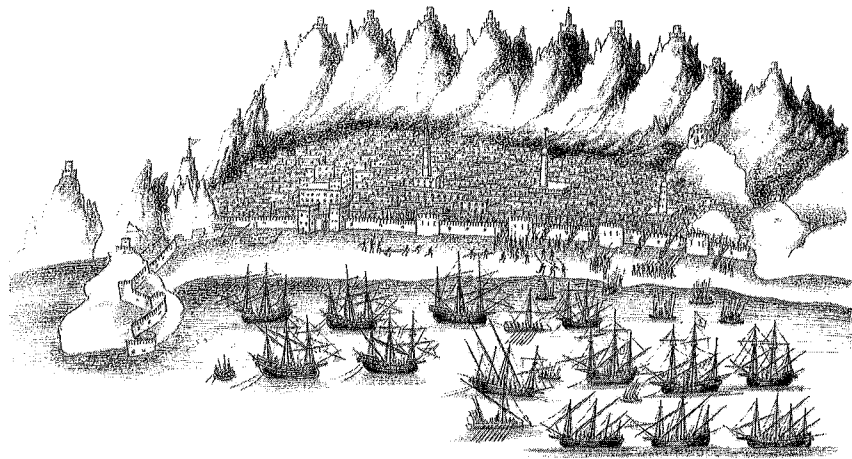


View of a Malabar fort built soon after the arrival of the Portuguese. The gunports show that cannon was already in use by non-European powers. (Photograph by author.)

Gengibre.



Ginger, as illustrated in the first Portuguese treatise on tropical medicines, 1530. (Gaspar Correa, *Lendas da Índia* [Lisboa: Da Academia real das ciencias, 1858–66] University of Michigan.)



Aden, as drawn by a Portuguese artist in the 1550s. Abraham bin Yiju apprenticed there as a trader in the thirteenth century and Ma Huan visited the port in the fifteenth century. The straight-masted vessels are Portuguese of the type *Tomé Pires* sailed into Guangzhou harbor. The lanteen-rigged craft are vessels from the region. (Christobal Acosta, *Tractado de las drogas y medidinas de las Indias orientalis* [Venetia: F. Ziletti, 1585]. In the Rare Book Collection of the Museums Collection, University of Michigan.)



A giraffe brought by one of the Zeng He expeditions from Africa to Beijing in the early fifteenth century. (Yongle Period Scroll. c. 1414. Philadelphia Museum of Art. 1977-42-1.)

includes a delightfully accurate description of the cultivation of pepper.

The pepper-trees resemble grape-vines; they are planted alongside coco-palms and climb up them in the same way that vines climb, except that they have no shoots, that is to say tendrils, like those of vines. . . . It produces fruit in small clusters, the grains of which resemble the grains of the date palm when they are green. In the autumn they gather the grains and spread them on mats in the sun, just as is done with grapes in order to obtain raisins; they keep turning them until they are thoroughly dried and become black, and then sell them to the merchants. . . . I have seen pepper grains in the city of Kalikut being poured out for measuring by the bushel, like millet in our country.<sup>37</sup>

Ibn Battuta continued his journeys in the Maldive Islands and Sri Lanka. He claims that he went east from Sri Lanka through Southeast Asia and to the imperial court of China. Modern scholars doubt this trip. The geography is garbled and there are suspiciously few stories of the personal encounters that make up much of the rest of the narrative. To enhance his prestige, Ibn Battuta may have fabricated the trip out of information he heard.

The Maldive Islands, however, had recently converted to Islam, and there is no question that Ibn Battuta visited. He served as chief Muslim judge, meting out stern justice to those who did not attend evening prayers. Continuing his pattern of short-term marriages, Ibn Battuta married locally, and within a few months, he had wed four different elite women. He had learned courtly intrigue at Delhi and was involved in an unsuccessful plot to conquer the Maldive Islands.<sup>38</sup>

After an extended trip to Sri Lanka and the east coast of India, Ibn Battuta lost his wealth to pirates on the Malabar Coast, who

attacked in twelve small ships. In terms of piracy, little had changed since the time of Abraham bin Yiju two centuries earlier.

They took everything I had preserved for emergencies; they took the pearls and rubies that the king of [Sri Lanka] had given me, they took my clothes and the supplies given me by pious people and saints. They left me no covering except my trousers. They took everything everybody had and set us down on the shore.<sup>39</sup>

Nevertheless, Ibn Battuta survived. Local merchants and the head of the local mosque gave him clothes and he started off again. Within days, he was once again in the company of kings, telling stories and passing information.

In 1348 CE, when Ibn Battuta returned to the Middle East, he was in his early fifties. At Damascus, he paused to consider the costs of his choice of the traveling life. From the time he left Damascus twenty years earlier, he had cut himself off from his family in Morocco. He knew nothing of his parents or his siblings. Not until his return to Damascus did he learn that his father had died more than fifteen years earlier. The wife and son he left behind in Damascus were also dead. Ibn Battuta's pattern was short marriages and hasty departures; he left at least seven wives behind. He bought slave girls for sexual pleasure and apparently sold them along the way. He did seem genuinely sad about the death of a baby girl in Delhi, the daughter of his then concubine. He faced his old age without wife or children.

In 1348 CE, death was all around Ibn Battuta. He was one of the first to record the Black Plague that would also ravage Europe in the same year.

[P]lague had broken out in Ghazza and the number of dead exceeded a thousand a day. . . . I went to Damascus and arrived on a Thursday: the people had been fasting for three days. . . .

The number of deaths among them had risen to two thousand four hundred a day. . . . Then I went to Cairo and was told that during the plague the number of deaths had risen to twenty-one thousand a day. I found that all the shaikhs I had known were dead. May God Most high have mercy upon them.<sup>40</sup>

From Cairo, Ibn Battuta traveled home to Morocco. "The memory of my homeland moved me, affection for my people and friends, and love for my country which is better than all others."<sup>41</sup> He reached Fez in November 1349 CE and found that his mother had died of the plague only six months earlier. As so many times before, Ibn Battuta turned to the court and the king. He approached the king of Morocco and told his stories of courts, cities, and monarchs. This time the king offered patronage if he would write his memoirs. Ibn Battuta wrote a book of 1,000 pages that mixed stories and homilies, trade possibilities and courtly ceremonies, relating what he had experienced and what he had heard in the towns and courts from China to Spain. It was his memoir that occupied the last years of his life.

Ibn Battuta's memoir is full of the stories of men rather like him. They had skills in Islamic law, or religious teaching, or administration. These men were the backbone of law, taxation, religious practice and scholarship across the Islamic world. From Spain, Tunisia, and Central Asia, they came and found employment in Baghdad or Delhi or kingdoms on the Malabar Coast. These men were more than mere functionaries. Like Ibn Battuta, they carried news, gossip, and descriptions of one court to another. They were the vital mechanism by which courts across the great Asian world came to be so similar in symbols, ceremony, and kingly culture. They were the agents by which a king, whether Muslim or not, might learn how much he would benefit by adopting this common culture.

## TREASURE AND TREATY

*Ma Huan, 1413–1431 CE*

In 1413 CE, a Ming Chinese fleet of perhaps fifty-seven vessels—some more than 200 feet long—sailed majestically out of the shipyards associated with Nanjing, the imperial capital. The largest vessels were termed “treasure ships” for the vast quantities of Chinese goods they carried and the treasures they brought back in trade and tribute from faraway places. In the fleet were ships that carried an army of more than 20,000 fighting men, ships for horses, and ships that carried only water.<sup>1</sup> After more than a year of preparation, the fleet slowly made its way east 200 miles down the Yangtze River to the Yellow Sea.<sup>2</sup> It was commanded by Zeng He, a highly placed and powerful court eunuch and confidant of the emperor.

