



Communities in Afro-Eurasia, c.1200-1450

By Trevor Getz

Afro-Eurasian societies took a variety of forms in 1200, from independent villages to empires. The coming of the Mongol Empire created the largest empire of all.



Scales and Types of Communities

Humans in small groups don't usually need a lot of rules or institutions to govern or organize themselves. But when we get into groups larger than about 150 people, we seem to need some sort of organization to keep order and achieve our shared goals. In larger groups, it's hard to know everybody. When we don't know the other members of our community personally, we want assurances that everyone is contributing their fair share. Social structures and rules make it possible for us to trust people we don't know.

Human societies have developed a lot of methods to organize themselves. Some similar strategies pop up again and again throughout history—rule by a powerful individual, class and gender hierarchies, governments and laws supported by a belief system—but there were also lots of differences.

If you looked around the world in 1200, you'd have seen lots of different community organizations:

- **Small communities** governed by elders related by ancestry;
- **Chieftaincy**, in which an individual had the power to make decisions over a community;
- **Kingdoms** with highly established bureaucracies, often closely tied to religion. The ruler may have inherited the throne, been selected from wealthy or powerful families, or even been elected;
- **City-states** focused on trade, often ruled by assemblies of merchants;
- **Confederations**—alliances of several states—often arose in regions where collective security was important;
- **Empires**, with a core community or state conquering and ruling others.

And there were probably many more types, none perfect, but each suited to their community's needs.

The State

Most of these types of communities—excluding chieftaincies and communities ruled by elders—can be called *states*. *State* is the formal term we use to describe a country. The state is usually defined as an organized community living under a unified political system. So states are about government—an organization of people who make decisions, organize society, and enforce rules. But states are also about the land and people they rule.

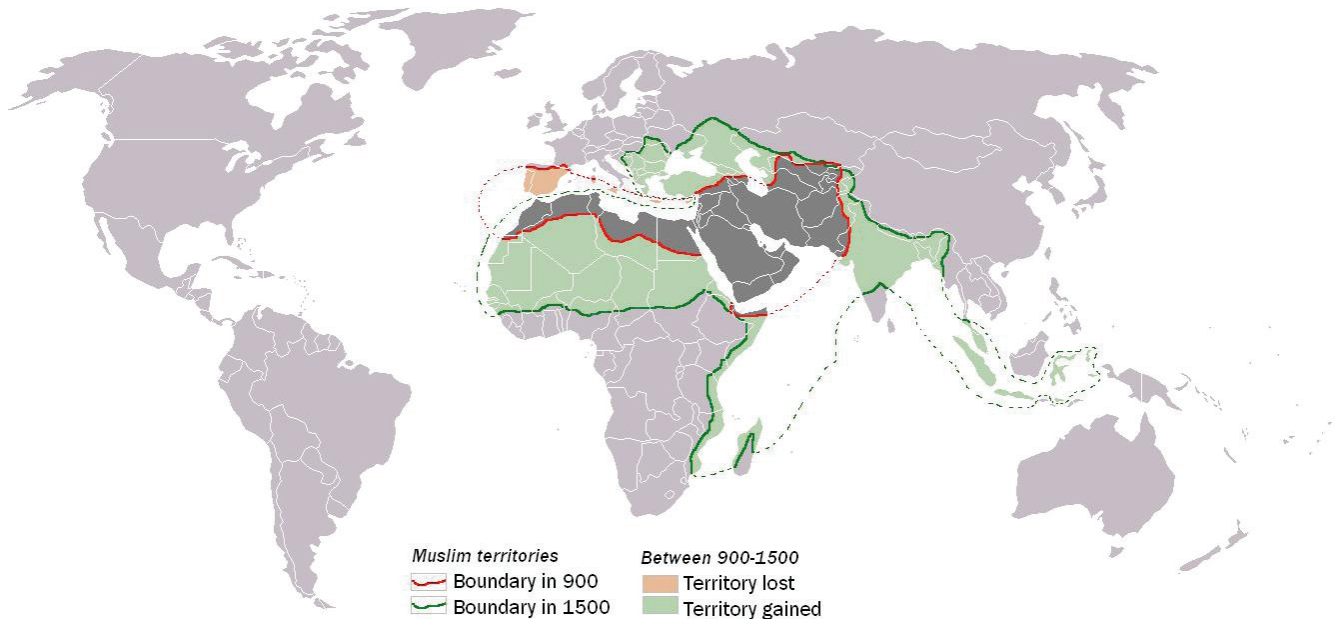
States usually claim to control a certain territory, with boundaries or borders, although there are some examples in history of mobile states, meaning they could move around. The people running a state also claim authority over a group of people. The state makes laws and dispenses justice, often using some sort of military or police force. States also collect resources and redistribute them, usually unequally.

