

Premodern Travel in World History

Stephen S. Gosch
and Peter N. Stearns



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Premodern Travel in World History

This book features some of the greatest travellers in human history—people who undertook long journeys to places they often knew little or nothing about—and returned home to share their experiences.

From Herodotus and Roman tourists, to the establishment of the Silk Road, to an epic trek from China to India in the seventh century, to Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta, through the first speculations on space travel, *Premodern Travel in World History* provides an overview of long-distance travel in Afro-Eurasia from around 400 BCE to 1500.

This survey uses succinct accounts of the most epic journeys in the premodern world as lenses through which to examine the development of early travel, trade, transportation, and cultural interchange between China, Central Asia, India, the Middle East, and Europe while also discussing themes such as the growth of empires and the spread of world religions.

Chapters include:

- The classical period
- The establishment of the Silk Road
- The post-classical period
- Muslim travelers, 700–1400 CE
- Marco Polo and the heritage of Christian travel
- The explosion of maritime travel in the fifteenth century

Complete with maps, this concise and fascinating study analyzes how travel pushed and shaped the boundaries of political, geographical, and cultural frontiers.

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For Eileen, Dana, and Larry, inspirations all, with love (SSG)
For Sarah Gipson and Kari Gunn, both fine travelers, with
love (PNS)

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Preface

This book is the result of a collaboration that began several decades ago at Rutgers University when one of us supervised the Ph.D. dissertation of the other. In those days we focused mostly on European history. But the world changed in subsequent years and so did we. Gradually, by independent routes, we moved into the emerging field of world history, one of us becoming a leading author of textbooks and more specialized works, the other concentrating on teaching.

Two approaches to the human past combine in this book. One of us is more of a ‘parachutist’ (to borrow the imagery of a distinguished French scholar), surveying the salient features of the landscape below, while the other is more of a ‘truffle-hunter,’ digging into the lives of individual travelers. Readers will judge for themselves how successful we have been in weaving together these two approaches and to what extent they lead to new understandings of the meaning of travel in the premodern world.

Many people helped move this book along the road to completion. We thank Kevin Reilly, Wilma Clark, Robert Gough, Edward Friedman, Peter Perdue, Ingolf Vogeler, James Oberly, Matthew Waters, and Chad Anderson for reading or listening to early versions of various chapters and offering valuable advice. At Routledge, Victoria Peters has been a most patient and considerate editor; Emma Langley and Jason Mitchell have been models of courtesy and efficiency. At the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, we thank the Department of History, the College of Arts and Sciences, the Center for International Education, and the Office of University Research for providing essential funding and opportunities for travel. We are also grateful to Victoria Fletcher and several colleagues on the George Mason side of things. Finally, special thanks go to Eileen Kramer, one of the hardest and most congenial of present-day travelers, for reading, listening to, criticizing, and encouraging several drafts of this book.

Introduction

WHY TRAVEL?

World history teachers have come to love Ibn Battuta. This North African traveler journeyed over 75,000 miles in his life, on foot and by donkey and ship, visiting three continents and many islands and reporting on them with a combination of keen description and vigorous value judgments. He tells us much about societies of his time—the fourteenth century—and his travels more broadly suggest the larger context for inter-regional contacts, including available transportation. But there is more than reportage. His motivations—why would someone go so far, amid such demanding conditions?—invite speculation about what moved some extraordinary people to indulge such wide curiosity. The consequences of his travels count too: his trips, and others like them, helped motivate other kinds of connections, in a crucial period in which world history turns from largely a story about separate places to an analysis of mutual influences.

* * *

This book is about some of the greatest travelers in human history—people who journeyed often thousands of miles, into places they knew little or nothing about, before travel was made easier by mechanical transportation or hotel reservations. The book is also about unknown people, again before modern times, who also went great distances but did not leave a personal record. They, too, helped cause change through their voyages.