As the fleet sailed from Nanjing, among those aboard was Ma Huan, recruited “in a subordinate capacity as a translator of foreign documents.”<sup>3</sup> He was thirty-two years old, Muslim, and spoke and read Arabic.<sup>4\*</sup> Ma Huan was from a city a few miles south of Hangzhou, one of the major trading ports of the time and about 150 miles south of the Nanjing shipyard. He was no

---

\*Ma Huan may have belonged to a village that was predominantly or completely Muslim, which seems to have been the common pattern. Muslim villages tended to locate along trade routes and center on a single local mosque.

noble or courtier, but rather a simple man, perhaps a low-level official. He self-deprecatingly describes himself as a “mountain-woodcutter.”<sup>5</sup> Like the rest of the men aboard, he would be away from his home and family for more than two years. Ma Huan’s memoir is particularly important because it is one of only two surviving eyewitness accounts of these imperial fleets and their voyages.

By the time of Ma Huan, Chinese goods had already circulated through Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean for centuries. Recall that Chinese goods formed much of the cargo of the tenth century Intan shipwreck featured in Chapter 3. Chinese ships did not, however, venture west of the Malay Peninsula. Even in the thirteenth century, Abraham bin Yiju, the Jewish spice trader, recorded no Chinese fleets during his twenty years of residence on the Malabar Coast of India.

Something rather new happened in the late thirteenth century. The Mongols, under a grandson of Genghis Khan, conquered all of China in 1279 CE. Scholars still hotly debate how much the Mongols adopted Chinese customs and how much they influenced China.\* The Mongol invasions effectively closed any divide between North and South China.\*\* The Mongols sent expeditions of conquest into mainland Southeast Asia. They also sent a

\*There was plenty to loot and conquer when the Mongols came into China. China of the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries had great cities, advanced industrial technology and agriculture, and a literacy-based bureaucratic elite selected by examination.

\*\*The older stereotype of China in the scholarly literature depicted a Confucian anti-trade north and a trade-oriented south. This seems less and less sustainable in the light of modern research. Rather, it now seems that even at the time of Xuanzang (seventh century), trade heavily affected both regions. Trade was especially important in the gradual amalgamation of cultures and languages that would become “China.” By the time of the Ming (1368–1644), trade was the active concern of regional officials and government policy.

mission against Java that dramatically failed and left large numbers of Chinese stranded on Java, resulting in a boost to both military and shipbuilding technology. Within China, Mongol indifference to trade probably helped private traders avoid government control and taxation.<sup>6</sup>

By the early decades of the fourteenth century, large Chinese trading fleets broke out of the boundaries of the Southeast Asia trade and sailed west to India. Around 1330 CE, Ibn Battuta (Chapter 6) personally saw such a fleet, entirely privately financed, that consisted of thirteen ships. It docked at the Malabar port of Kalikut. The fleet stayed for a few months and then departed together for China. The large traders aboard knew which spices they wanted and carried specific goods to trade for them. Ibn Battuta was clearly impressed.

The large ships have anything from twelve down to three sails, which are made of bamboo rods plaited like mats. They are never lowered, but they turn them according to the direction of the wind; at anchor they are left floating in the wind. A ship carries a complement of a thousand men, six hundred of whom are sailors and four hundred men-at-arms, including archers, men with shields and arbalests, that is men who throw naphtha. Each large vessel is accompanied by three smaller ones. . . .<sup>7</sup>

Ibn Battuta tried to book passage to China aboard one of the large trading ships and discovered that, besides sails, they were powered by large oars, each requiring fifteen oarsmen. The ships had four decks and private cabins for the most important of the traders, who brought along their wives and concubines. Also aboard was the agent of the shipowner, and he traveled with a full entourage, including African slaves.<sup>8</sup>

In the 1370s CE, half a century after Ibn Battuta, a new Ming dynasty reconquered China, wresting it from the heirs of Genghis

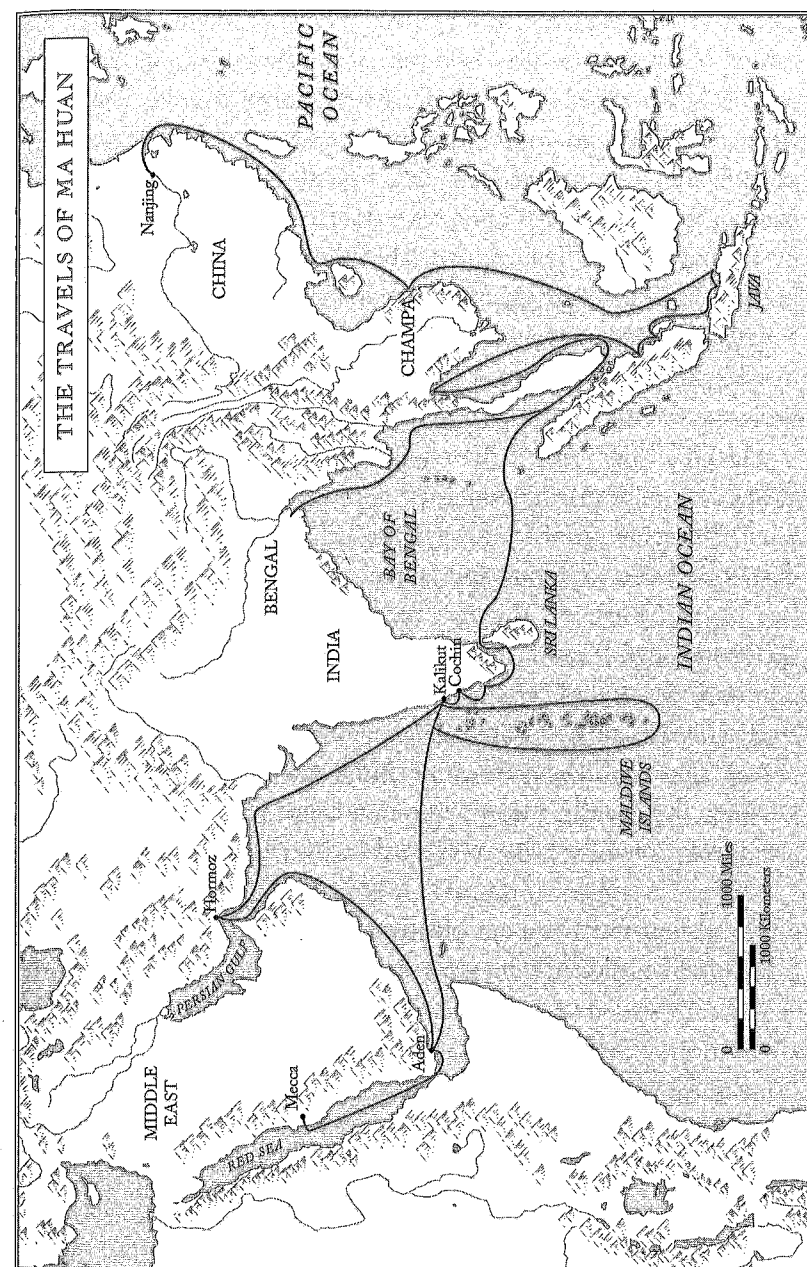
Khan, and after two decades of isolationism, China developed an interest in the southern seaborne trade. By the early 1400s CE, the Ming dynasty was at the height of its wealth and power. The emperor commanded the building of the Forbidden City at Beijing, a new walled palace complex of 180 acres.<sup>9</sup> Using both diplomacy and warfare, the emperor extended Chinese power west along the caravan routes, fortifying the new territory with watchtowers and armed outposts. He attacked west into Xinjiang and south into current-day Vietnam. His administrators commandeered labor to repair and rebuild large sections of the Great Wall. He sent ambassadors to and received ambassadors from many of the powers of Central Asia and the Middle East.<sup>10</sup>

In this ambitious milieu, Chinese fleets grew in scale and scope of activities. The Ming emperor Yung-le was personally involved in the planning of the fleets and appointed one of his chief eunuchs as commander. The great fleets were intended to establish trade and diplomatic dominance across the whole of Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka, coastal India, the southern shore of the Middle East, and the east coast of Africa.

