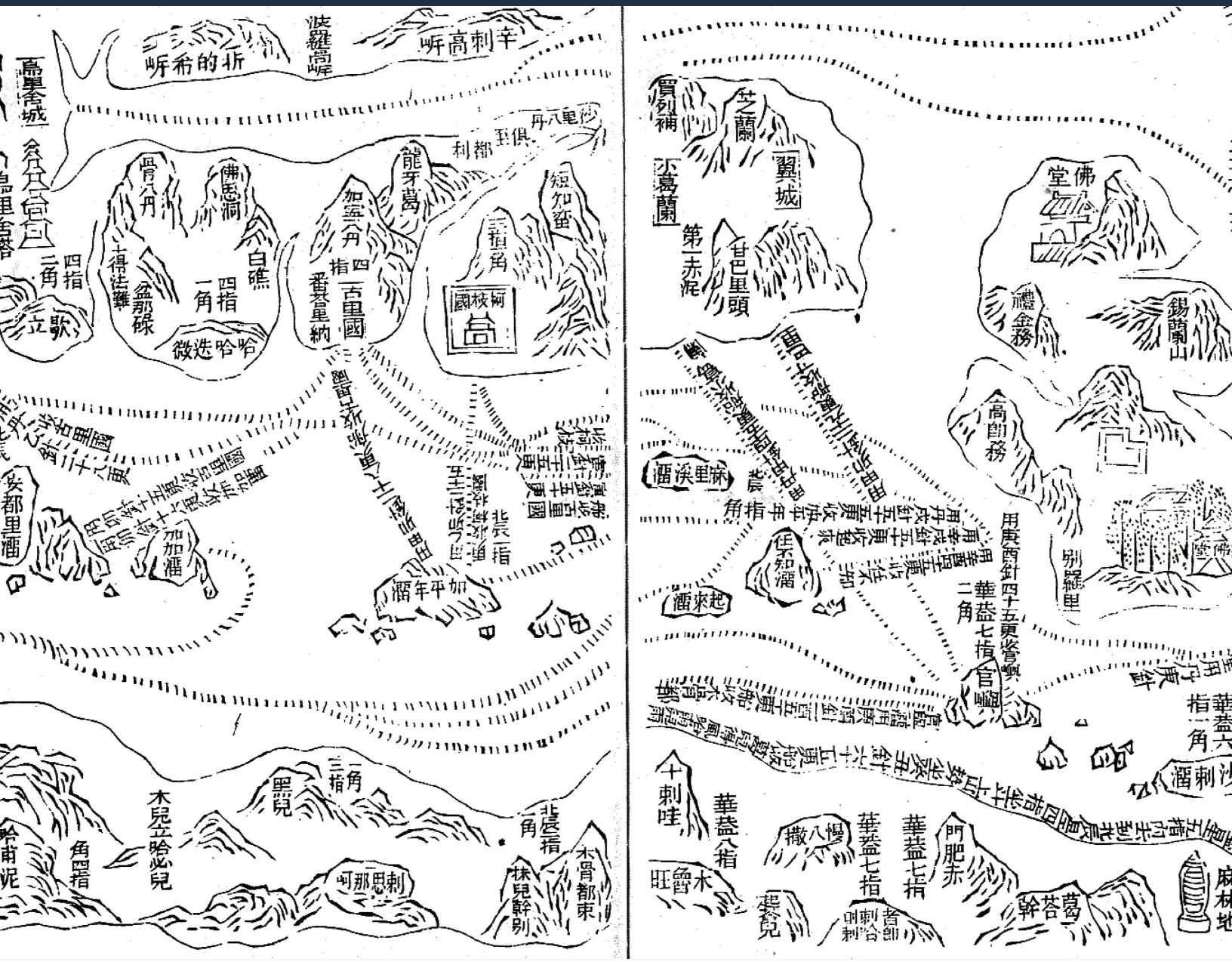

Primary Sources: Networks of Exchange c. 1200 to 1450 CE

Compiled and annotated by Eman M. Elshaikh, additional edits by Terry Haley

A collection of primary sources on cross-cultural trade, interaction, and exchange in finance, governance, religion, medicine, and more.

Introduction to this collection

This collection touches on cross-cultural trade, interaction, and cultural exchange, highlighting innovations in finance, governance, religion, medicine, and transportation and the transfer of technology, beliefs, and commodities.