Patterns of Afro-Eurasian States, c. 1200

By 1200, states could be found in many parts of *Afro-Eurasia* (Africa plus Europe plus Asia). States stretched from Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe near the southern tip of *Africa*, to Koryō/Goryeo (Korea) and Japan at the eastern end of *Asia*, to the Kingdoms of Ireland, Scotland, and England off the western coast of *Europe*.

The largest of these states tended to fall along a fertile belt of land, where lots of food could be grown, stretching from the Mediterranean coasts of Africa and Europe to China and Southeast Asia. At the heart of this vast region was the Islamic World, or *Dar al-Islam*. In 1200, the Islamic World was centered on the Abbasid Caliphate, with its headquarters in Baghdad. Possibly the greatest city of its age, Baghdad was a center of learning but also governance, training Islamic judges and administrators to run the caliphate. Once, the Abbasids had ruled a great

empire from Baghdad, covering almost the whole Islamic World in a vast state tied together by a shared religion and by these judges and administrators. The Islamic World flourished because of the wealth created by the trade that crisscrossed this central region of Afro-Eurasia.



A map of Dar al-Islam between 900 and 1500 CE. Despite the fact that there was no centralized authority by the 1200, Islam itself continued to expand, and more and more states became Muslim-ruled. By Bless_sins, CC BY 3.0.

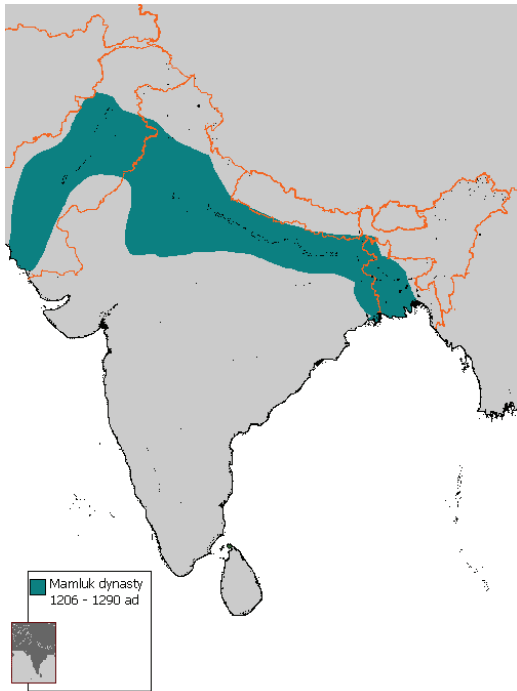
By 1200, however, *Dar al-Islam* as a political system had fractured. The Abbasid were competing with rival Muslim states based in Egypt, Morocco, Turkey, Spain, and elsewhere.

While Islam as a political system had fractured, Islam as a faith continued to spread far beyond the borders of any one state. It was coming to play a particularly important role in West Africa, where the largely Muslim states of Takkur and Ghana competed with a wide range of neighboring people and countries which had not embraced Islam. States in this region remained relatively small until the fourteenth century emergence of Mali as an empire on a grand scale.