Travel, particularly across cultural or political frontiers, is always exciting. The stories of the great premodern travelers have their share of adventure. But there is more to travel than some stirring anecdotes. Travel also reveals much about the societies in which it occurs. It involves not only transportation systems, but also political organization and patterns of trade, even religious beliefs. The motives of the travelers themselves are a mirror of the times they lived in. More directly still, travelers'

accounts sometimes provide virtually the only information we have about certain societies in the past, for example in the vast nomadic reaches of Central Asia.

Travel also has results. Some of the great journeys of the past—through reports and simply through finding viable routes—affected political and diplomatic policies. Others helped blaze new trade connections, or the paths of religious missionaries. Travel is one of the forces that shaped world history, prompting new kinds of contacts among various peoples of the world.

It is impossible, of course, to cover all the long-distance travel that occurred from early times to 1500. Many travelers left no direct records, though sometimes we have other evidence that allows us some knowledge of venturesome merchants or missionaries even when we don't know their names. In one case, as we will see in Chapter 8, we can't even be sure that one of the most famous travelers even went where he said he did. But there are more records about travel than about many other human activities, especially in past centuries where it was fairly unusual. So we do have access to some incredible individual stories. We can see how travel sheds light on wider political and cultural issues in times past. And we can see what consequences some of the great travelers inspired.

We can also see how travel changed. New methods of transportation, more effective political systems, new kinds of religious motivations all affected travel. Travel itself also caused change, as information about one journey stimulated others to set out on their own adventures. Travel, and the knowledge travel brought, helps explain why, by 1400 or so, more people, from more societies, were setting out on ambitious journeys than ever before.

Travel has some distinctive human characteristics. Lots of animals travel long distances. Some are genetically programmed to migrate with the seasons or to return to their birthplaces to have their own progeny. Humans are not genetically guided to particular travel routes, they have to experiment more. But the species can adapt to a variety of environments, which is an important precondition for travel. It can easily be pushed to travel by economic necessity. And in some cases, it can be pushed by sheer curiosity as well.

The first kind of human economy, hunting and gathering, involved considerable travel, at least within a region, in search of game. Fairly small population increases, in an economy that required lots of space per person to generate adequate food, could force humans to migrate even longer distances. Thus *homo sapiens sapiens*, the most recent human species, to which we all belong, surged out of East Africa, where it originated, in migrations that took the species to almost all parts of the habitable world by 25,000 BCE. Migration patterns continued later on, bringing nomadic peoples from Central Asia into India, the Mediterranean

and Europe, or spreading the Bantu peoples of west Central Africa both south and east.

While migration demonstrates that human beings are traveling animals, and while migrations are a vital force in their own right, this book is mostly about a different, more individual kind of travel—in which people leave a place, cover long distances, but intend to come back home (and usually manage to do so). This is the kind of travel that brings news of remote places that can stimulate the fancies of one's own people. This is the kind of travel usually associated with trade.

Most of this kind of travel—going, but coming back—occurred, before very modern times, in agricultural societies, where most people did not in fact travel widely. In contrast to hunting and gathering, agriculture encouraged most people to settle in one spot, where farms could be developed, irrigation systems or other amenities built. Some hunting or short-distance trade might still be essential, but many peasants placed a great premium on geographic stability—in their own lives, and in fear of strangers. But even agricultural people realized that there were advantages to contacts with more distant places, if only for trade in exotic goods. And agricultural societies generated a few individuals who, for whatever personal reasons, could not accept local confines, and went out to see what they could find in exotic places. Many agricultural societies also interacted with nomads or other peoples who regularly moved about, and this could connect to individual travel patterns as well.

Most of the great travelers—at least the ones we know about—were men. Women obviously participated in migrations. But agricultural societies urged sharp differences between men and women, with women usually expected to stay in and around the home, or at most go to a local market. We will find some exceptions, particularly around religious pilgrimages; and of course this gender bias may also reflect slanted records. But there is no question that travel was not available to a number of key groups.

The few people—predominantly men—who traveled widely in societies where most people's horizons were bounded by a handful of villages, could have an unusual impact in part because their activity was so unusual. They also require a special kind of explanation, of what pushed them to do what most of their fellows did not attempt. A book about travel before travel became somewhat routine captures these distinctive elements and consequences.