Guiding question to think about as you read the documents: *How did trade networks facilitate cross-cultural interactions, in particular the exchange of intellectual and cultural ideas and traditions c. 1200 to 1450 CE?*

WHP Primary Source Punctuation Key

When you read through these primary source collections, you might notice some unusual punctuation like this: … and [ ] and ( ). Use the table below to help you understand what this punctuation means.

Punctuation	What it means
ELLIPSES words … words	Something has been removed from the quoted sentences by an editor.
BRACKETS [word] or word[s]	Something has been added or changed by an editor. These edits are to clarify or help readers.
PARENTHESES (words)	The original author of the primary source wanted to clarify, add more detail, or make an additional comment in parentheses.

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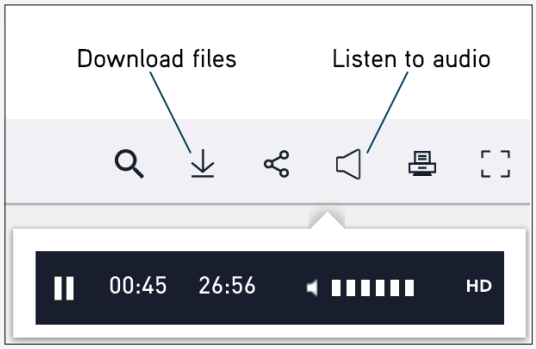

Source 1 - Ibn Battuta's Visit to Mombasa and Kilwa, 1325–1354 (0:40)

Title

Selections from Ibn Battuta's *Travels*

Source type

Primary source – travelogue

Date and location

1325–1354, East African Coast

Author

Ibn Battuta (1304–1369)

Description

Ibn Battuta was an Arab traveler. *The Rihla*, whose formal title is *A Masterpiece to Those Who Contemplate the Wonders of Cities and the Marvels of Travelling*, is Ibn Battuta's narrative recounting his multi-decade travel experiences. In this excerpt, Ibn Battuta describes some societies in East Africa and their trading practices.

Key vocabulary

disembarking	desolate
cereals	locality
pious	millet
favoring	thoroughbred

Guiding question

How did trade networks facilitate cross-cultural interactions, in particular the exchange of intellectual and cultural ideas and traditions c. 1200 to 1450 CE?

Excerpt

We sailed for fifteen days and came to Mogadishu, which is an enormous town. Its inhabitants are merchants and have many camels … When a vessel reaches the port, it is met by [small boats], in each of which are a number of young men, each carrying a covered dish containing food. [Each young man] presents this to one of the merchants on the ship saying "This is my guest," and all the others do the same. Each merchant on disembarking goes only to the house of the young man who is his host, except those who have made frequent journeys to the town and know its people well; these live where they please. The host then sells his goods for him and buys for him, and if anyone buys anything from him at too low a price or sells to him in the absence of his host, the sale is regarded by them as invalid …The sultan, whose name is Abu Bakr, is of Berbera origin,[1] and he talks in the Mogdishi language,[2] though he knows Arabic…

1 Berbera was part of a chain of commercial port cities along the Somali seaboard.
2 Mogdishi is a coastal dialect of Somali.

I embarked… for the Sawahil country,[3] with the object of visiting the town of [Kilwa][4] in the land of the Zanj.[5] We came to [Mombasa],[6] a large island two days' journey by sea from the Sawahil country. It possesses no territory on the mainland. They have fruit trees on the island, but no cereals, which have to be brought to them from the Sawahil. Their food consists chiefly of bananas and fish. The inhabitants are pious, honorable, and upright, and they have well-built wooden mosques. We stayed one night in this island, and then pursued our journey to Kilwa, which is a large town on the coast. …

From Kilwa we sailed to [Dhofar], at the extremity of Yemen.[7] Thoroughbred horses are exported from here to India, the passage taking a month with a favoring wind … it is a month's journey from Aden[8] across the desert, and is situated in a desolate locality without villages or dependencies.[9] Its market is one of the dirtiest in the world and the most pestered by flies because of the quantity of fruit and fish sold there. … The inhabitants cultivate millet and irrigate it from very deep wells, the water from which is raised in a large bucket drawn up by a number of ropes attached to the waists of slaves. Their principal food is rice, imported from India. Its population consists of merchants who live entirely on trade. …

Citation

Ibn Battúta. *Travels in Asia and Africa: 1325–1354*. Edited by Sir E. Denison Ross and Eileen Power (The Broadway Travellers). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1963.

