

## Lesson 4: Era Overview: Expanding Interactions, 300–1500 C.E.

Essential Question: *Why did the first empires decline, and how did new empires rise to take their place?*

### Introduction:

In 629 C.E., a Chinese Buddhist named Xuanzang (shoo-wen-zahng) set out on a long journey to India. His goal was to spread Buddhist learning and form closer ties between India and China. He traveled by land, heading west on the Silk Road across Central Asia before turning south to India. All told, he would cover more than 10,000 miles on his remarkable journey.

Xuanzang encountered many dangers along the way. He got lost in the Gobi Desert and nearly died of thirst. Snow and freezing conditions in the Tian Shan Mountains killed many members of his party. Bandits attacked and robbed him. But he also met with great kindness and hospitality. His writings about the people and places he visited provide a valuable historical record of the time.

In India, Xuanzang studied with Buddhist monks and visited sacred Buddhist sites. He settled for a time in northern India, which he described as a peaceful land governed by a wise and generous ruler, King Harsha.

In 645, after 16 years abroad, Xuanzang returned to China. There he became a renowned Buddhist scholar. With his help, China developed closer relations with India. At the time, China was gaining strength under the Tang (tahng) dynasty. India, in contrast, was growing weaker. Just two years after Xuanzang's return, King Harsha died and his kingdom fell apart. India remained divided for centuries to come.

During the period from 300 to 1500 C.E., the world changed in many ways. Kingdoms and empires rose and fell, and new ones took their place. Meanwhile, different parts of the world became more connected through trade and the exchange of ideas. In this lesson, you will read about key developments during this period of expanding interactions.

### Themes

**Cultural Interaction** The growth of empires and trade routes increased contacts among peoples. Ideas, customs, and beliefs spread more easily around the world.

**Political Structures** Empires rose and fell, including the great civilizations of the classical world. The Muslim and Mongol empires ruled vast territories.

**Economic Structures** Trade networks expanded during this period. States and empires grew wealthy from increased trade and commerce.

**Social Structures** The collapse of classical civilizations changed society in Rome, China, and India. But new social structures soon emerged.

**Human-Environment Interaction** The world population fell as a result of disease and other factors. This trend began to reverse, however, with increased food production.

### Section 2 Crisis in the Classical World

Early in the first millennium C.E., a series of crises shook the classical civilizations of China, Rome, and India. The Han, Roman, and Gupta empires had flourished for hundreds of years. They had dominated their separate worlds and produced great cultural achievements. By 550 C.E., however, they had all collapsed.

**The Han Decline** The first to fail was the Han Empire. The Han dynasty had ruled China for four hundred years. It created a system of strong, centralized rule and expanded China's borders. Agriculture, trade, and commerce grew. It was a time of peace and increased prosperity.

In 220 C.E., however, the Han dynasty fell. The causes of that collapse were complex and went back many years. Political factors played an important part. In 9 C.E., Han rule had been interrupted by the overthrow of a young emperor. The Han later regained the throne, but various factions in government began to struggle for power. Over time, these internal struggles undermined Han control.

Other factors played a role, too. One key factor was pressure on China's borders by nomadic tribes from Central Asia. These tribes had long threatened northern China. Faced with this constant danger, China spent heavily on military defense. Much of the cost was financed by higher taxes on Chinese peasants. Unable to pay their taxes, many peasants had to sell their land to wealthy landowners. The gap between rich and poor grew, and peasant revolts broke out. In addition, deadly diseases such as smallpox—brought to China along the Silk Road from other parts of the world—sparked **epidemics** that ravaged the population.

All these factors caused instability in China and weakened the Han dynasty. Regional warlords began to challenge Han power. Bandits roamed the land. In 220, the last Han emperor gave up the throne. China broke into warring kingdoms for nearly four centuries.

**The Fall of Rome** Two centuries later, the Roman Empire collapsed. Rome suffered from many of the same problems that troubled the Han, including attacks from nomadic tribes. Like the Han, Rome declined over a period of many years.

Political problems were one factor. Rome never developed a reliable system for choosing its leaders. By the 200s C.E., most Roman emperors were generals who seized power by force. They depended on their soldiers for support, and few stayed in power for long. Twenty-six emperors ruled Rome in the last half of the third century. All but one was killed or committed suicide.