Ma Huan caught the spirit of the expeditions in a poem he wrote a few years after he returned to China:

The Emperor's glorious envoy received the divine commands  
 "proclaim abroad the silken sounds, and go to barbarous lands."<sup>11</sup>

Ma Huan was on the fourth imperial expedition (1413–1415 CE) to sail south and west from China and into the Indian Ocean. Like earlier imperial fleets, this expedition set out in the autumn months to exploit the prevailing monsoon winds. The fleet followed the coast of China southwest for ten days to the kingdom of Champa, in the central section of what is today Vietnam. From the outset of the voyage, Ma Huan carefully recorded dress,



customs, and life as he saw it. He identified the king of Champa in central Vietnam as a "firm believer" in the Buddhist religion who wore a "three-tiered elegantly-decorated crown of gold filigree."<sup>\*</sup> Both the king and his nobles wore long robes of indigenous manufacture over wrapped silk that covered the legs. The king forbade others to wear white or have doorways taller than a designated height. Ma Huan noticed that the headgear of the nobles had painted and gilded decoration that denoted rank. From his first contacts in Champa, he found that nobility lived well. "The house in which the king resides is tall and large. The four surrounding walls are ornately constructed of bricks and mortar, very neat."<sup>12</sup>

Ma Huan next noted the climate as "pleasantly hot, without frost or snow, always like the season in the fourth or fifth month. The plants and trees are always green." He then turned to the description of useful flora and fauna:

The mountains produce ebony, ch'ieh-lan [a top grade of incense], Kuan yin bamboo, and laka-wood. The ebony is very glossy black, and decidedly superior to the produce of other countries. The ch'ieh-lan incense is produced only on one large mountain in this country, and comes from no other place in the world; it is very expensive, being exchanged for [its weight in silver].<sup>13</sup>

He also listed the possible trade items that the people of Champa liked: "dishes, bowls, and other kinds of blue porcelain

<sup>\*</sup>Throughout his memoir, Ma Huan did not differentiate between Buddhist and Hindu states. Modern scholars have tried to trace the influence of each belief system in many Southeast Asian kingdoms but with little success. Ma Huan may have been closer to the truth that Hinduism and Buddhism were much mixed and, to an outsider, practices in Southeast Asia looked quite similar to Hindu practices in India.

articles, the hemp-silk, silk-gauze, beads, and other such things" from China.<sup>14</sup>

Ma Huan tried to make the foreign places comprehensible to his readers by comparing the food and domestic animals to what prevailed back home:

Their horses are short and small, like donkeys. Water buffaloes, yellow oxen, pigs and goats . . . all these they have. Geese and ducks are scarce. . . . The cock birds have red crowns and white ears, with small waists and high tails; they crow, too, when people take them up into their hands; [they are] very likeable.<sup>15</sup>

In Champa as in later ports, Ma Huan sought out ordinary folk and described their customs. After marriage, "the man's father and mother, with their relatives and friends, to the accompaniment of drums and music escort husband and wife back to [the paternal] home; they prepare wine and play music."<sup>16</sup> In Champa, he found legal judgment harsh. "For light offences, they employ thrashing on the back with a rattan stick; for serious offences, they cut off the nose."<sup>17</sup> Ma Huan noted that there was no paper in Champa. The people used pounded bark or goatskin for keeping accounts and other writing. From Champa, the fleet sailed south to Java, which remained deeply involved in maritime trade.

While in Java, Ma Huan also wrote about house types, the dress of the king and his court, and trade possibilities. Ma Huan had read earlier Chinese travel literature and knew what was expected. He even listed these topics in the introduction to his memoir: "climates, topography . . . appearance of the people . . . local customs . . . natural products, and . . . boundary limits."<sup>18</sup>

Ma Huan's sensitivity to detail and difference set his account apart from run-of-the-mill travel accounts. His observations still seem fresh and interesting even after the passage of five centuries.



The houses are constructed in storeyed form, each being . . . [about forty feet] in height; they lay a plank [flooring, over which] they spread matting [of] fine rattans, or patterned grass mats, on which the people sit cross-legged; on the top of the houses they use boards of hard wood as tiles, splitting [the wood into] roofing.<sup>19</sup>

Ma Huan noticed that unlike the king of Champa, the Javanese king and his nobles did not wear a robe but only wrapped silk from the waist down. Men, from the king on down, wore a dagger tucked into the waistband of this garment.<sup>20</sup>

It was on coastal Java that Ma Huan first located a resident community of overseas Chinese. "Tu-pan . . . is the name of a district; here there are something more than a thousand families, with two head men to rule them; many of the people are from [Guangdong] province."<sup>21</sup>

Trade ties between Fujian and Java were centuries old by the time of Ma Huan in the early 1400s. The province produced most of the Chinese goods found in the tenth-century Intan shipwreck of Chapter 4. Chinese emigration probably followed these long-standing close trade ties between Fujian and Java.

Ma Huan and the fleet soon arrived at a port on the coast of Java founded and run by overseas Chinese. Its prosperity was based on spices brought from the Molucca Islands to the east and sandalwood from the island of Timor.

Originally it was a region of sand banks; and because people from [China] came to this place and established themselves, they therefore called it New Village; right down to the present day the ruler of the village is a man from [Guandong Province]. There are something more than a thousand families [here]. Foreigners from every place in great numbers come here to trade. Gold, all kinds of precious stones, and all varieties of foreign goods are sold in great quantities. The people are very wealthy.<sup>22</sup>

In the early fifteenth century, Java consisted of a large kingdom, Majapahit, and a few smaller ports.\* The Chinese fleet, therefore, made several stops to deal with local powers along the north coast of Java. Ma Huan generally found three categories of people in the ports: Muslims (Arabs and local converts), Chinese, and local Hindus or Buddhists. As usual, he observed general patterns of life in these port towns:

The people of the country have no beds or stools for sitting on or sleeping on; and for eating they have no spoons or chopsticks. Men and women take areca-nut and betel-leaf, and mix them with lime made from clam-shells; and their mouths are never without this mixture.<sup>23</sup>

In Java, Ma Huan watched performances by men who made paintings on paper of "men, birds, beasts, eagles, or insects." These paintings, he thought, "resembled scroll pictures." During the performance, the man unrolled a section, thrust it toward the audience, and told the story. "The crowd sits round and listens to him, sometimes laughing, sometimes crying, exactly as if the narrator were reciting one of our popular romances."<sup>24</sup> With this insight, Ma Huan came incredibly close to recognition of the common pattern of scroll-painting performance that stretched across much of Asia at the time. It was common to Bengal, Rajasthan, Persia, Southeast Asia, and China. Only in the last few decades have scholars realized the common features of this form of popular entertainment.<sup>25</sup>

One story of the fleet in Sumatra suggests the complex relation of imperial China to overseas Chinese communities and pirates.

\*In the last decades of the thirteenth century, the key states in the region had been Kediri and Singosari, but they were then superceded by the developing empire of Majapahit. By the fifteenth century, the time of Ma Huan's memoir, Majapahit was in decline and new successor states were emerging.