3 Sawahil country is Arabic for coasts; here, it refers to coastal East Africa.
4 Island in modern-day Tanzania, formerly the center of Kilwa Sultanate
5 A name used by medieval Arab Muslim geographers to refer to both a certain portion of Southeast Africa (primarily the Swahili Coast) and to its Bantu inhabitants.
6 Located in modern-day Kenya
7 Dhofar is in modern-day Oman near the border ("at the extremity") with Yemen.
8 In modern-day Yemen
9 In this case, the word *dependencies* refers to the type of connections between villages, or villages and cities, that, if they existed, would have made these places thrive more.

Source 2 - al-Shakandi's descriptions of Andalusia, c. 1200 (6:05)

Title

al-Shakandi's descriptions of Andalusia

Source type

Primary source – personal narrative

Date and location

c. 1200, Andalusia

Author

al-Shakandi (d. 1232)

Description

Shaikh al-Shakandi was a Moorish citizen of Cordoba and a scholar. Moors were Muslims who resided on the Iberian Peninsula (modern-day Spain and Portugal). Al-Shakandi traveled between southern Spain and North Africa. He considered his home of Andalusia to be more significant culturally than other Islamic centers like Baghdad and Damascus. In these excerpts, he describes the agricultural and cultural cultivation of Andalusian cities like Almeria, Jaen, and Seville.

Key vocabulary

destitute

illustrious

ardor

rearing

provisions

commodities

citron

Guiding question

How did trade networks facilitate cross-cultural interactions, in particular the exchange of intellectual and cultural ideas and traditions c. 1200 to 1450 CE?

Excerpt

Almeria was the greatest [trade center] in Andalus; Christians of all nations came to its port to buy and sell, and they had factories established in it. From there the Christian merchants who came to its port traveled to other parts and markets in the interior of the country, where they loaded their vessels with such goods as they wanted …

Jaen is not destitute of [scholars] and poets. It is the birth-place of many illustrious individuals in all professions, and the sciences are cultivated in it with as great an ardor and enthusiasm as in any part of Andalus. It is generally known by the name of Jaen of the silk, owing to the extensive cultivation of mulberry trees for the rearing of silk worms …

Seville is to be praised for many things: mildness of temperature, purity of air, fine buildings, good streets … and abundance of provisions and commodities of all sorts. This … gave rise to the saying, so common among the people of Andalus: "If you seek birds' milk, by Allah you will find it in Seville"[10] …

This district … surpasses in beauty and fertility every other spot on the face of the earth; that the oil of its olives is exported as far as Alexandria … fig trees … grow in great abundance …

I have also heard of the magnificence and good design of its buildings … and spacious courts planted with fruit trees, such as the orange, the lemon, the lime, and the citron tree. The sciences and the arts are cultivated … the number of their authors is indeed too considerable to be stated, and their writings too well known to need description.

Citation

Maqqari, Ahmad b. Muhammad al-, and Pascual de Gayangos. *The history of the Mohammedan dynasties in Spain: extracted from the Nafhu-t-tíb min ghosni-l-andalusi-r-rattíb wa táríkh Lisánu-d-Dín Ibni-l-Khattíb*. London: Oriental Translation Fund, 1840.

10 *Birds' milk* is an idiom meaning a delicacy that cannot be obtained (since birds do not produce milk).

Source 3 - Note of a Double Loan Arising from a Tax, 1203 (9:35)

Title

Note of a Double Loan Arising from a Tax

Source type

Primary source – financial document

Date and location

1203, Florence

Author

Abbot Hubert (c. thirteenth century)

Description

This document describes an abbot, a male head of a monastery, borrowing from a money-lender named Manno in order to pay back a debt to Iacopo. The rate of interest is 20 percent per year, and there is a double pledge: monastic property and the guarantee of Guernius as collateral (something valuable that a borrower promises to give to the lender if he or she cannot pay back money that he or she has borrowed).

