



Overview: The Global Tapestry 1200 to 1450

By Trevor Getz

The period between 1200 and 1450 CE was one of both diversity and similarities among societies in different parts of the world.



Why 1200?

Nothing particularly significant happened in the year 1200. I mean, events happened that were a big deal for some people—like the death of Emperor Guangzong in China and the Byzantine victory over the Bulgarian ruler Ivanko—but it was a surprisingly unimportant year in global history.

So why start a course on this date?

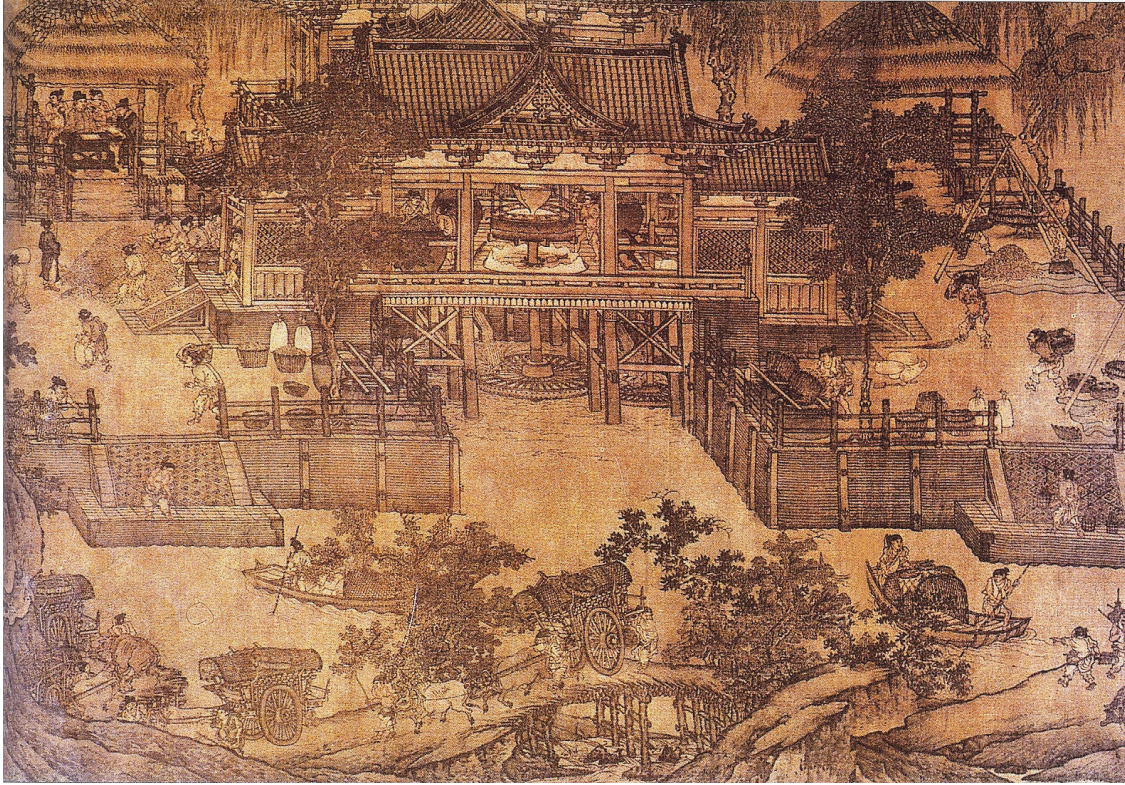
OK, let's admit that part of the answer is that 1200 is a nice round number. It's more satisfying and easier to remember than, say, 1192 or 1237. But why start in this period at all, and not, say, 300 years later, when the people of the two big landmasses of Afro-Eurasia and the Americas were permanently connected for the first time? Now that sounds like a big deal.

Starting in the early thirteenth century (that's what we call the period between 1200 and 1300 CE, or Common Era) lets us do something important. Let's begin our history story with a glimpse of a world as it was before everyone began to be tied together in one big system. This will let us see societies that might have had some contact with their neighbors, in some cases trading with societies that were far away, but that nevertheless remained quite different from each other. That's a useful thing to study. We live in a fully connected world today—one in which you can talk in real time with someone in Antarctica or China. But to fully understand how we got that way and what it means to be so connected, we must begin in a time when things were very different.