Other problems were economic and social in nature. To support the empire and its defense, Rome raised taxes to levels that were too high for most poor farmers to bear. Many left their farms and fled to the cities. But there were not enough jobs to support these migrants. Poverty and social problems increased. Diseases also swept across the empire, killing as much as one fourth of the population. Farming and trade suffered, and tax revenues plummeted. The price of food and other goods shot up. This inflation fueled anger and social unrest. The Roman Empire's enormous size had always made it difficult to govern. To solve this problem, the emperor Diocletian split the empire into eastern and western halves. In 324, Emperor Constantine transferred the capital to the eastern city of Byzantium, which became Constantinople.

In the meantime, Germanic tribes continued to attack the western empire. Invaders entered Rome and sacked the city twice, once in 410 and again in 455. Rome was teetering on the brink of collapse. In 476, a Germanic leader overthrew the last western emperor. The eastern empire, later known as the Byzantine Empire, survived for another thousand years. But it never regained the strength or glory of the Roman Empire at its height.

**The End of Gupta Rule** The Gupta Empire was the third classical civilization to fall. The Gupta kings ruled northern India for more than two centuries, beginning around 320 C.E. Although they created a strong central government, they gave local rulers a good deal of **autonomy**. During the Gupta era, the economy prospered and Indian civilization entered a golden age.

Compared with the fall of the Han dynasty and imperial Rome, the reason for the Gupta collapse was simple: foreign invasion. For years, a nomadic group known as the White Huns had threatened India from the northwest. The Gupta Empire was shielded from these attacks by two barriers, one geographic and the other

political. The first barrier was the towering Hindu Kush and Himalayan mountain ranges to the north. The other was the military strength of the Persian state to the west.

Around 450, however, that protection broke down. The White Huns crossed the mountains and invaded India. Gupta forces repelled the invaders at first. But the cost of this defense drained the empire's resources. When the invaders returned, they overran northern India. By 550, the Gupta age was over. Except for a brief period in the 600s, under King Harsha, India was divided into small kingdoms for the next six centuries.

**Civilizations on the Rise** The collapse of classical empires had a significant impact across much of **Afro-Eurasia** the vast region made up of Africa, Europe, and Asia. For centuries, large portions of North Africa, Europe, and Asia had enjoyed peace and stability under imperial rule. The security those empires provided helped promote trade and the exchange of ideas across the continents. Now that system had collapsed. Other strong states survived, however. New empires eventually emerged.

One of the strongest surviving states was the Sassanian Empire of Persia. The Sassanians, who ruled from 226 to 651 C.E., controlled a large territory that extended from the Roman Empire in the west to Gupta India in the east. Sassanian rule relied on a strong warrior culture and a thriving economy based on agriculture and trade. The Sassanians spent much of their wealth on wars with the Roman and Byzantine empires. But they also developed large cities and a flourishing culture.

In China, several centuries passed before another dynasty, the Sui (sway), united the country in 589. But it was the Tang dynasty that really revived Chinese power. The Tang took control in 618 and ruled for 300 years. They were followed by another great dynasty, the Song (soong), which ruled for another three centuries. Under the Tang and Song, China enjoyed a long period of prosperity and cultural achievement.

In Europe, the fall of Rome led to a long period of decline, often referred to as the Dark Ages. Cities crumbled. The economy shrank and the population fell. But new political structures gradually emerged, and order began to return. Around 800 C.E., a powerful leader named Charlemagne united parts of central and western Europe in a kingdom known as the Holy Roman Empire. By 1000, farming and trade were on the rise, and the population began to grow. During this period, traders and missionaries from the Byzantine Empire introduced their customs and beliefs into Russia and eastern Europe. As a result, many people there converted to **Orthodox Christianity**.

States and empires also developed in Africa and the Americas. In East Africa, the kingdom of Axum built a prosperous trading empire that ruled the coast and highlands of what is now Ethiopia between 100 and 600 C.E. In southern Africa, the kingdom of Zimbabwe grew rich by trading in gold and other products. And in West Africa, the kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai also gained wealth and power through the gold trade.