Key vocabulary

usury	emend
inviolable	commune
alienate	interest
renounced / renouncing	serfs
constituting	capital
debtor	abbot

Guiding question

How did trade networks facilitate cross-cultural interactions, in particular the exchange of intellectual and cultural ideas and traditions c. 1200 to 1450 CE?

Excerpt

In the year 1203. May twenty-ninth. To the witnesses investigating this matter, namely, Cambio Giungni, Maczo the son of Melliorelli Galigarii, and Rugerio Tebaldoli, greeting.

Hubert, by divine consent Abbot of the church and monastery of St. Michael of Passignano, foreseeing advantages to the said church and for payment of usury to Iacopo, son of Uguiccioni the Jew, for the denarii[11] which he had received from him in payment of taxes to the commune of Florence on behalf of the community of Summofonte has

11 The plural of denarius, an ancient Roman silver coin

accepted from Manno, son of the late Gianni Macci, twenty pounds of good denarii, which denarii he promised to return and pay to him in the next six months or before with interest of four denarii per pound per month. Otherwise he has promised to give him double the sum as a penalty and to emend and pay all damage and expenses arising because of this, and he has promised to give the same interest if he holds it beyond this time. And for the better observing of all these terms and for holding them inviolable and for payment of the penalty, if there be need, he has pledged and handed over to him as a pledge[12] Guernerius his colonus[13] and a man of Mezola, brother of Peruczi, with all his possessions, serfs, and service. And if this pledge be unsuitable, or if it be made over to some other person, or if any one have prior claim, he has pledged to him as guarantee all the other goods of the monastery worth triple the debt and has received free possession from him. But if it be void he may then hold, sell, pledge, or alienate the said pledge in any way and take as a penalty [an amount] not reckoned in the said debt and in all these matters he has renounced all claim to money not specified. Besides, Iacopo, son of the late Galgani, renouncing all aid of law in this case, and constituting himself chief debtor, has promised to the said Manno, under pain of double penalty, to give and pay all the said debt, capital and interest within one month from the time of the investigation if the said abbot does not pay and if action (in court) is granted against the said abbot and monastery.

Done at Florence, etc.

Citation

Santini, P., ed. *Documenti dell'Antica Costituzione del Comune di Firenze*. Florence: Presso G.P. Vieusseux, 1895. In *A Source Book for Medieval Economic History*. Edited by Roy C. Cave and Herbert H. Coulson. Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Co. New York: Biblo & Tannen, 1965 and Paul Halsall, "Medieval Sourcebook: Note of a Double Loan Arising from Tax, 1203." *Internet Medieval Source Book*. Fordham University, 1998. https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/1203double-loan.asp

12 *pledged and handed over to him as a pledge:* given as collateral

13 A *colonus* is a tenant farmer of the late Roman Empire and the European Middle Ages. The coloni (plural of colonus) were drawn from poor free farmers, partially emancipated slaves, and barbarians sent to work as agricultural laborers among landed proprietors.

Source 4 - Marco Polo on paper money, c. 1300 (14:20)

Title

Excerpt Marco Polo's *Travels*

Source type

Primary source – travelogue

Date and location

c. 1300, Venice

Author

Rustichello da Pisa (thirteenth century) and Marco Polo (1254–1324)

Description

In this excerpt of Marco Polo's travels, Marco Polo expresses his astonishment about paper as a "credit" currency versus Europe's valuable metal currency. This was amazing to Marco Polo, who observed how money was minted (making a coin from metal), distributed, and distinguished from counterfeits (fakes) using a system of seals, which are official marks that are stamped on a document to show that it is real and carries the authority of the government.

Key vocabulary

solemnity	provinces
cast	mint
imprint	alchemy
impressed	seal
counterfeit	tender

Guiding question

How did trade networks facilitate cross-cultural interactions, in particular the exchange of intellectual and cultural ideas and traditions c. 1200 to 1450 CE?