Sometime in the late fourteenth century, a group of Chinese fled to a port on the north coast of Sumatra "with their whole households." One Ch'en Tsu-i from "Kuang-tung . . . set himself up as their chief; he was very wealthy and tyrannical and whenever a ship belonging to strangers passed by, he immediately robbed them of their valuables." The first of the imperial expeditions in 1407 CE captured this Chinese pirate and took him to the capital, where he was executed.<sup>26</sup>

Other Chinese communities, such as the one at Malacca, seemed to retain close ties with the imperial court and sent tribute missions. On some islands, Chinese traders settled, married local women, and largely merged into the local society. Overall, there was a general idea at court that some of the Chinese in Southeast Asia were still connected to China, called the Central Country.<sup>27</sup>

After stops on Sumatra, where Ma Huan also found Chinese trading communities, the fleet sailed north along the east coast of the Malay Peninsula to current-day coastal Thailand. The capital, Ayuthia, was close to the location of the modern city of Bangkok. Along with the standard description of the climate, flora, fauna, prevailing customs, and trade goods, Ma Huan noticed that Thai Buddhist monks and nuns were vaguely similar to the Buddhist monastic tradition in China.

In this country the people who become [monks] or become nuns are exceedingly numerous; the habit of priests and nuns is somewhat the same as the Central Country [China]; and they, too, live in nunneries and monasteries, fasting and doing penance.<sup>28</sup>

Ma Huan was, as a Muslim, probably unaware of old, deep doctrinal splits within Buddhism, primarily between Hinayana (the Little Vehicle) and Mahayana (the Larger Vehicle), which were responsible for the differences in practice that he noted. Re-

call that Xuanzang, the Buddhist pilgrim of Chapter 1, debated these differences in interpretation 800 years earlier.<sup>29\*</sup>

From Ayuthia, the fleet sailed back down the Malay Peninsula to the port of Malacca, close to current-day Singapore. Malacca, founded sometime between 1375 and 1400 (only a generation before Ma Huan's first voyage), was the rising star of ports in the western portion of Southeast Asia and the major transshipping point between the Indian Ocean and the water routes of Southeast Asia. Ma Huan recorded that Malacca had been formerly controlled by Thailand, but a local king had asserted independence and an earlier imperial fleet recognized his independence with "two silver seals, a hat, a girdle, and a robe."<sup>30</sup> The head of the expedition set up a stone tablet in Malacca, and the king subsequently visited the Ming emperor.

By the time of the fourth imperial fleet, the king of Malacca was chafing under Chinese dominance. He had just converted to Islam and dressed, as Ma Huan noted, as an Arab. He "uses a fine white foreign cloth to wind round his head; on his body he wears a long garment of fine-patterned blue cloth, fashioned like a robe; [and] on his feet he wears leather shoes."<sup>31</sup> It is interesting that adoption of this dress accompanied the king's conversion to Islam. These are the sorts of robes that would have been familiar to most of the travelers of previous chapters, such as Ibn Fadlan, the diplomat; Abraham bin Yiju, the Jewish pepper trader; Ibn Sina, the philosopher; and Ibn Battuta, the jurist. The Chinese imperial relationship with the king of Malacca was still close at the time of the fourth expedition. Ma Huan noted an extended stay in Malacca. The fleet's crew off-loaded tribute and trade goods they had

\*Doctrinal differences had also resulted in warfare. A kingdom in Sri Lanka used its troops to shut and destroy Mahayana monasteries sometime in the fifth century. Sri Lanka remains Hinayana to this day.

collected into a secure compound to await their return from the Indian Ocean.

At Malacca, imperial fleets typically divided, some heading for Bengal, others for Africa or the west coast of India. In 1413 CE, Ma Huan's portion of the fleet sailed northwest between Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula, stopping at two ports. Lesser states were of minimal importance, and Ma Huan rather wrote them off. "The land has no products. It is a small place."<sup>32</sup>

Tin mining on the Malay Peninsula caught Ma Huan's attention. Tin was just as important a trade item in the fifteenth century as it had been in the tenth century, the time of the Intan shipwreck.

As to "flower tin": there are two tin areas in the mountain valleys; and the king appoints a chief to control them. Men are sent to wash [for the ore] in a sieve and to cook it. [The tin] is cast into the shape of a tou-measure . . . to make small blocks which are handed to the officials.<sup>33</sup>

The blocks were of a standard weight and were bundled into units of forty. Salvage divers of the tenth-century Intan shipwreck found the tin in exactly this ingot form.

Once clear of the island of Sumatra, the fleet headed west via the Andaman Islands to Sri Lanka. Although the Chinese fleet had an army of more than 20,000 men and Ma Huan's portion might have had 6,000 troops, he recorded no battles. The fleet never attacked or sacked a port. In Sri Lanka, as in all other stops, the aim of the fleet was to awe local and regional states, not attack them. Still, the Chinese did occasionally use their military might. A decade prior to Ma Huan's expedition, an imperial fleet attacked both Sumatra and a Sri Lankan king who had refused to offer tribute. Ma Huan noted with satisfaction that subsequent to the attack, the Sri Lankan king remained firmly subordinate to China. He "constantly sends men with offerings of precious stones and other such things; they ac-

company the treasure-ships returning from the [Western] Ocean and bring tribute to the Central Country [China]."<sup>34</sup>

The assessment of tribute required conversion of local coinage, weights, and measures into standard Chinese ones. This subject is a constant theme throughout Ma Huan's memoir. In Sri Lanka, the king "uses gold of ninety per cent [purity] to cast coins of current use. Each weighs one *fen* and one *li* on our official steelyard."<sup>35</sup>

The fleet continued west from Sri Lanka around the southern tip of India to Malabar. Ma Huan was quite aware that this lush coast, dense with coconut palms, was pepper country.

The land has no other product, [but] produces only pepper. The people mostly establish gardens to cultivate pepper for a living. Every year when the pepper is ripe, of course, big pepper-collectors of the locality make their purchases and establish warehouses to store it; [then] they wait until the foreign merchants from various places come to buy it.<sup>36</sup>

By the fourth expedition, Ma Huan's first, both the Chinese and regional kings of major ports seem to have worked out a relationship. Head diplomats of the fleet honored the king with robes and charters. Then representatives of both sides got down to business. The king's agent and the chief trader of the fleet first examined the Chinese silks and other goods and fixed a date for setting prices. On that date, "all joined hands" and agreed that "whether the price be dear or cheap, we will never repudiate it or change it." Next, the traders of the city brought "precious goods," such as pearls and coral. Determination of their prices "cannot be settled in a day; if done quickly, it takes one moon, [or more] slowly, two or three moons." All of the fleet's subsequent trading then took place at these fixed prices.<sup>37</sup> In spite of the strength of the Chinese fleet, a negotiation of several months meant that the Chinese were not simply dictating prices and terms.

This large-scale negotiated price-fixing was not the typical pattern in Malabar ports of the time. Traders simply bought what they could and the market set the price. Later in the memoir, Ma Huan described this regular trade at Kalikut:

Foreign ships from every place come there [to Kalikut] and the king of the country also sends a chief and a writer and others to watch the sales; thereupon they collect the duty and pay it to the authorities.<sup>38</sup>

The Chinese court had grand plans for long-term domination. At several ports, Zeng He set up carved stone proclamations announcing their intentions that stated:

Though the journey from this country to the Central Country [China] is more than a hundred thousand *li*, yet the people are very similar, happy, and prosperous, with identical customs. We have here engraved a stone, a perpetual declaration for ten thousand ages.<sup>39</sup>

What could a regional king like Zamorin of Kalikut gain from the Chinese connection? With an army of several thousand Chinese soldiers in his port, perhaps he had little choice. Still, there were some political benefits. The Chinese committed to support him against family rivals and external enemies. Practically, this promise meant relatively little, as a fleet arrived unpredictably only once every few years. Ma Huan records only one case in which the Chinese actually captured a local usurper in Southeast Asia and restored the king to his throne.

From Kalikut, possibly during the extended negotiations, Ma Huan got an opportunity to go to Mecca alone, possibly on a local ship. The holy city moved him. He wrote about many of the expected subjects: architecture, local fruits and vegetables, and trade

products. "The customs of the people are pacific and admirable. They observe all the precepts of their religion; and law-breakers are few. It is in truth a happy country."<sup>40</sup>

After the lengthy stop in Kalikut, the fleet sailed west to the Maldive Islands. If Malabar was pepper country, the two important commodities in the Maldives were cowry shells, used as minor coinage, and coconuts.