In the Americas, great civilizations arose on both continents. In **Mesoamerica**—a region comprising parts of modern Mexico and Central America—the Olmecs, Maya, Aztecs, and other peoples created powerful states with large cities and prosperous trade networks. In South America, the Incas built a great empire that stretched for thousands of miles along the Andes Mountains. In North America, the Pueblo Indians and other peoples created sophisticated cultures based on farming and trade.

### **Section 3 The Muslim Empire**

In the 600s, another great empire emerged, this time in Southwest Asia. Starting from the Arabian Peninsula, Muslim conquerors quickly gained control over a vast territory. Over the next few centuries, the Muslim Empire spread Islamic culture and beliefs across three continents.

**Origins of the Empire** The origins of the Muslim Empire lie in the teachings of Muhammad, the founder of Islam. Muhammad had his spiritual revelation—his message from God—in around 610 C.E. He began preaching in his hometown of Mecca and soon gained a following. But other Arabs rejected his message and forced him and his followers to flee the city. From his new base in the town of Medina, Muhammad continued to preach and gain support among Arab tribes. Finally, by 630, his forces were able to retake Mecca. Two years later, Muhammad died.

At that point, the Muslim community picked Abu Bakr, Muhammad’s father-in-law, as their new leader. He became the first **caliph** or Muslim ruler. Three more caliphs followed in succession: Umar, Uthman, and Ali. These men established the caliphate, or Muslim state. The caliphate combined both political and religious authority.

During the rule of the first four caliphs, from 632 to 661, Arab armies conquered the rest of Arabia and then moved into the Middle East and North Africa. They took Persia from the Sassanians and Egypt from the Byzantine Empire. Their success hinged on two main factors. One was their fervent belief that God was on their side. The other was their mastery of the camel for desert transport and warfare. They also benefited from weakness in the Byzantine and Persian empires, which had been fighting each other for years and suffered from internal problems.

In 661, a new caliph—a member of the Umayyad family—took power. He moved the capital to Damascus, Syria, and established a dynasty. The Umayyads continued to expand the empire, moving deeper into North Africa and capturing Spain. They also took lands in northwestern India and defeated Chinese forces in Central Asia. Only crucial defeats in France and at Constantinople blocked their advance into Europe.

In 750, the Umayyads were overthrown by another dynasty, the Abbasids. Under the Abbasid caliphate, the capital was moved further east, to Baghdad. The Abbasids ruled for 500 years, until 1258, overseeing a golden age of Muslim culture. They had lost most of their power by the mid-900s, however. By that time, separate dynasties ruled different parts of the Muslim world, including Spain, North Africa, and Persia.

A serious split also occurred among the Muslim faithful. Some Muslims had never accepted Umayyad or Abbasid rule. These Muslims, known as **Shi’a**, remained loyal to the fourth caliph, Ali, and his descendants. The majority of Muslims, known as **Sunni**, accepted the Umayyad and Abbasid rulers. Over time, the split between Shi’a and Sunni Muslims led to separate branches of Islam.

Another group, the **Sufis**, also emerged at this time. They were Muslim mystics who rejected the worldly nature of the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates. They lived simply and sought a direct experience of God. As Muslim holy men, the Sufis later played an important role in the spread of Islam.

Despite these differences, by 900 the Muslims had created an empire that stretched across much of Afro-Eurasia, from Spain in the west to India and Central Asia in the east. They regarded this empire as **Dar al-Islam**—“the House of Islam”—a realm under Muslim rule where Islam would prevail. Over the next several centuries, Islamic influence would continue to grow, extending further into Africa, Europe, and Asia.

**Muslim Society and Economy** The Muslim Empire absorbed many different cultures and peoples. It included Arabs, Christians, Jews, Persians, Indians, Turks, North African Berbers, and Black Africans, among others. As a result, Muslim society was highly diverse.

In general, Muslim rulers respected Christians and Jews as “People of the Book”—that is, believers in God—and allowed them to practice their faith. But non-Muslims were subject to a special tax, along with other restrictions. Although second-class citizens, they were usually allowed to live in peace and manage their own affairs.

Eventually, though, most people in the Muslim world converted to Islam. Many also learned Arabic, the language of the Islamic holy book, the Qur'an. A common religion and common language helped unite people throughout the empire. Over time, many Muslims came to identify themselves as Arabs because of their language and faith.