Excerpt

The emperor's mint is in this city of Khanbaliq;[14] and it is set up in such a way that you might well say he has mastered the art of alchemy, as I will now prove to you … he has money made for him in the following way. He has the bark stripped from trees—to be precise, from the mulberry trees whose leaves are eaten by silkworms. Then the thin layer [that is] between the bark and the wood of the tree is removed. After being ground and pounded, it is pressed with the aid of glue into sheets like those of cotton paper, which are completely black. And when these sheets are ready, they are cut up into pieces of different sizes, rectangular in shape and of greater length

14 The winter capital of the Yuan dynasty; modern-day Beijing

than breadth. … All these sheets of paper are stamped with the emperor's seal. And they are made with as much authority and solemnity as if they were cast from pure gold or silver; for several specially appointed officials write their names on each piece of money, each setting his own stamp, and when everything has been done correctly the chief of the officials [chosen] by the emperor dips the seal entrusted to him in cinnabar[15] and stamps it on the piece of money, so that the imprint of the seal dipped in the cinnabar remains impressed upon it; and then the money is legal tender. And if anyone were to counterfeit it, he would be punished with the ultimate penalty …

The Great Khan has such a huge quantity of this money made that with it he could buy all the treasure in the world. … [L]et me tell you that all the races and regions of men under his rule are perfectly willing to accept these sheets in payment, since wherever they go they use them to make all their payments, whether for merchandise or pearls or precious stones or gold or silver; with these sheets that I have told you about they can buy anything and pay for anything. And you can take my word for it that the sheet worth ten bezants[16] does not weigh even one.

Citation

Polo, Marco. *The Travels*. Translated by Nigel Cliff. London: Penguin Classics, 2019.

15 A bright red mineral consisting of mercury sulfide. It is the only important ore of mercury and is sometimes used as a pigment.
16 *Bezants* were gold coins in medieval Europe.

Source 5 - Fibonacci's Book of Calculation, 1202 (18:25)

Title

Liber Abaci

Source type

Primary source – mathematical treatise

Date and location

1202, Italy

Author

Leonardo Fibonacci (c. 1170–c. 1240–50)

Description

Leonardo Fibonacci was the son of a customs (part of the government that checks and collects taxes on goods bought and sold across borders) official and was interested in mathematical ideas and technologies that would improve trade and finance. Fibonacci's *Book of Calculation* introduced Indian and Middle Eastern mathematical concepts to his Italian readers, helping them use Arabic-Indian numerals, arithmetic procedures, and algebra in their commercial work. He translated ideas from many Arab mathematicians that he met during his travels and tried to explain the mathematical reasoning in a simple manner.

Key vocabulary

algorithm

Guiding question

How did trade networks facilitate cross-cultural interactions, in particular the exchange of intellectual and cultural ideas and traditions c. 1200 to 1450 CE?

Excerpt

In [this book] I presented a full instruction on numbers close to the method of the Indians, whose outstanding method I chose for this science …

As my father was a public official away from our homeland in the Bugia[17] customs house established for the Pisan[18] merchants who frequently gathered there, he had me in my youth brought to him, looking to find for me a useful and comfortable future; there he wanted me to be in the study of mathematics and to be taught for some days.

There from a marvelous instruction in the art of the nine Indian figures, the introduction and knowledge of the art pleased me so much above all else, and I learnt from them, whoever was learned in it, from nearby Egypt, Syria, Greece, Sicily and Provence, and their various methods, to which locations of business I travelled considerably

17 Port city in modern-day Algeria
18 Describes those from the city of Pisa in Italy

afterwards for much study, and I learnt from the assembled disputations.[19] But this, on the whole, the algorithm and even the Pythagorean arcs, I still reckoned almost an error compared to the Indian method. Therefore strictly embracing the Indian method, and attentive to the study of it, from mine own sense adding some, and some more still from the subtle Euclidean geometric art, applying the sum that I was able to perceive to this book, I worked to put it together in XV distinct chapters, showing certain proof for almost everything that I put in, so that further, this method perfected above the rest, this science is instructed to the eager, and to the Italian people above all others. …

The nine Indian figures are: 987654321.

With these nine figures, and with the sign 0—which the Arabs call zephyr—any number whatsoever is written. …

Citation

Sigler, L.E. *Fibonacci's Liber Abaci: A Translation into Modern English of Leonardo Pisano's Book of Calculation*. New York: Springer-Verlag, 2012.

19 In the scholastic system of education of the Middle Ages, *disputations* offered a formalized method of debate designed to uncover and establish truths in theology and in sciences.