CAN TRAVELERS BE BELIEVED?

This book relies heavily upon writings by travelers who describe what they saw and heard while on the move and (sometimes) how they got from place to place. But can premodern travelers be believed? Are the narratives

they produced credible sources of evidence for the modern scholar? Strabo, a Greek traveler in the first century CE, once wrote, 'Everybody who tells the story of his own travels is a braggart.' As we shall see in the course of this book, boasting about one's adventures on the road or at sea was a continuing, but not universal, feature of premodern travel writing. However, an attitude of healthy skepticism on the part of modern readers, close attention to the varied and sometimes contradictory elements embedded in travel narratives, and the careful use of other sources of evidence can correct for traveler braggadocio, and enable researchers to distinguish, for the most part, between what is historically sound and what is not. This general approach is also useful in overcoming a second problem inherent in much premodern travel writing, namely the tendency of travelers to exoticize, and create fantasies about the lands and peoples they visited.

Premodern travelers not only frequently bragged about their experiences, they also depicted some of the peoples they encountered en route as strange and weird, as 'others' quite different from, and often inferior to, themselves. An aspect of much travel writing before 1500, to which all students must remain alert, is the contrast, often implied rather than explicit, between 'we' who are 'normal' and 'they' who are 'bizarre'. Some of the travelers in this book went even further, spicing up their narratives with fantastic stories of monstrous beings, usually said to inhabit the outer edges of the earth, to which the travel writer had not ventured.

The bragging, the 'othering,' and the fantasies about strange creatures and monsters in premodern travel narratives, have led some researchers to reject much of this writing as of no real value to the historian. Some scholars, mostly in the field of literary studies, have argued that premodern travel writing is useful, but only for understanding the beliefs of the traveler and the expectations of his or her audience at home. One of the most interesting recent books about Herodotus, a work by Francois Hartog, makes precisely this claim (for a complete citation, see Further Reading below). Going still further, an influential group of scholars—specialists on travel writing by Western writers since 1800—rightly point out that many modern European and American travelers wrote up their experiences, in part, to justify the rule of 'us' over 'them.'

The critics of travel narratives, both premodern and modern, have made valuable contributions in drawing attention to the serious flaws that do indeed appear in this type of writing. But much of the documentary evidence used by historians, especially if their research has a pre-1500 focus, is defective in various ways, often significantly so—not just travel writing. To some extent, these problems with sources are what make historical research interesting, even fun. How do we know about any aspect of the human past? How do we correct for bias or point of view in a piece of writing by a traveler or anyone else? Historians face these questions every day of their professional lives. And our answers are really

not very complicated: we study evidence carefully and weigh it against other sources. Our findings are often no more than comparatively plausible, rather than ‘true’ or ‘false.’ And our ‘conclusions’ are almost always provisional, subject to change in the light of new evidence or new ways of examining or thinking about evidence.

WORLD HISTORY?

This book covers a lot of historical and geographical ground, but as noted above, it is far from the complete story of travel before 1500. In the interest of feasibility, important regions such as the Americas and the islands of the Pacific Ocean are omitted. Modern scholars, especially archaeologists, know that well before 1500 there was much long-distance travel in the Americas and between the major island chains in the Pacific. But the available evidence for these two areas—compared to that for Afro-Eurasia—is still quite limited, although this is changing, as books by Charles Mann, Ben Finney, and others make clear (see Further Reading below). The same is true for travel from India and Southeast Asia, two regions that produced an abundance of hardy travelers, but for which the documentary record is thin. Despite these omissions, this book is intended to be a contribution to world history. It focuses on travel between the major areas of premodern Afro-Eurasia, which in 1500 probably included 80 percent of humankind. In so doing, the authors hope it will add something of substance to today’s wide-ranging discussion of the origins and nature of globalization.

FURTHER READING

Basic background

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Beginnings to 1000 BCE

INTRODUCTION

It is well-established that beginning around 3000 BCE there was a marked increase in the frequency and length of journeys in the region of the Middle East and North Africa, the area bounded by Egypt's Nile River in the west and, in the east, the region of the Indus River in today's Pakistan. Important travel also extended south, in Africa, from Egypt. Travel patterns prior to the development of the early river valley civilizations, however, are less clear.