Communities—big, small, and overlapping

We will start our study of the period 1200 to 1450 by looking at the systems of governance and systems of belief in different parts of the world. Of our three frames, it's the communities frame through which we will view these elements. This is the frame we use to study a society by looking at how its people thought and how they organized themselves. The first lesson takes us to the most populous zone, Afro-Eurasia. We'll move on to the Americas and the Pacific zones in the next lesson.

Over these first two lessons, we will try to establish a framework for a useful comparison of societies around the world. You will be introduced to societies like the Islamic countries that connected the regions of Afro-Eurasia to each other, and the South and Southeast Asian states where Islam mingled with Hinduism and Buddhism. Europe, in the west, was divided into many small states, although its societies were often connected by the Christian faith and some shared cultural elements left over from Roman rule. In sub-Saharan Africa, big kingdoms and smaller communities were similarly tied to each other by culture and belief, and were also connected to the Islamic world to the north. In East Asia, meanwhile, the ancient ethical system of Confucianism and a long history of imperial bureaucracy sustained a unified government across the vastness of China. Its neighbors, in Korea, Japan, and Central Asia, orbited around its immensity while developing their own unique cultures. Many of these East Asian states, along with many Islamic communities and even parts of Europe, would be conquered by the Mongols early in this era, and we will see how this experience reshaped this vast region of the world.



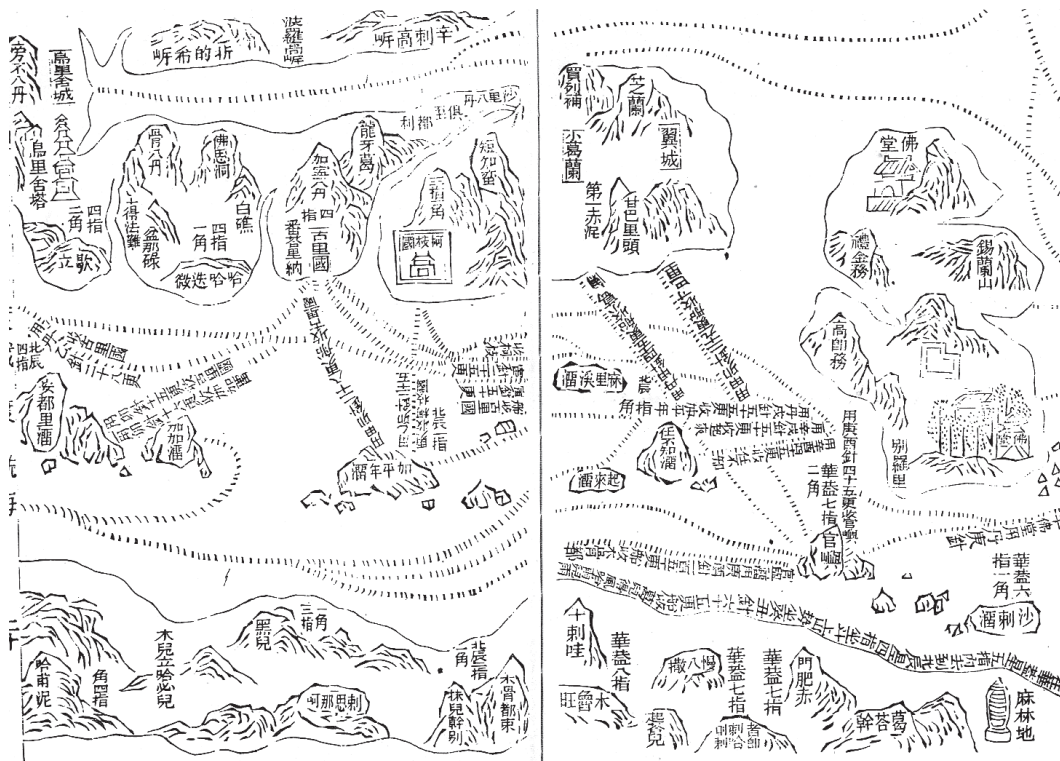
[A painting of a water-driven mill for processing grain](#), and the transportation that served it, from Song Dynasty China. Without food, there was no empire. Public domain.