Source 6 - In praise of Majapahit, 1365 (22:30)

Title

Nagarakertagama

Source type

Primary source – speech/eulogy

Date and location

1365, Java, Indonesia

Author

Mpu Prapanca (c. fourteenth century)

Description

This is an excerpt of an Old Javanese eulogy (a speech or piece of writing expressing praise) dedicated to a Javanese king of the Majapahit Empire (1295–1527). It was written by a Buddhist monk and includes descriptions of the empire and its cosmopolitan courts and markets during the empire's height. It shows the mixing of Hindu and Buddhist belief systems and the multi-ethnic nature of many communities.

Key vocabulary

immeasurable

doctrine

speculative

retinue

brahmins

Guiding question

How did trade networks facilitate cross-cultural interactions, in particular the exchange of intellectual and cultural ideas and traditions c. 1200 to 1450 CE?

Excerpt

Such is the excellence of His Majesty the Prince who reigns at Majapahit as absolute monarch. He is praised like the moon in autumn, since he fills all the world with joy … His retinue, treasures, chariots, elephants, horses, etc., are immeasurable like the sea …

The land of Java is becoming more and more famous for its blessed state … "Only [India] and Java," so people say, "are mentioned for their superiority … the multitude of men experienced in the doctrine … whatever [work] turns up, they are very able to handle it." …

[Among them are men who are] expert[s] of the religious traditions [with] complete knowledge of the speculative as well as all the other philosophies, … the system of [logic], etc. …

For this reason all kinds of people have continually come from other countries, in multitudes. There are Jambudwipa [India], Kamboja [Cambodia], China, Yawana [central Vietnam], Champa [south Vietnam], Karnataka

[south India], Goda [Bengal], and Siam [Thailand]. … They come by ship with numerous merchants; monks and brahmins are the principal ones…

Citation

Benda, Harry Jindrich, and John A. Larkin. *The world of Southeast Asia: selected historical readings*. New York: Harper & Row, 1967.

Source 7 - Zheng He's *The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores*, 1433 (25:15)

Title

The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores

Source type

Primary source – voyage chronicle

Date and location

1433, China, describing voyages in the Indian Ocean

Author

Ma Huan (1380–1460) and Zheng He (1371–1433 or 1435)

Description

During the early fifteenth century, the Ming dynasty emperor tried to expand Chinese reach across the Indian Ocean, commissioning nearly two thousand ships to sail around the globe, mapping the oceans, and bringing news to China. Zheng He, a Chinese Muslim sailor, was knowledgeable in Arabic and Arab customs, so he was made the imperial envoy (a person who represents a government who is sent to talk to other governments) and began an expedition in 1405. Over nearly three decades, he led seven expeditions from Southeast Asia to East Africa. Ma Huan, a Muslim Chinese translator, accompanies Zheng He on his last four expeditions and wrote *The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores* on Zheng He's behalf in 1433.

Key vocabulary

devoutly	unerring
constituted	prognostications
professed	minted
adhered	exchange-values
apparatus	junks

Guiding question

How did trade networks facilitate cross-cultural interactions, in particular the exchange of intellectual and cultural ideas and traditions c. 1200 to 1450 CE?

Excerpt

Calicut [Kozhikode, in southwest India]. This constituted the great country of the Western Ocean, being three days' sailing north-west from Cochin. … The king was a Nan-k'un man, and a devout Buddhist. The population included the same five kinds of persons as in Cochin.

The king and the people refrained from eating beef, while the great chiefs, being Muslims, refrained from eating pork. …

Two Muslim chiefs administered the country. The majority of the people professed the Muslim religion, and once in seven days they worshipped in twenty or thirty temples. On the visits of the Chinese treasure-ships, Indian and Chinese officials fixed the exchange-values of the Chinese silks and other goods, and the values were reduced to writing and strictly adhered to when the local traders exchanged their gems and other valuables. The Indians, using no apparatus but the digits of hands and feet, made unerring calculations. …

Aden [in southern Yemen]. From Calicut the junks steered due west and reached Aden after one month. In this rich and populous sea-side country, king and people were Muslims, and spoke Arabic. … Aden had markets, public baths, and shops selling goods of every kind … The king minted [gold and copper coins]. Astrologers made accurate prognostications of the seasons, eclipses, tides, and weather. … The king sent valuable gifts as tribute to China. … Mecca. From Calicut ships steered south-west, and after three months made Jeddah, [from which] Mecca could be reached in a day. Here was founded the Muslim religion, which all the inhabitants professed and devoutly followed… Foreign Muslims came annually to worship … The king minted a very pure gold [coin]. In Medina lay the tomb of the holy Muhammad. … The king of Mecca sent tribute to the Chinese court.