The fibre which covers the outside of the coconut is made into ropes both thick and fine; men come from every place on foreign ships to purchase these too. . . . In the construction of their foreign ships they never use nails, they merely bore holes, and always use these ropes to bind [the planks] together.<sup>41</sup>

Sewn boats were common all across the Indian Ocean, the Bay of Bengal, and Southeast Asia, and had been for a thousand years before the time of Ma Huan. Recall that this was exactly the construction of the Intan shipwreck explored in Chapter 4.<sup>42</sup>

A century before Ma Huan's voyage, Ibn Battuta visited the Maldives, islands off the west coast of India that were then newly converted to Islam. He railed against the women who were naked from the waist up. They laughed at him. By the time of Ma Huan, Islamic modesty prevailed. "The women wear a short garment on the upper [part of the body]; and on the lower [part] they, too, wear a broad kerchief round them. They also carry a broad, large, cotton kerchief which passes across the head and covers it, disclosing only the face."<sup>43</sup>

From the Maldives, the imperial fleet sailed northwest to Aden and Hormuz. In the twelfth century, Aden had been the home of Abraham bin Yiju's senior partner. It was still a rich sophisticated port when Ma Huan arrived there three centuries later. "They have seven or eight thousand well-drilled horsemen and foot soldiers; therefore the country is very powerful and neighbouring

states fear it." Just as at Kalikut, diplomacy was in the foreground with exchange of costly presents, while trade filled the background. Ma Huan wrote paragraphs listing precious goods available, their prices, and local weights and measures.<sup>44</sup>

Hormuz was the westernmost point of the fourth imperial expedition of 1413–1414 CE. There, Ma Huan saw a street performance that charmed him.

[The man] directs a bystander to take a kerchief, fold it several times, and tie it tightly around both eyes of the monkey; he directs a different person to give the monkey a surreptitious hit on the head and hide himself in the thick of the crowd; after this [the man] releases the kerchief and directs [the monkey] to seek out the person who struck him on the head; however vast the crowd, the monkey goes straight to the man who originally [struck him] and picks him out; it is most strange.<sup>45</sup>

From Hormuz the fleet quickly retraced its route around India to Malacca, picked up the goods left there for safekeeping, and returned by the shortest route to the south coast of China.

By the time the fourth fleet returned to China in 1415 CE, the costs of the emperor's grand plans were beginning to show. Taxes were high and there was unrest in the countryside.<sup>46</sup> There were rebellions on the periphery, both in what is now Vietnam and along the Silk Road, in addition to new threats from the Mongols. Ma Huan went on a second expedition in 1421, and by the time he returned, there were even more imperial problems. At court, a strong faction of the literati opposed the court eunuchs who favored the expeditions.

In the spring of 1422, a catastrophic fire burned many of the buildings in the newly finished Forbidden City and killed hundreds of people, including the emperor's favorite concubine. A

Persian ambassador, witness to the fire, described the emperor's self-doubt:

The god of Heaven is angry with me, and hath therefore burned my palace; although I have done no evil act: I have neither offended my father, nor mother, nor have I acted tyrannically.<sup>47\*</sup>

At court, the fire only strengthened the literati faction that opposed the eunuchs and the fleets.

After the old emperor died in 1424 CE, the literati faction controlled his young son, the new emperor. An edict reversed the policy of imperial fleets, declaring them a waste of money with no benefit for China. The edict did not wholly stop the fleets, however. There was one more expedition, in 1431 CE, and Ma Huan was aboard once again as a translator of Arabic.

By the 1440s CE, the expansionist policy was eradicated with imperial thoroughness. An edict ordered all records of the fleets burned. Only a handful of memoirs, a couple of charts, and one map survive. Another edict ordered an end to foreign trade and even ordered the seacoast population moved inland. This inward-turning policy was much the same as seventy years earlier in the first decades of the Ming dynasty and was a recurrent feature of Chinese history for the next 500 years. Trade, of course, did not stop. It was too important. Goods were smuggled out through the independent kingdom in what is today Vietnam.\*\*

\*Incidentally, the Persian ambassador was an avid chess player and found many worthy opponents in Beijing, though the players shared no common language.

\*\*The withdrawal from foreign trade is a recurrent theme in Chinese history. The withdrawal in the 1440s corresponds to a similar policy seventy years earlier under the early Ming, and like that period, it took several decades to reverse.

What, then can be made of these fleets and their journeys to the Western Ocean? The imperial fleets followed the most well known trade routes in sailing patterns that private Chinese fleets had plied for more than a century. They stopped at only the largest ports and capitals, ignoring any out-of-the-way places where things might have been "discovered." Rather than being voyages of discovery, the imperial fleet journeys were a combination of trade and what, in modern parlance, is known as gunboat diplomacy. The whole operation undoubtedly seemed like a good policy choice in Beijing, or such effort would not have been expended on it. One potential benefit was that the emperor could extend his sphere of influence by forcing subordination treaties on a host of kings along the way. And the venture might well pay for itself with favorable trading and tribute gifts from the subordinated kings. As in modern times, however, gunboat diplomacy proved far more costly and had far more meager results than expected. It is perfectly understandable that a faction at court argued for attention to the immediate danger of rebellion on the eastern steppe that threatened the northern heartland of China rather than wasting money on great fleets.<sup>48</sup>

For Ma Huan however, the voyages were something else entirely. Like many travelers—Ibn Fadlan, Ibn Battuta, Xuanzang—Ma Huan searched for pattern and structure among unfamiliar beliefs and customs. He analyzed and sought to make comprehensible what he saw and experienced. There was a continuing need for such writers and interpreters across the Asian world. His memoir is, however, far more than just a report of diplomacy, products, and the wonders of faraway places.

Compared to other travel writers of the time, Ma Huan's writing was distinguished by his simple, unvarnished observations, his respect for those he encountered, and his awareness that at least some ways of doing things in foreign lands were not so dif-

ferent from back home. He compared games in Southeast Asia to those found in China. Many peoples were termed "neat and clean" and industrious in the development of local manufactures. Their foods were different but interesting. Ma Huan was moved by his acceptance as a Muslim in the ports of the Middle East and, more important, at Mecca. Unlike Ibn Battuta, Ma Huan never spoke either of factional conflict or opportunities within Islam. It was enough to be among fellow believers and be part of the far-flung community that stretched from Mecca to China.

Years later, a highly placed friend of Ma Huan's wrote a brief epilogue to the memoir. He hoped that it would help as Ma Huan struggled to find patronage at court to have his book printed.\*

The epilogue speaks of Ma Huan returning to his native village and describes him as a man who "constantly went out to enlighten other people, to enable everybody to acquire knowledge about conditions in foreign regions."<sup>49</sup> Ma Huan's memoir is infused with how much he appreciated the opportunity to experience and interpret peoples outside of China—how they lived, married, and practiced their many beliefs. Ma Huan was profoundly changed and moved by what he experienced.

---

\*It was difficult to get a book printed in China at this time. Books were scarce and expensive. The generally xenophobic attitude of the court could only have made the process more difficult. Still, the memoir survives.