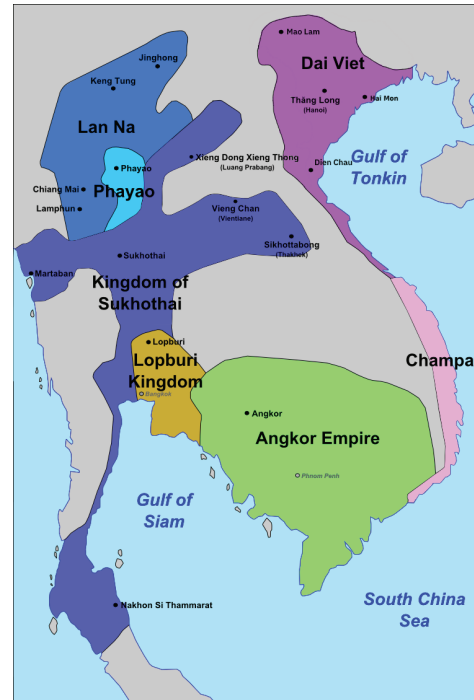
To the east of the Abbasids was the region of South Asia, including today's Pakistan and India. Around 1200, much of northern India was ruled by an Islamic ruler known as the Sultan of Delhi. This Sultanate (an area ruled by a sultan) conquered vast regions of northern India. However, the Delhi Sultans had many local rivals. These rivals—often called Rajput—ruled small states. Their kingdoms were generally multi-ethnic and contained many religions—Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and others.



Some states of West Africa c.1200, including Ghana (Wagadu). By WHP, CC BY-NC 4.0



Map of the Delhi Sultanate, early 13th century.
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Some Southeast Asian States of the 13th century. By Nicolas Eynaud, CC BY-SA 4.0.

Some large states also flourished in Southeast Asia's most fertile regions. The biggest of these was the Angkor Empire. In general, Southeast Asian states were kingdoms ruled by kings and sultans who organized strong armies and had close ties to religious organizations— whether Hindu, Buddhist, or Muslim. These states facilitated trade between their neighbors in South Asia and China. Many parts of Southeast Asia, however, were organized into smaller communities, governed by chieftains or elders.

To the north and east was China. Around 1200, China was the largest and most populous state in the world, with the most sophisticated governing structure. It was ruled by the Song Dynasty emperors, who used two important strategies for governing their vast territory and population. The first strategy was a bureaucracy—a class of professional scholar-administrators. These bureaucrats went through a complex system of schooling and examination to become qualified to work for the government.

The second strategy was to support a balance between agriculture and trade. Feeding a vast empire was very difficult, and the Song Emperors were concerned – above all else – about the peasant farmers' ability to grow food (especially rice). This was an era of enormous growth in Chinese cities. Immigrants poured into these cities, which were centers of innovation and tax revenues for the emperors. But as the cities grew, feeding the people living in them became harder and harder.

Song Dynasty China was so powerful and wealthy that many of its neighbors adopted elements of Chinese culture even while developing different governing systems. This included the Korean kingdom of Koryŏ/ Goryeo and many Southeast Asian states. While Japan was also heavily influenced by Chinese culture, by 1200 the empire no longer dominated the island, and Japan was governed by powerful military leaders known as *shoguns*.

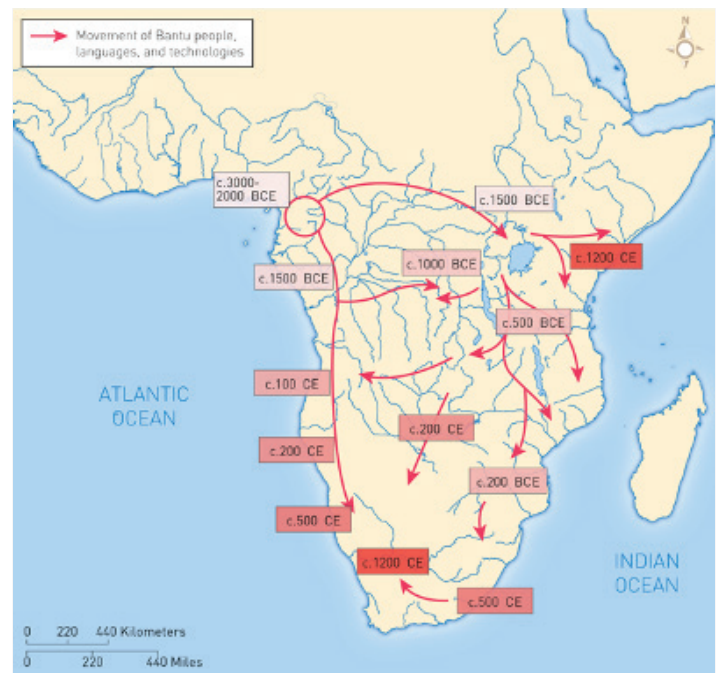
Chinese merchants and manufacturers engaged in the huge trading system of the Indian Ocean, which linked China with places as far away as the coast of East Africa. Here, a series of commercial city-states traded goods from the interior of Africa to merchants from Arabia, India, and later China, in exchange for luxuries like silk and spice. This East-African region of merchants and city-states is collectively called the Swahili Coast, based on the language they shared (Kiswahili). These cities were generally independently governed, often by a council of merchants but sometimes by a ruling family.