THE LATE PALEOLITHIC AND NEOLITHIC ERAS, 25,000–3500 BCE

We can only guess about the earliest instances of long-distance travel because they occurred well before there were any written records. Archaeological evidence regarding both the spread of artistic styles among Paleolithic hunter-gathers and the extent of early trade networks established by Neolithic farmers is of some help.

Small sculptures of mature females, called Venus figurines, have been found at numerous Upper Paleolithic sites dating from around 25,000 BCE. The find-spots are spread over a huge area stretching from Western Europe to Siberia. Although the tiny sculptures differ in many ways, they have enough similar features to suggest the spread of a common artistic style. Since it is not likely that any single traveler or group of travelers carried the basic design for the figurines from Siberia to Western Europe (or vice versa), how could this type of artifact have spread so widely?

Most Paleolithic hunter-gatherers lived in camping communities that were small, widely separated, and migratory. Their movements were shaped by the passage of the seasons and the migratory patterns of the wild animals, birds, and fish on which they depended. But such communities were far

from isolated. They were connected to other communities in two ways, directly by their participation in periodic large gatherings (for example, the powwows of North American Indians) and indirectly by their membership in systems of down-the-line exchange.

Hunter-gathers from scattered base camps came together from time to time in powwow-type mass gatherings to renew friendships, to feast and dance, to arrange marriages, and to exchange information about animals and plants. Such gatherings provided a setting for the reciprocal exchange of various small objects (seashells, polished amber, carved wood or stone, etc.) in transactions that combined aspects of gift-giving and trade. Here is one way in which a common artistic style could develop and spread among widely dispersed hunter-gatherer communities.

Down-the-line exchange refers to a type of relay network that indirectly linked communities. The earliest evidence in writing for this type of system is found in Herodotus, the Greek historian and traveler of the fifth century BCE (whom we will meet again in the following chapter). In the network described by Herodotus, communities in locations ranging from Central Asia to the Greek island of Delos were linked to one another:

The overwhelming majority of the stories about the Hyperboreans [for the Greeks, a legendary people of the Far North] come from Delos. The Delians say that sacred objects are tied up inside a bundle of wheat straw and are transported from the Hyperboreans first to Scythia [in Central Asia], then westward as far as possible—that is, to the Adriatic—through a chain of successive tribes, then south to Dodena (which is the first Greek community to receive them), then to the Gulf of Malia, where they cross over to Euboea, where they are passed from town to town until they reach Carystus, at which stage Andros is omitted, because the Carystians are the ones taking them to Tenos, and from Tenos the objects are conveyed to Delos.

Herodotus, IV.33, trans. Waterfield, p. 245

In this passage, Herodotus describes the kind of system of exchange that probably, many millennia earlier, facilitated the wide distribution of the Venus figurines among Paleolithic hunter-gatherers. In down-the-line systems, things such as objects and information traveled much farther than people.

* * *

Early trade networks among Neolithic farmers in the Middle East and the Aegean region can be mapped by tracing the spread of two semiprecious minerals, obsidian and lapis lazuli. Determining the routes along which these substances were transported is possible because the sources of the

two minerals were limited. Obsidian is a black or dark green volcanic glass that was valued for making sharp cutting tools, including razors, and ornamental objects. It was mined at a few sites on the Anatolian Peninsula and on the small Aegean island of Melos. Lapis lazuli is a deep-blue mineral that was used to make beads, jewelry, and ornamental vessels. Veins in today's northeastern Afghanistan and southern Pakistan are the only sources of lapis.