## THE ASIAN WORLD

*500–1500 CE*

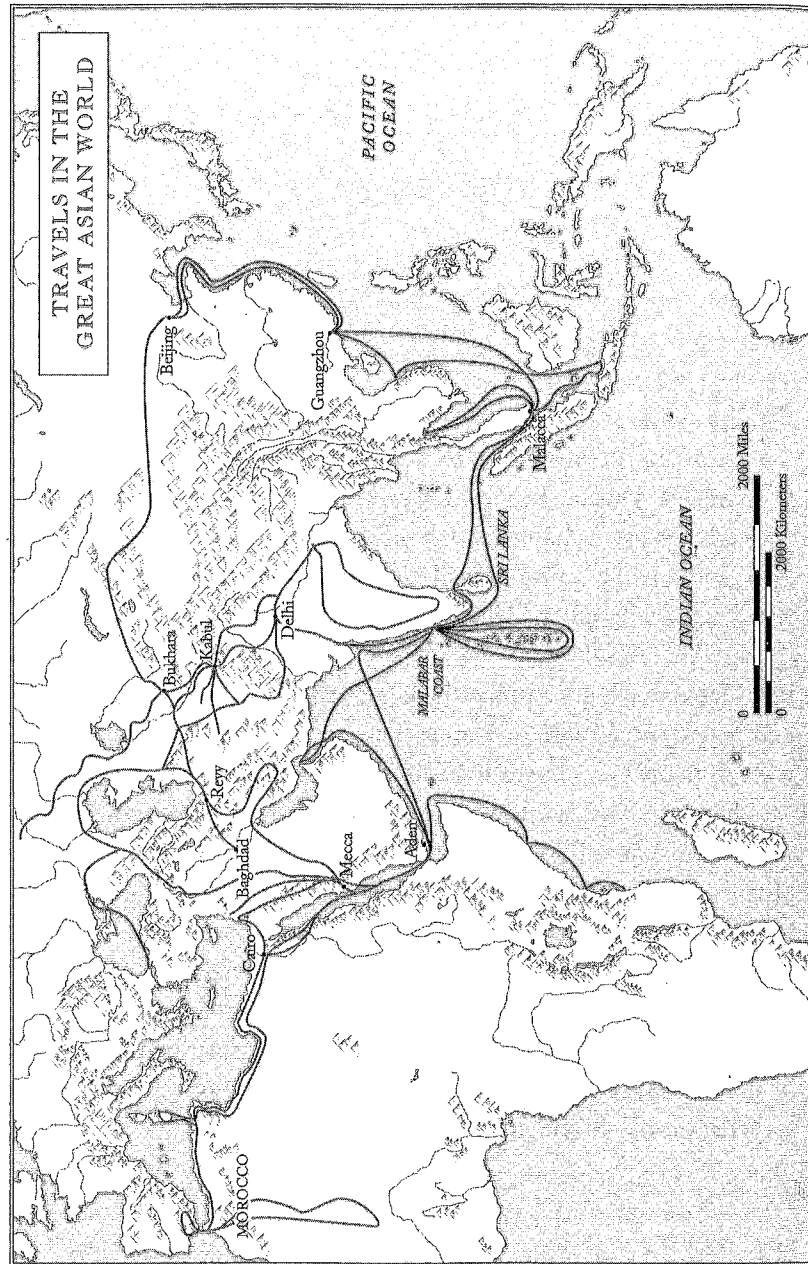
The Asian world, 500–1500 CE, was a place of great empires and large capital cities. In Southeast Asia were the kingdoms of Srivajaya, Pagan, Angkor, Champa, and Dai Viet. China went through dynastic changes but was strongly linked to the rest of Asia. India had empires as well—the Kushans, the sultanates, and the Mughals based at Delhi; the Cholas and Vijayanagara in the south. The Middle East had the Abbasid caliphate. Central Asia had Genghis Khan's empire, the largest the world has ever known, and it had the empire of Timur. The populations of these realms were in many cases larger than the whole of Western Europe.

Asia was a vast world of contrast, from deserts to mountains, from monsoon rain forest to dry plains. It held a bewildering variety of cultures and languages, many local religions and varieties of Buddhism, Islam, and Hinduism that spread across wide regions.

But it was its networks that made the great Asian world unique. Bureaucrats, scholars, slaves, ideas, religions, and plants moved along its intersecting routes. Family ties stretched across thousands of miles. Traders found markets for products ranging from heavy recycled bronze to the most diaphanous silks.\*

---

\*This volume explores only some of the networks found in Asia in the millennium from 500 to 1500 CE. There were many more. One could consider the



To clarify this world, here is drawn on a single map the routes of the travelers featured in the various chapters. "Crossing Points" are cities that two or more travelers visited. The routes and networks connected a world that went from China across Central Asia, into India and the Middle East, North Africa, Spain, and portions of sub-Saharan Africa.

### EMPIRES AND CITIES

Asian empires tended to promote linkages and connections to other kingdoms in several ways. Often their own territories crossed "natural" ecological boundaries and brought together regions and societies in unexpected ways. The Kushans, the Afghans, and the Mughals established empires that successfully ruled both sides of the formidable Himalayas. The South Indian Chola kingdom built a navy and conquered the islands of Sri Lanka, Java, and Sumatra, politically tying together India and Southeast Asia. Genghis Khan ruled both the steppe and large areas of agricultural China. Administrative continuities generally promoted trade between ecologically different regions: the trade in horses from the steppe to the plains of India, in rice from south to north China, in steel from Damascus to Afghanistan. The big states also produced widely used currencies, such as Chinese cash<sup>1</sup> and silver dirhams, and established standards for normalizing local weights and measures.

many pilgrimage routes from the viewpoint of networks or bring the same kind of analysis to patterns of marriage that spread family or clan influence. Court painters corresponded, viewed each other's work, and moved to find patronage across a network that stretched from Spain to southern India. Systems of predicting the future, such as astrology and numerology, were broadly similar across much of Asia. Many of the practitioners formed networks of knowledge. Analysis of both slavery and piracy in Asia could benefit from this approach.



They also frequently organized postal systems for reliable communication. Abraham bin Yiju could send a letter from Mangalore and have it arrive in Cairo in slightly over a month. Ibn Battuta found that his letter of introduction went from the far western border of India to Delhi and back in less than two months.

Although the big capital cities—Delhi, Beijing, Baghdad, Vijayanagara—were impressive (and often many times the size of any European city of the time), the importance of medium-sized cities cannot be overemphasized. These empires, by and large, rose by the expansion of power of a regional family based in a medium-sized city, their regional capital. When empires fell, they generally devolved into regional successor states. The regional capitals usually not only survived, they thrived. Medium-sized cities thus remained long-term sources of demand, learning, and patronage, and in addition, they produced the bureaucrats necessary to run an empire.

Cities, large and small, needed basic food, fabric, fuel, and building materials. The elite of these cities attracted the more sophisticated trade goods of the Asian world. The Chinese urban elite generated an almost insatiable demand for ivory, both African and Southeast Asian, which found its way into religious statues, pens, fans, boxes, and the decoration of furniture. Their demand for the most aromatic incense in the world was filled by incense logs and bushes from Southeast Asia and India. The demand for elegant clothes and beautiful colors in population centers of the Middle East, India, and Southeast Asia pushed discovery of and trade in new plant dyes.

The urban centers were also places of specialized manufacture that created trade opportunities and employment for these skills. Cities produced books, artwork, fine fabrics, sophisticated musical instruments, jewelry, and scientific instruments, all of which were in demand throughout the Asian world. Damascus developed steelmaking to such a high art and in such quantity that

traders brought its products to all parts of the Asian world. Damascus blades were just as ubiquitous in Indonesia as they were in Babur's Central Asia. China produced prodigious quantities of ceramics that were traded across the Asian world, from the Philippines and Japan to the west coast of Africa.