The Pacific and the Americas are two other regions that you will encounter in this unit. These larger regions are often depicted as more “separate,” more “different,” than the many parts of Afro-Eurasia. You will use evidence to judge for yourself whether this depiction is accurate. Certainly, both were physically somewhat separate from the big Afro-Eurasian landmass. But we are increasingly learning how both the Pacific and the Americas had their own long histories of religious innovation and state-building.

These early lessons will help to demonstrate how human societies in many regions shared traits, whether because their leaders and thinkers devised similar strategies or because they learned from each other. We will also see their differences, and the wide diversity of shapes communities could take, even within each single region!

Routes of exchange

But we don’t want to give you the wrong idea. Although societies were often quite different from one another in this period, all of these communities traded and learned from their neighbors, and many were in contact with communities quite far away.

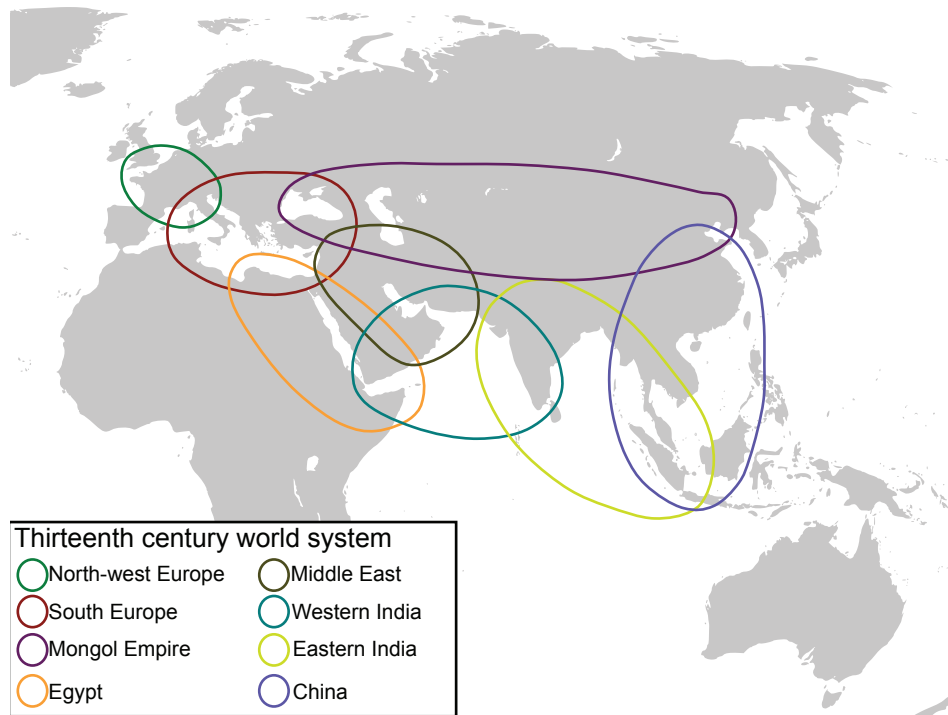


A copy of an early fifteenth-century chart from the Chinese admiral Zheng He. Although hard to recognize, it includes India along the top and Africa on the bottom. It demonstrates the extensive connections across Afro-Eurasia in this period. Public domain.

One way to see these connections is by looking at the world through the production and distribution frame. These are the strategies people thought up for making and getting the stuff we need to live, and the stuff we want just because we like it. In 1200, most of those things came from nearby — people grew their own food and made many of their own tools. But some of them came from faraway cities and countries.

Why did people need or want goods that were produced in distant regions? A few reasons. First, expertise is difficult to acquire. Video tutorials and how-to manuals were still centuries away, so the only way to learn a skill was to study under an expert, and that meant that technology and skills were often concentrated in one location. Similarly, raw materials like plants and minerals were often concentrated in just a few places, so finished goods were abundantly available right where they were made, which kept prices to buy them pretty low. In other areas, however, the same desirable goods might be rare and exotic enough to drive up prices faster than you can say “supply and demand.” The trick for the merchant was to carry goods from a place where prices were low to another place where prices were high due to that product’s scarcity.