These merchant states had little control over the interior, where larger states were forming. Most were involved in producing gold and other minerals for the Indian Ocean market. One of the most powerful of these interior states was Great Zimbabwe. Other states emerged to the west such as Tyo and Kongo. Many of these central and southern African states had relatively weak kings whose main role was to negotiate among the powerful families and clans in their state. For this reason, we often call these states *confederations*. The confederation was a political model that was widely followed throughout central and southern Africa by people who shared a common background—known as Bantu culture.

Far to the north, on the northwest edge of Afro-Eurasia, Europe in this period was politically fragmented. There were a few large centralized kingdoms, lots of small states, and some city-states. There were also remote regions where small communities were led by local elders or chieftains. We generally say that power in 1200 Europe was *devolved*. That means local nobles and officials had the most say in what happened, even in large states like the Holy Roman Empire, France, and the Angevin Empire (ruled from England). Political



Song Dynasty China and neighboring states, early thirteenth century. By Mozzan, CC BY-SA 3.0.



The Bantu cultural zone, c. 1200. Bantu states and societies took different forms, but shared a number of cultural practices including kings and princes who served more as judges, healers, and peace-makers than powerful monarchs. By WHP, CC BY-NC 4.0.

power was decentralized. Religious leaders like the Patriarch of the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Pope had influence over large regions, but they remained disunified. There were also many religious minorities and regions where Islam or paganism was the belief system for most people.