Social structures in the Muslim world varied considerably depending on local traditions. In the Muslim heartland of Southwest Asia, however, a common system of social classes had developed by the 900s. At the top of this system were Arabs or Muslims by birth. Next came converts to Islam. The third class was made up of people who practiced other religions, including Christians and Jews. At the bottom were slaves, typically people captured in war. As in most other cultures at the time, women were generally considered inferior to men. They did enjoy certain rights, though, including the right to own property. For the most part, women's work revolved around the home and family.

Agriculture and commerce formed the economic foundations of the Muslim world. Trade, in particular, was a key activity. Arab merchants had long taken part in overland trade across Southwest Asia. Muhammad had himself been a trader early in life. As a result, Muslims had a positive attitude toward commerce. They took advantage of the various trade routes that linked Muslim lands with the rest of Afro-Eurasia. They traded goods ranging from West African gold and Arabian honey to Indian spices and Chinese silks.

Muslim traders relied on camel caravans to travel long distances across harsh desert lands. But they also made use of ships and sea routes to sail between Europe, Africa, and Asia. Along with these means of transport, other key factors helped promote trade in the Muslim Empire. These factors included a common language, a common set of laws, and a common currency. In addition, Muslim rulers offered guarantees for the safe conduct of trade and commerce.

Agriculture was also important in the Muslim world, though arid conditions limited farming in many places. One notable exception was Spain. There, Muslims developed extensive irrigation systems and grew crops such as sugar and citrus fruits, imported from South Asia.

Economic prosperity led to the growth of urban areas across the Muslim world. Cities such as Córdoba, Fez, Cairo, and Baghdad became important centers of trade, commerce, and culture. One visitor to Baghdad around 1000 C.E. described the glories of the Abbasid capital:

*The city of Baghdad formed two vast semi-circles on the right and left banks of the Tigris [River]. . . . The numerous suburbs, covered with parks, gardens, villas, and beautiful promenades, and plentifully supplied with rich bazaars [markets], and finely built mosques and baths, stretched for a considerable distance on both sides of the river. . . . [M]arble steps led down to the water's edge, and the scene on the river was animated by thousands of gondolas, decked with little flags, dancing like sunbeams on the water.*

—Yakut, *Geographical Encyclopedia*

**The Culture of Islam** Life in Baghdad and other Muslim cities reflected the great achievements of Islamic civilization. This culture drew on a variety of influences. The beliefs of Islam and the traditions of Arabia played a central role. But Muslim culture also absorbed ideas and styles from classical Greece and Rome, Persia, India, and China.

Architecture flourished in the Muslim world. Architects built beautiful mosques, or Muslim houses of worship, with large domes and tall minarets, or towers. They designed ornate palaces and decorated them with colorful tiles and complex carvings in geometric and floral patterns. They also laid out elaborate gardens, filled with lush greenery and watered by fountains. The Alhambra—a royal palace and fortress in Granada, Spain—is a good example of the magnificence of Muslim architecture.

Art and literature were also important in Islamic civilization. The art of handwriting, called calligraphy, was a fine art in the Muslim world. So was the creation of textiles and rugs with intricate designs. Although Islam discouraged depictions of the human figure, Muslim artists in Persia and India painted exquisite miniatures of people and animals in natural settings. Writers crafted wonderful stories, such as the tales in *A Thousand and One Nights*, also known as *Arabian Nights*. Other writers, such as the Persian Sufi poet Rumi, wrote beautiful poems.

Muslims also advanced scholarship and learning in many fields. Libraries and universities, such as the famed al-Azhar in Cairo, thrived in the Muslim world. Muslim scholars translated and preserved ancient Greek classics, including the writings of Aristotle and Plato. The work of Muslim philosophers such as Ibn Sina (i-bin SEE-na), known as Avicenna in Europe, had great influence on later European thinkers.

Muslim scholars made important advances in mathematics, astronomy, and medicine. They adopted math concepts from India, including the use of zero and the system of Arabic numerals still in use today. They also developed algebra and applied it to the study of astronomy. In medicine, Muslim specialists treated diseases, performed surgery, and wrote books that became standard medical texts in Europe.