### COURTLY AND POLITICAL CULTURE

As places of elite culture, these cities and courts had many similarities. Across the great Asian world, kings used broadly similar symbols, including the umbrella, sunshade, fly whisk, drums, horns, and jeweled weapons. Ceremonies, such as honorific robing, were also similar. In the seventh century, a Buddhist king in Central Asia honored the pilgrim Xuanzang with ceremonial robes. Two hundred years later, Ibn Fadlan carried honorific robes from the Abbasid caliph of Baghdad and presented them to Almish on his ill-fated ambassadorial mission. Four centuries later, Ibn Battuta received honorific robes from kings across the Middle East, at Christian Constantinople, and in Muslim sub-Saharan Africa. A century later, Ma Huan recorded the diplomatic presentation of silk honorific robes to kings the Chinese fleet visited. In the sixteenth century in central Asia, Babur received robes from his powerful clan uncle. He later gave robes to his leaders after the victories at Kabul and Delhi. Similarly widespread was the presentation to honored guests of pan—betel nut wrapped in a special leaf, a pleasant substance to chew. The ceremony showed the largesse of the king, the honor demonstrated by the king's preparing it with his own hands, and the deference of public acceptance by the receiver. Kings from the Middle East to South China presented pan or robes, or both, to ambassadors, their own nobles, soldiers, guests, and their own family. The function of both ceremonies was to establish a relationship between the giver and the receiver in the presence of an approving audience.

The large empires also produced courtly cultures that became part of the practice of whole regions and local ethnicities. A Persianized culture, adopted by Afghan and Central Asian conquerors of India, merged with local practice to become a common elite culture across much of India. The culture of the Chinese court gradually spread to become elite culture throughout Vietnam. A Burman culture spread from the court at the expense of local ethnicities.

Across much of Asia, the political culture included common rewards and pleasures of courtly life. There was a common acceptance and understanding of the relationship between earthly pleasure and the pleasure of Paradise. One did not stand against the other. Among the travelers of this book, several were from the courtly class and indulged in the typical courtly pleasures. Babur had gardens built, named them, and enjoyed them immensely. He is quite open about his frequent use of alcohol and hashish, recounting their effects, and extolling the camaraderie of drinking parties. Both Ibn Battuta and Babur had slaves and concubines of both sexes. Fine fabrics were one of life's great pleasures in the Asian world. Both Babur and Ibn Battuta knew their fabrics and could name the origin of any particularly fine piece. Hunting with the king was another of the widely shared courtly pleasures. It was both a ceremony of noble solidarity and practice for war. Hunting figures prominently in Babur's memoir during periods of peace. The Central Asian notion of the king's table spread through the Middle East, Persia, and India. Nobles shared exotic foods and talk; some wrote books of recipes. Music and dance were the common entertainment. The pleasures of the noble life included patronage of intellectuals and artists, who produced books, poetry, painting, and calligraphy. Other common recreations were equally widely shared. Chess, for example, was played from Spain to China. The Persian ambassador to China at the time of Ma Huan was a great chess player and readily found opponents in Beijing.

## BUDDHISM AND ISLAM

The great Asian world benefited from two major universalizing religions: Islam and Buddhism. Both addressed universal human needs and recruited on the basis of relatively simple personal commitment rather than ethnicity, region, language, or gender. Both required long-distance travel in pursuit of knowledge and training and built institutions that promoted and supported such travel. At the height of Buddhism, there was a chain of monasteries, rest houses, and sites of worship stretching across Central Asia, Afghanistan, India, Southeast Asia, China, Japan, and Korea. Islamic patronage eventually developed madrassas and rest houses that stretched from Spain across North Africa, through the Middle East, into both Central Asia and India, and certain cities of Southeast Asia and China. These institutions made it possible for believers to find shelter and worship with others thousands of miles from home. In both religions, building rest houses, establishing markets for traders, and planting trees for shade along roads were acts of religious merit.

Both religions offered legal systems that regulated relations within their communities. Both Sharia law and, to a lesser extent, Buddhist practice created far-flung communities that had the means to accommodate foreigners and settle disputes.

Both Islam and Buddhism provided the institutional framework for extraordinarily wide circulation and discussion of ideas. In the seventh century, Xuanzang debated much the same topics all along his journey from China across Central Asia and into South India. He would have found similar debates and the texts to support them all across Southeast Asia. Seven centuries later, Ibn Sina's books were discussed and criticized from Afghanistan to Spain.

It was important that neither Islam nor Buddhism held the dominant position that Christianity did in Europe. More than

Christianity ever did, Islam and Buddhism jostled for converts and competed with more local beliefs, large and small. For example, these two big religions vied with various sects of Brahmanic Hinduism in India, Zoroastrianism in Persia, local fertility and ancestral beliefs in Southeast Asia and Central Asia, and Confucianism and Daoism in China. This rich intellectual mix produced its share of factional wars, religious persecution, periodic calls for orthodoxy, and the occasional local suppression of one belief system or another. Nevertheless, the competition produced profound and widespread questioning and discussion of the place of man in society and the cosmos. Many of the most innovative answers came at the intersections of various faiths.

#### TRAVEL AND TRADE

Supporting institutions and similarities of courts and administrative practice made it relatively easy for men to move long distances in pursuit of position and employment. Ibn Battuta met jurists and religious teachers from Spain, Central Asia, and India, and even a friend of his father's from Morocco when he visited Mecca. Soldiers had equally widespread opportunities for employment. Babur considered disbanding his troops in Central Asia and migrating to find service with relatives in China, part of his complex web of family and friendship ties that stretched across much of the northern half of the Asian world. After the conquest of Delhi, Babur sent money to relatives in Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

Traders moved most of all. Far-flung trading communities spread all across Asia: Gujaratis in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, Armenians through Central Asia, Chinese residents in Bengal, Arabs in Guangzhou. Most day-to-day activities, such as marriage, divorce, property ownership, and inheritance, were regulated within communities. Everywhere they settled, Jews operated within Jewish law and

practice. Transgression meant ostracism and serious financial consequences. Abraham bin Yiju certainly learned the consequences of marrying a slave prostitute in Mangalore. Islamic traders, from Aden to Canton, operated under Sharia law, which had its own courts, judges, and rules of evidence.

Traders operated for the most part with little interference from their host state, which often set only taxes and terms of trade. These were rarely onerous restrictions, for two reasons. Most kings needed taxes from trade, especially if much of the agricultural land was taken up by nobility. Also, every port and capital had competitors. Aden competed with Hormuz for the trade from India. Kalikut competed with Cochin, Mangalore, Cannore, and half a dozen other ports for the spice trade of the Malabar Coast. If traders were dissatisfied, they moved individually or as a community to another port. Even the Portuguese could not stop this process. This limited state involvement meant that piracy was a continuing problem along the maritime routes, just as banditry was on the land routes. Certain areas, such as the northern half of the western coast of India, anywhere near Japan, and the Malacca Straits, were pirate havens for centuries.

Overall, there was an extraordinary openness to traders and whatever new goods and ideas they brought. Official Chinese ideology often disapproved of trade and made a virtue of tightly controlled ports and internal traders.<sup>2</sup> This attitude did not stop the demand for ivory and incense, or the export of iron, silk, and ceramics, or an insatiable curiosity about foreign plants, ideas, and medicines. Advice manuals to kings, a common genre across the Asian world, suggested that the ruler take joy in the novel and in news from elsewhere. This advice is from an eleventh-century Persian manual:

In the same measure that you are informed of affairs in the world generally and the doings of its princes, it is your duty to be

acquainted with your own country and the conditions prevailing amongst your people and bodyguard.

These books of advice to kings celebrated travel. They lauded the role of traders and made it an obligation of kings to welcome and protect them.\*

Trade mattered. The volume and variety of trade affected much of the population of the great Asian world. Tropical spices and medicines moved north to the plains of India, west into the Middle East, and east into China. These medicinal plants were not “discovered” by doctors in cities, much less by the traders who brought them. These spices and medicines were first discovered by the forest dwellers who experimented with their local profusion of plants. The great Asian world included not just traders and courts but reached deep into the forests of Southeast Asia, the hills above the Malabar Coast, and the pearl beds of Sri Lanka.