In the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, a number of important, long-distance routes connected regions that produced different types of goods. These routes were made up of chains of many trading communities, each of which had a circuit in which they moved. Together, they connected societies stretching from east to west along the Eurasian landmass. They’re often grouped together as the Silk Roads, because silk from East Asia was one of the most important products carried along them. Trade along the Silk Roads intensified in this period as demand rose for Chinese, Persian, and Indian goods in regions to the west. The stability provided by Mongol rule of Central Asia helped a lot, too, providing safety for travelers, which encouraged trade. This increase in traveling merchants helped spread technologies and culture across Eurasia. For example, it gave Europeans access to the spices and other valuable goods from East Asia.



Thirteenth-century economic systems in Eurasia, according to Janet-Abu-Lugh, illustrating many of the overlapping trading circuits in Afro-Eurasia. Notice how many of these trading circuits had to be involved to bring goods like spices from China to northwest Europe. Public domain.

Long-distance trade routes emerged in the Americas as well. In the Andes Mountains of South America, among the huge trading cities of Mesoamerica, and in the Mississippi River valley, three major trading systems moved goods across vast overland routes. Other smaller maritime networks connected these three larger networks at times. And in the Pacific Ocean, merchants moved goods along the west coast of South America and Mesoamerica. Along these routes, merchants in the Western Hemisphere traded luxury goods like jade, turquoise, shells, and bright feathers, as well as durable products like obsidian. These goods met the growing demands of wealthy consumers and the needs of state governments.

Of course, many trade routes were short. A good example is the movement of English wool. Wool was turned into cloth in the nearby region of Flanders, and it then went on to provide clothing for people in many parts of Europe, but it didn't travel much further. In this era, there were many trade routes around the world that were of this size, or even smaller.



A Mayan jade ornament from this era. Jade was one of several valuable goods traded over long distances in Mesoamerica. By Sailko, CC BY 3.0.

Consequences of connectivity

These trading connections made new goods and resources available to people in societies that were part of these networks. Obsidian from one small part of Mesoamerica could be turned into tools used by farmers and soldiers all around the region. West African gold provided currency for the economies of Christian and Islamic societies across Europe and the Middle East. Chinese silk and English wool mingled in Europe, providing different kinds of clothing for different classes of people, and for various purposes. Trade also helped economies grow, providing jobs for merchants and artisans in the societies that produced these goods.

Looking a little deeper, we can also see that these networks of connectivity had cultural impacts as well. Technologies traveled along the same routes as goods. The flood of Asian technologies into Europe in this period is a particularly important story, as game-changing innovations like the moldboard plow and new ideas helped European populations to grow and philosophies to flourish. We study these changes through the networks frame.

But these trade routes carried deadly passengers as well, namely diseases. The pandemic known as the Black Death (or bubonic plague) nearly wiped out trade along the Silk Roads and many other Afro-Eurasian trade routes beginning in the 1340s. Some routes only recovered in the early fifteenth century, by which time the system's collapse had helped bring down the Mongol Empire. This change in the political map destabilized Central Asia, so now Europeans had to find another way to get to Asia's artisanal goods. But that is a story we will pick up in the next unit.

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: Atlas from the 14th century attributed to Abraham Cresques. Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1375_Atlas_Catalan_Abraham_Cresques.jpg

A painting of a water-driven mill for processing grain, and the transportation that served it, from Song Dynasty China. Without food, there was no empire. Public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Song_Dynasty_Hydraulic_Mill_for_Grain.JPG

A copy of an early fifteenth-century chart from the Chinese admiral Zheng He. Although hard to recognize, it includes India along the top and Africa on the bottom. It demonstrates the extensive connections across Afro-Eurasia in this period. Public domain. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Zhenghe-sailing-chart.gif>

Thirteenth-century economic systems in Eurasia, according to Janet-Abu-Lugho, illustrating many of the overlapping trading circuits in Afro-Eurasia. Notice how many of these trading circuits had to be involved to bring goods like spices from China to northwest Europe. Public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Archaic_globalization.svg

A Mayan jade ornament from this era. Jade was one of several valuable goods traded over long distances in Mesoamerica. By Sailko, CC BY 3.0. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mesoamerica_maya_ornamento_in_giadeite_250-900_dc_ca_04.jpg