The results obtained from two archaeological excavations illustrate the movement of obsidian and lapis lazuli over long distances. Digs on mainland Greece at sites dating from around 6000 BCE have unearthed pieces of obsidian traceable to Melos, about a hundred miles from the find-spots. Researchers working in the upper reaches of the Tigris River in today's northern Iraq, at a site dated around 3500 BCE, have turned up several hundred beads made from lapis lazuli. The Iraqi find-spot is more than a thousand miles from the sources of the ore in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The geographical distribution of obsidian and lapis lazuli find-spots establishes that during the Neolithic era there was exchange over long distances, but we cannot be certain about how the commodities were transported. Seafarers from the Greek mainland could have used boats made from logs, skins, or reeds to island-hop across the Aegean to Melos. (Much earlier, around 60,000 years ago, the first humans to settle New Guinea and Australia used boats of unknown description to make their way across sixty miles of open water from the Indonesian archipelago.) In the case of the lapis, it is unlikely that any single group of traders traveled the entire distance from the Afghan highlands or Pakistan to the Tigris Valley. More likely is the possibility that some sort of down-the-line network was responsible for bringing the mineral to the Tigris region.

RIVER VALLEY CIVILIZATIONS, 3500–2000 BCE

During the middle of the fourth millennium BCE a series of pivotal economic, political, social, cultural, and technological changes transformed life in the lower reaches of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The changes led to the establishment of the world's first civilization (or complex society), simultaneously creating the conditions for an unprecedented surge in long-distance travel. Somewhat later, similar developments occurred in the Nile Valley (3100 BCE) and in the Indus Valley (2900 BCE) in today's Pakistan. Contacts and exchanges between the three river valley civilizations soon developed, leading to the establishment of a vast zone or corridor of long-distance interchange in the Nile-Indus region.

A few centuries later and well to the east of the Nile-Indus area, a fourth civilization began to emerge along the Yellow River in northern China. The developments in the Yellow River area were similar to those in

the Nile–Indus zone but there was little contact between China and the regions to the west until much later. (For the growth of travel between China and the West, see Chapters 5 and 9.)

* * *

Undergirding the rise of the civilization on the Tigris–Euphrates floodplain was the growth of an agricultural surplus, soon accompanied by an upturn in long-distance trade. The construction of a complex of irrigation canals that tapped the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates during the dry summers boosted the output of barley and wheat. As a result, the people who lived in this region, the Sumerians, became the first cultivators in world history to produce large agricultural surpluses, freeing around 10 percent of their number for other kinds of work and making possible the establishment of the first true cities.

By 3200 BCE Sumerian cities began to emerge as centers of an expanding system of long-distance trade that was probably based on pre-existing down-the-line networks. Archaeological research at early Sumerian urban sites has turned up stone bowls produced in Iran, silver vessels made from ore mined in the Taurus Mountains of eastern Anatolia, and a variety of ornamental objects made of lapis lazuli from northeastern Afghanistan. Revenues from the trade in luxury commodities added to the surplus obtained from the cultivators.

Lasting social, political, cultural, and religious changes followed from the developments in Sumerian agriculture and commerce. The surplus produced by the farmers, in the form of rents and taxes, went to newly constituted elites of landlords, religious officials, military leaders, and governmental administrators, many of whom used bronze artifacts and luxury goods obtained from afar as badges of their authority. Class lines sharpened. Gender relations became more patriarchal. Informal networks of spiritual leaders morphed into organized priesthoods. City-states, administered by officials using newly developed systems of writing and backed by professional armies, replaced less articulated types of political organization. Monumental structures such as city walls, fortresses, temples, storehouses, palaces, and tombs gave visible form to and reinforced the emerging hierarchies.

A cluster of additional developments in the Tigris–Euphrates region during the late fourth millennium, all of them in transportation, spurred the growth of long-distance travel. Sometime prior to 3000 BCE, the Sumerians invented the wheel and became the first people to use oxen to pull carts, two innovations with obvious implications for the future of land travel over the long term. In the short run, however, the wheel and the cart had no impact on travel over long distances because they required relatively smooth roads to function effectively. Roads of this quality were rare until much later.