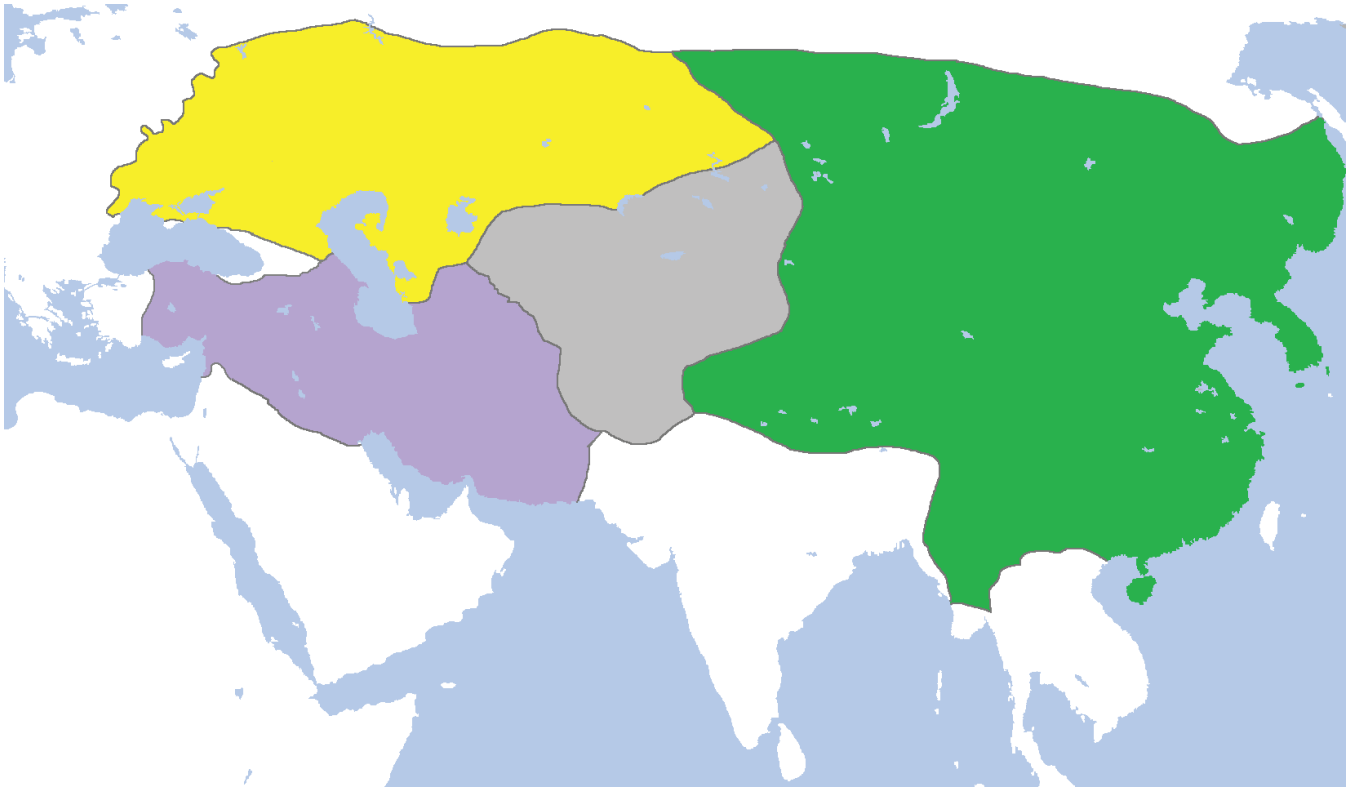


[Map of Europe around 1190 CE](#), by William R. Shepherd 1926. From the University of Texas Library, public domain.

The Mongols and After

Around 1200, the Mongol Empire swept across the world like a storm, disrupting many of the states and communities we've discussed. Emerging from the steppes of Eurasia, the Mongols began their conquest of much of Afro-Eurasia between 1218 and 1294. You'll learn more about them in other lessons. They were an alliance of people from the steppes of Eurasia. This region, though we haven't even discussed it here, had its own politics of mobile peoples, rather than settled states and territories. In the thirteenth century, the Mongols conquered most of the Islamic world, China, and all of Central Asia. They hit their limits in a series of defeats that kept them from Southeast Asia (failed invasion of Vietnam, 1285), Africa (defeat by the Egyptian Mamluks at Ain Jalut, 1260), Europe (Battle of Mohi, 1241), and Japan (failed invasions, 1274 and 1281). In these defeats, the weather often played as big a role as the military forces.

In the 1250s and 1260s, the Mongol Empire split into four parts to more easily rule the vast area they had conquered, but these parts still maintained a close relationship with each other.



Approximate extent of the Mongol Empire in 1294, in its four parts—the Golden Horde (yellow), Chagatai (grey), Yuan (green), and Ilkhanate (purple). By Gabagool, CC BY 3.0.

The Mongols created a new, vast, unified political system in the middle of Afro-Eurasia, one that had a big impact on the way politics worked in those regions. Mongol political innovations—including vast road systems, new forms of diplomacy, and new ways of using money—carried over when the empire split into four parts. The structures of Mongol rule helped new large states rise in these areas even after the Mongol system itself collapsed in the fourteenth century. You'll encounter evidence of this when we study the Ottoman, Mughal, Ming (Chinese), and Russian Empires in the next era. That's why the Mongol years represent a pretty important period in Afro-Eurasian history, as we're going to see in the articles and videos to come.

Trevor Getz

Trevor Getz is Professor of African History at San Francisco State University. He has written eleven books on African and world history, including *Abina and the Important Men*. He is also the author of *A Primer for Teaching African History*, which explores questions about how we should teach the history of Africa in high school and university classes.

Image credits

Cover image: Building with walls in the Chinese city of Kaifeng, reproduction of the painting *Along the river during the Qingming festival*, by Zhang Zeduan, Kyoto, Kansai, Japan. Detail. Kyoto, Museum of fine Arts © DeAgostini/Getty Images.

A map of Dar al-Islam between 900 and 1500 CE. Despite the fact that there was no centralized authority by the 1200, Islam itself continued to expand, and more and more states became Muslim-ruled. By Bless_sins, CC BY 3.0. <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?curid=15780677>

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