Muslims also developed key technologies in irrigation and navigation. They built canals, dams, and waterwheels. They borrowed and adapted the triangular sail from ancient Greece and the magnetic compass from China. They also refined the art of papermaking, another Chinese invention. In these and many other ways, Islamic civilization made great advances.

## Section 4 The Mongol World

By the mid-900s, the Muslim Empire had fractured. An Umayyad prince governed Spain, while a Shi'a dynasty called the Fatimids ruled Egypt. The Abbasid caliphs still reigned in Baghdad, but they were controlled by a Persian dynasty to the east. Later, in 1055, Turkish nomads known as Seljuks conquered the Persians and gained control over the Abbasid caliphate. Muslim civilization would continue to flourish for several centuries, but the Muslim Empire was over.

One final blow remained, however. In 1258, Mongol conquerors stormed into Baghdad and killed the last Abbasid ruler. A new empire had been born.

**The Mongol Empire** The Mongols were a group of nomadic tribes from the plains of Central Asia. For centuries they had lived as herders in the grasslands north of China. They slept in felt tents, called yurts, and survived on meat and milk from their animals. They also raided and fought with other tribes.

In 1206, a Mongol leader, or **khan**, managed to unite the Mongol tribes into a powerful fighting force. His name was Temujin, but he took the title of Genghis Khan, or "Universal Ruler." Under his leadership, the Mongols began a campaign of conquest that would create the largest empire the world had ever known.

Genghis first turned his army south, toward China. After several years of fighting, he had taken a large portion of northern China. He then moved west, capturing the lands of Central Asia and gaining control over the Silk Road. Crossing the Himalayas, he also occupied parts of modern-day Pakistan.

Several factors contributed to Genghis's success.

- First, the Mongols were fierce warriors and excellent horsemen. They could ride far and fast, and even sleep while riding.
- They were also well trained and highly disciplined. Genghis organized his troops on the decimal system, dividing them into groups of 10, 100, 1000, and 10,000.

- Genghis was a skilled military strategist who knew how to deceive his enemies. At times he would appear to retreat, only to draw his enemy into a trap.
- Genghis could also be ruthless. If a city rebelled after being conquered, he would return and raze it to the ground, leaving no survivors. His reputation for brutality caused some enemies to surrender without a fight.

In 1227, Genghis died. Power then passed to his son and grandsons, who continued the conquests. The Mongols took the rest of China, all of Russia, and most of Southwest Asia. Their westward advance was finally halted at the gates of Vienna and the shores of the Mediterranean. By 1260, Mongol lands extended across Eurasia, from China to Europe. In half a century, the Mongols had created an empire more than twice as large as the Muslim Empire, and six times larger than Rome at its height.

**Mongol Rule** Because the Mongols were nomads, they had no real experience with governing. They did have a strong moral code, however, which they enforced through their own legal system. Among other things, this code forbade theft, lying, betrayal, and defiance of authority. The penalty for violating this code could be death.

The Mongols could also be flexible. They allowed conquered peoples to maintain their own customs and traditions. In many cases, they adopted local customs themselves. They practiced religious tolerance. One of Genghis's grandsons reportedly said, "We believe in one God. . . . But just as God has given different digits [fingers] to the palm, so He has given different religions to men."

In 1265, the Mongol Empire split into four parts, called khanates. The largest and most important of these, the Khanate of the Great Kahn, included China and the Mongol homeland. Its ruler, Kublai Khan (KOOH-bly KAHN), united China and ruled like a Chinese emperor. He also maintained ties with the other khanates and kept the empire connected.

During this period, a huge network of exchange developed across the Mongol world and beyond. This network relied on the **Pax Mongolica**, the peace and security that prevailed under Mongol rule. The Mongols expanded trade routes and built a courier system to speed communication throughout the empire. As a result, trade increased dramatically across Afro-Eurasia. A growing volume of goods flowed along the Silk Road, from China to Europe and Africa. Ideas and inventions traveled, too. Paper and gunpowder—two Chinese inventions already adopted in the Muslim world—made their way to Europe during this period.

Of course, people also made the journey. The most famous traveler on the Silk Road, the Venetian trader Marco Polo, became an adviser to Kublai Khan and later wrote about the marvels of the khan's royal court. Among the innovations he noted was paper money, which the Mongols used to promote trade. This new currency, Polo said, could be used to "buy anything, including pearls, precious stones, gold, or silver." The Mongols also issued a kind of passport and credit card for travel throughout the empire. This document indicated the traveler's importance and the level of service that person should receive along the way.