Citation

Ali, Omar H. *Islam in the Indian Ocean World: A Brief History with Documents*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2016.

Source 8 - Chola Spoked Chariot Wheel, c. 1200 (29:30)

Title

Chola Spoked Chariot Wheel

Source type

Primary source – image of archaeological artifact

Date and location

1200, Tamil Nadu, India

Author

Unknown, built under Rajaraja Chola II

Description

This depicts an important transport technology, the chariot. The chariot and its wheel are so finely sculpted that they include even the faintest details. This sculpture is located at Airavatesvara Temple, a Hindu temple of Dravidian architecture located in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The stone temple incorporates a chariot structure and includes major Vedic and Puranic deities such as Indra.

Guiding question

How did trade networks facilitate cross-cultural interactions, in particular the exchange of intellectual and cultural ideas and traditions c. 1200 to 1450 CE?

Excerpt

Citation

Chariot detail, relief sculpture at Airavatesvara Temple, India. © Alison Wright / Corbis Historical / Getty Images.

Source 9 - Guyot de Provins poem about Mariner's Compass (30:55)

Title

Guyot de Provins poem about Mariner's Compass

Source type

Primary source – poem

Date and location

thirteenth century, France

Author

Guyot de Provins (c. thirteenth century)

Description

De Provins was a French poet and troubadour (a songwriter and singer) who likely traveled to the Middle East and elsewhere. In this satirical work, likely from around 1200, de Provins criticizes the Church by sarcastically and indirectly talking about how certain the compass is and how well it finds its place, in contrast to the Pope. He describes the technology of the mariner's compass, which at this time was beginning to be more common in Europe. The fact that a non-scholar like de Provins was writing about this mechanism suggests it was no longer a complete rarity or mystery.

Key vocabulary

virtue	accord
adheres	mariners

Guiding question

How did trade networks facilitate cross-cultural interactions, in particular the exchange of intellectual and cultural ideas and traditions c. 1200 to 1450 CE?

Excerpt

This same star does not move, and

They [the mariners] have an art which cannot deceive,

By virtue of the magnet,

An ugly brownish stone,

To which iron adheres of its own accord.

Then they look for the right point,

And when they have touched a needle

And fixed it on a bit of straw,

Lengthwise in the middle, without more,

And the straw keeps it above;[20]

Then the point turns just

Against the star undoubtedly.

When the night is dark and gloomy,

That you can see neither star nor moon,

Then they bring a light to the needle;

Can they not then assure themselves

Of the situation of the star towards the point [of the needle]?

By this the mariner is enabled

To keep the proper course;

This is an art which cannot deceive.

Citation

de Provins, Guiot. "The Mariner's Compass." In "The Mariner's Compass," by Erenest K. Ruden, *Science and Industry: 1898-99, Volume* 3, 560. Scranton, PA: The Colliery Engineer Company, 1899.

20 Needle floating in water

Source 10 - Yuan Stone with Nestorian Inscription, c. 1300 (33:30)

Title

Yuan Stone with Nestorian Inscription

Source type

Primary source – reproduction of archaeological artifact

Date and location

1271–1368, China

Author

unknown

Description

Reproduction of a stone tablet engraved with a Nestorian Christian cross and inscribed with Syriac writing. The original was found at the site of a Christian church or monastery at Fangshan District in modern-day Beijing and was dated to the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368 CE) of medieval China.

Guiding question

How did trade networks facilitate cross-cultural interactions, in particular the exchange of intellectual and cultural ideas and traditions c. 1200 to 1450 CE?

Excerpt

Citation

A porcelain Nestorian Christrian plaque from the Yuan Dynasty in the exhibition "The Silk Road in Inner Mongolia" presented by The University Museum and Art Gallery of Hong Kong University in 2007. © Dustin Shum/South China Morning Post via Getty Images.

Eman M. Elshaikh

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Cover: Zheng He, Chinese school. Chart showing India, top, Ceylon and Africa, bottom. Woodcut. © Photo12/Universal Images Group via Getty Images

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