Trade served the spread of the universalizing religions. Ritual objects and books of both Buddhism and Islam came from specialized centers and moved along both water routes and caravan routes to Tibet, Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and China.

Trade in the great Asian world included the exotic, the prosaic, and everything in between. At one extreme, a giraffe was somehow transported from Africa to the imperial court of China. At the other extreme, fish paste produced on the coast of Thailand and ordinary Chinese iron cooking pots were regular, profitable items traded to the islands of Southeast Asia. Rice, the most prosaic of foods in India, China, and Southeast Asia, became a high-status food across the steppe world. Every ship and every caravan carried a range of goods from the precious to the mundane.

\*The most famous book in this tradition is Italian, Machiavelli's *The Prince*. The author knew of Asian manuals when he wrote advice for his king.

Perhaps the most telling point in considering the importance and regularity of trade is that all across the Asian world, various peoples defined who they were with objects of trade as much as products of indigenous manufacture. The steppe was the perfect environment to raise horses, sheep, and cattle. As Babur observed, this natural advantage resulted in a trade of tens of thousands of horses each year to India, where horses did not breed well. For the nobility of India, the horse was a crucial symbol defining status. With the proceeds from the sale of horses, steppe people bought iron for horse trappings, elegant cloth for courtly robes, and steel for weapons, which in turn became defining features of their culture.

### INNOVATION

There was a restless, even relentless, spirit of innovation common throughout the great Asian world. In politics, states experimented with bureaucracies and taxes. They developed currencies and defined new legal status for conquered peoples. From the Middle East to China, they produced advice manuals for kings. Kings eagerly awaited the return of ambassadorial missions so they could consider the latest ceremonies of loyalty or innovations in military organization. States undertook major economic development projects, such as the irrigation of land for growing rice and road building that connected regions.

In warfare, kings from Egypt to China well understood the limits of armies based on ethnic or regional loyalty. They successfully experimented with slave armies, armies based on religion, and prisoners as soldiers. Genghis Khan broke up clan-based service and formed new mixed units with men from a variety of clans.

In science, until at least 1300 CE, the Middle East, India, and China were the major centers of innovation. Hundreds of new

tropical plants arrived at courts. Some entered pharmacopoeias, where they were described and often drawn by medical writers such as Ibn Sina. Other new plants graced the royal table. Kings and nobles would often attempt to grow new varieties in their gardens. Babur boasted in his memoirs that he was the first to grow the Indian orange in Kabul. Whole new medical techniques were discovered, such as the development of inoculation in China.

In mathematics and astronomy, developments were extraordinary. Out of India came a commonly used numeric system. From India and the Middle East came algebra, a variety of geometries, including solutions to conic sections, and even a primitive form of calculus. Astronomical observatories were features of many courts.

In trade, the millennium was equally innovative. Traders not only brought promising plants to new environments but financed attempts at cultivation. Jewish traders brought sugarcane from India and began plantations along the Nile. Mango and pepper cultivation spread from India to Indonesia, where these plants became cash crops. Entrepreneurs first opened new markets, then made cheap local copies of expensive import items, such as Gujarati printed cotton cloth, Baghdad tiles, caliphate silver currency, Chinese ceramics, Damascus blades, and Chinese silk.

#### SELF-REFLECTION

The Asian world noticed and commented on itself—a self-consciousness not yet typical of Europe. Especially in China and the Middle East, there was a flowering of biography and autobiography. In India, there were literally thousands of books written on how life was lived and how it should morally be lived. Poets reflected on the sorrows of love and the fleeting nature of beauty. Artists pictured their world and paid particular attention to the

exotic. The giraffe brought to China is known both from descriptions and a painting. Histories and geographies abounded.

The great Asian world was robust enough to survive most day-to-day or even century-to-century changes and disruptions. When Baghdad declined as a great city, trade shifted to the successor capitals: Rey, Balk, Bukhara, and Ghazni. When Arab traders became Muslim, they built mosques along the trade routes and practiced their new religion. Different groups rose and fell as the dominant traders: Jews, Armenians, Gujaratis, Malays, Yemenis, Tamils, Arabs, and Chinese. Considering the millennium as a whole, there was more integration, more movement of knowledge and talented men, and more innovation at the end of the period than at the beginning.

#### EUROPEAN COLONIAL CONQUEST

Many within the Asian world recognized that the Europeans, “hat-wearers” as they were labeled, were a different breed and brought different assumptions with them. For centuries Europe had been on the fringes of the Asian world. There were, of course, trading ties to Asia through Venice, Genoa, and Prague, as well as the long-standing trade down the Russian rivers that Ibn Fadlān observed. The more intimate networks of intellectual discussion, religious debate, family ties, trade partnerships, ambassadorial missions, bureaucratic service at courts, codes of honor, poetry, music, fashion, and art were, by and large, not exchanged between Europe and Asia.

When the Europeans arrived in Asia, they proclaimed themselves traders as well as representatives of kings, directly responsible to their sovereign. This was new and unexpected. No trader in the Asian world represented a king. Abraham bin Yiju, though he was from Cairo, would never have conceived of himself as somehow

loyal to or a representative of the sovereign of Egypt. The European traders were also heavily armed. Although Asian traders regularly hired troops to protect caravans or ships, they were rarely involved in wars. The Europeans brought the notion of intertwining trade and warfare to Asia from centuries of practice on the European continent and in the Mediterranean. Royal involvement in trade and cannon casting, for example, was seen as a direct practice of profitable politics.<sup>3</sup> Finally, Europeans brought with them a sense that they were “Portuguese” or “English” and Christian. Indeed, there had been wars over sectarian interpretation of Islam and attacks on Buddhist institutions by expanding Islam, but there was nothing like the European definition of *Christian* and *heathen*. Recall that Abraham bin Yiju’s business group included local Hindus, Gujaratis, and Muslims. The Europeans were truly outsiders to the Asian world. Europeans did not often recruit local men of talent who came from different racial and ethnic groups into significant positions. High posts always went to men from the home country or the white race. Europeans used their own ceremonies of reward and honor, and did not adopt such ceremonies as robing, found in Asia.

In practical terms, these European attitudes meant that conquests went to the European king, not the local commander. No European (with the exception of Raja Brooke in Borneo) founded an independent kingdom in Asia. How different this was from Babur, who knew that he had to “share out” portions of his conquests to commanders and family to keep his army and kingdom going. Babur’s was the typical pattern across Asia. Even in the bureaucratized caliphate, imperial China, and the Mughal Empire, it was military commanders who carved out successor states based on their conquests. Europeans successfully merged the ideas of a corporate trading company, loyalty to a throne, and a professional officer corps and thereby prevented losing their conquests to military

commanders. None of this happened overnight, but Asian observers noticed that European armies tended to stay intact as they approached battle, unlike Asian armies, in which portions of the army led by bribed individual leaders often changed sides on the eve of battle. Nor did European armies shatter when the leader was killed. Asian observers also noticed that treaties were always in the name of the European king or trading company, never in the name of the commander.

In spite of these advantages in military structure and the beginning of “national” loyalty, it is important to emphasize how slow the process of European conquest and colonization of Asia was. England became the largest power in India only in the nineteenth century. Holland had early success in the Southeast Asian islands and Sri Lanka, but did not expand its empire beyond the islands. Russia only conquered the eastern steppe in the seventeenth century. Except for the crusader states, European intervention in the Middle East is mainly a twentieth-century phenomenon, and China was never colonized to the extent that India was.

In spite of the European conquests, much of this vast, highly interconnected, and interdependent Asian world continued under colonial rule. Even under European domination, Arab ships still sailed every year to Africa carrying Gujarati cloth and returning with gold. Chinese traders moved into the new British port of Calcutta. Horses by the thousands still came down from Central Asia to India. It was only slowly that colonial powers undercut local political processes and reoriented Asian economies to serve the home country.