Under the Mongols, travelers could journey the length of Asia, from China to Europe, with little concern for their safety. As a Chinese writer noted at the time, "The land within the Four Seas [Asia] had become the territory of one family, civilization had spread everywhere, and no more barriers existed."

**The Mongol Collapse** The Mongol Empire lasted for around a century. Then, like all giant empires, it collapsed. Political disunity among the khanates was one problem. Another was the tendency of the Mongols to adopt the customs and culture of the people they ruled. Over time, they lost the warrior spirit that had driven their conquests.

The main cause of the collapse, however, was disease. Like Han China and imperial Rome, the Mongol Empire was stricken by a deadly illness that spread along trade routes. The disease was **bubonic plague**, also known as the Black Death. It began in the 1330s in China, where it killed as much as half of the population in just twenty

years. From there it spread west along the Silk Road, killing millions more. It devastated the populations of Southwest Asia and Europe, where at least a quarter of the people died. The plague was most deadly in cities, where people lived close together. But it also ravaged the countryside.

The Black Death brought down the Mongol Empire. It reduced populations and disrupted trade and commerce. Movement along the trade routes slowed to a trickle. As a result, links between the four parts of the empire were broken. Each khanate faced mounting pressures. Two were overthrown quickly: the Persian khanate in 1335 and the Chinese khanate in 1368. The Mongols who ruled Russia—known as the Golden Horde—broke into smaller groups that declined in power over the next few centuries.

Only in Central Asia did Mongol rulers remain in power. In the late 1300s, a warrior known as Timur Lang, or Timur the Lame, took control. Attempting to revive the Mongol Empire, he expanded into Southwest Asia, seizing lands from India to the Mediterranean. He was a brutal ruler, however, who governed through terror. In the early 1500s, his descendants would conquer India and establish the Mughal Empire.

## Section 5 Expanding Networks of Exchange

During the centuries from 300 to 1500, the various regions of the world became increasingly connected. People, ideas, and goods began to move more freely within regions and around the world. Religions also spread beyond their lands of origin to become established in new places.

**Trade Networks** Several major trade networks flourished during this era. The largest network connected the various parts of Asia with each other and with Africa and the Mediterranean. The Silk Road was the major land route in this network. It carried an enormous amount of trade over the centuries, particularly during the time of the Han and Mongol empires. The use of camel caravans—an Arab innovation—enhanced overland travel through desert regions.

Sea routes were also important. Merchant ships sailed from Korea, Japan, and China through the South China Sea to the ports of Southeast Asia and India. They crossed the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea, and the Persian Gulf to the shores of Southwest Asia and East Africa. They also moved up the Red Sea to link with trade routes in the Mediterranean.

A second major trade network crossed Europe. Although the fall of Rome disrupted trade for centuries, by the year 1000 merchants were starting to revive European trade. The Vikings—a warrior people from Scandinavia—helped launch this network in the 800s by expanding along sea and river routes. They crossed the Baltic and North seas and traveled around Spain into the Mediterranean. They also moved down the rivers of Russia to the Black and Caspian seas. They traded furs, lumber, salt, glass, horses, woolens, and many other goods. They also brought slaves from Britain and the Slavic lands of eastern Europe to trade in the Muslim world.

A third major trade network linked Africa's Mediterranean coast with the lands south of the Sahara Desert. This network, called the trans-Saharan trade route, was based on the exchange of two valuable products: salt and gold. Traders carried salt from the northern desert and traded it for gold from south of the desert. This trade supplied two-thirds of the world's gold and supported the powerful kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai.

Other, smaller trade networks existed in the Americas and the South Pacific. In the Americas, a loose trading system spanned the continents but centered on the high civilizations of Mesoamerica and the South American Andes. In the South Pacific, the island groups of Polynesia, Melanesia, and Micronesia were conducting sea trade by the 1400s.

**World Religions** Exchange networks and the growth of empires also helped spread religious beliefs across Afro-Eurasia. As a result, the major faiths—Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—became **world religions**. Traders and missionaries carried Buddhism throughout Asia. Hinduism traveled with Indian traders to Southeast Asia. Islam spread over a large region from West Africa to Central Asia. It also gained a foothold in India and Southeast Asia. Christianity spread across Europe and Russia, and also took root in Egypt and Ethiopia. Judaism became established in communities stretching from western Europe to Central Asia and beyond.

These religions expanded during a period of change and upheaval throughout Afro-Eurasia. Their promise of salvation or spiritual peace offered comfort to people unsettled by urban life and the rise and fall of empires. In many cases, the religions interacted peacefully. In the Muslim world, for example, Jews, Christians, and Muslims often lived side by side, with little conflict.

Religious tensions and conflicts did develop, however. Muslims showed little tolerance for Hinduism, with its belief in many gods. When Muslim conquerors invaded India, they tried to convert Hindus to Islam. Tensions also developed between the two branches of the Christian faith: Roman Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity. In 1054, the two churches split officially.

The biggest conflicts, however, occurred between Christian and Muslim armies. In 1095, the Catholic Church launched the **Crusades** in an effort to oust Muslims from the holy lands of the Eastern Mediterranean. Christian armies also sought to retake Spain from the Muslims. By 1250, they had recaptured most of the Iberian Peninsula.

**Exchanging Knowledge** Ideas and technologies also moved through exchange networks. It would be impossible to list all the ideas spread during this era. But such a list would include writing systems and discoveries in math, astronomy, and medicine. It would also include technologies in such areas as irrigation, navigation, printing, and papermaking.

The system of Arabic numerals is one example. The Muslims adopted this system from India and later passed it along to Europe. Arabic numerals were much more practical than the Roman numerals used in Europe at the time. Based on the decimal system, they allowed for the development of modern math.

One important technology that spread widely at this time was the camel saddle. Devised in Arabia, this invention made camels useful for transport in desert areas. This, in turn, had a great impact on overland travel and the development of trade in Afro-Eurasia.

**Environmental Factors** The growth of exchange networks also had environmental effects, including the spread of disease. Populations suffered from devastating plagues that were transmitted along trade routes. Deadly diseases like smallpox, measles, and the bubonic plague helped cause the collapse of the Han, Roman, and Mongolian empires. As networks expanded, so did the danger of infectious disease.

As a result, the world population fluctuated greatly. It fell from an estimated 257 million in 200 C.E. to 206 million in 700 C.E. By 1000 C.E., the population had recovered and was growing rapidly. But the plague of the 1300s caused another sharp decline. By 1500, the population was rising again.

Increased prosperity from trade and agriculture boosted the world population. But this prosperity had environmental consequences. Farmers cut down forests to raise more rice and wheat, causing deforestation in some areas. Expanded cultivation also produced soil erosion and flooding, as soils ran off into rivers and raised water levels. This problem was evident in China's Huang He River valley, the nation's breadbasket. There, frequent flooding over the years caused terrible destruction and loss of life. As a result, the Huang He was known as "China's Sorrow."

### *Summary*

**In this lesson, you read about major developments in the world between 300 and 1500 C.E. During this period, the growth of empires and exchange networks increased connections among the regions and peoples of the world.**

**Cultural Interaction** Contact and interaction among cultures expanded with the growth of empires. The Muslim Empire brought many different peoples together and forged a culture that reflected many influences. The Mongol Empire promoted the exchange of ideas and customs across Afro-Eurasia. World religions spread widely during this period.

**Political Structures** Classical empires fell, but new states arose to take their place. The Muslim and Mongol empires ruled vast territories and created new political structures. They could not hold their empires together, however, and fractured into separate states.

**Economic Structures** Agriculture and trade were the main economic activities. Trade expanded with the growth of trade routes and new forms of transport. Growing prosperity helped strengthen the Muslim and Mongol empires. The disruption of trade, however, led to the Mongol collapse.

**Social Structures** Societies suffered with the collapse of civilizations in China, Rome, and India. Europe, in particular, entered an age of disorder with the end of the Roman Empire. The rise of Islam imposed new social structures on large portions of Afro-Eurasia.

**Human Environment Interaction** Expanded agriculture and trade had environmental effects. Diseases followed trade routes, killing millions and reducing the world population. Rising food production helped populations recover but led to deforestation, erosion, and floods in some areas.