Far more important for land transport in the short term, especially for journeys by merchants, was the introduction of the donkey as a pack animal. Donkeys are native to North Africa and Western Asia and seem to have been domesticated in the fourth millennium (or somewhat earlier). They are hardy, sure-footed, trainable animals capable of carrying heavy loads over long distances on 'roads' that are little more than bridle paths. Where and when donkeys were first used in pack trains or caravans is unknown, but archaeological evidence suggests that donkey caravans were first used widely in the Tigris–Euphrates region around 3000 BCE.

The final innovation in transportation in the fourth millennium was the development of the earliest sailing vessels sturdy enough to carry heavy cargoes on the high seas. (Riverine craft able to transport heavy loads had long been in use in various parts of the world.) By 3000 BCE Sumerian shippers were active in the Persian Gulf and Egyptians were sailing in the Red Sea and the eastern Mediterranean.

TRAVEL IN THE NILE–INDUS REGION, 3500–2000 BCE

Shortly before 3000 BCE travel for economic and military purposes increased markedly in the Tigris–Euphrates region. Following a short lag, a similar trend developed in the Nile valley and, slightly later, in the Indus area. The development of new lifeways based on the accelerated agricultural production, expanding commerce, and innovations in transportation created unprecedented possibilities for travel in the region bounded by the Nile and Indus rivers. But the new lifeways also created powerful needs that could only be satisfied by travel. Farmers in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Indus valley produced all of the food and fiber they needed but the three regions lacked local sources of timber and metals such as copper and tin, both needed to make bronze.

Bronze was essential for the manufacture of weapons, ritual objects, and many types of tools and utensils. Timber was needed for all types of construction, including the building of carts, wagons, boats and ships. Elites in the Nile–Indus region also sought various kinds of luxury goods that could only be obtained from afar: lapis lazuli, aromatics, horses, etc.

* * *

From 3500 BCE onward, the trend in the Nile–Indus region was toward increased travel and longer journeys. But documenting this trend is difficult. It is not until we get close to the period around 2000 BCE that we begin to obtain any significant documentary evidence regarding travel.

One hint of the importance of long-distance journeys during the third millennium BCE comes from *Gilgamesh*, the Sumerian epic poem that, in written form, dates from around 2000 BCE but is based on much older traditions of Sumerian storytelling. In one of the key episodes in the poem, Gilgamesh (who was in fact the king of the city-state of Uruk around 2700 BCE) travels with a companion to the cedar forests of Lebanon (or eastern Anatolia) to obtain timbers for his palace. After many trials and adventures, including a battle with the monster guarding the forest, Gilgamesh and his friend cut down the trees they need, load them on a raft, and float down the Euphrates to Uruk. There can be little doubt that the story of Gilgamesh's journey to the cedar forest is a literary echo of a well-established tradition of travel from treeless Sumer to the rain-watered highlands of Lebanon and Anatolia, a distance of perhaps 600 or 700 miles, to obtain timber.

The *Gilgamesh* epic is an exciting read, but much more valuable as evidence of long-distance travel in southwest Asia during the third millennium BCE are the commercial records and artifacts excavated by archaeologists in the past 150 years. For example, Mesopotamian inscriptions from the time of King Sargon of Akkad (ca. 2300 BCE) and several centuries thereafter record the arrival of merchant vessels from ports located in today's Bahrain, Oman, and the Indus Valley region. According to these writings, the ships carried a variety of goods, including copper, hardwoods, ivory, pearls, carnelian (a semiprecious stone mined in western India and used in jewelry), and gold.

Archaeological research at sites in Mesopotamia, Bahrain, and Oman has led to the recovery of artifacts traceable to the Indus Valley civilization, confirming the information on the inscriptions. Among the most important of these objects are stamp seals carved in soapstone, stone weights, and colorful carnelian beads. Especially intriguing are a few Mesopotamian cylinder seals on which water buffaloes have been carved. While common in the Indus region, the water buffalo was unknown in Mesopotamia. No such items produced in Mesopotamia have been found in the Indus region, but small statues of male figures found at Indus sites have features that suggest a familiarity with, and mastery of, Mesopotamian sculptural styles.

Most of the trade between Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley was indirect. Shippers from both regions converged in Persian Gulf ports, especially on the island of Bahrain (known as Dilmun to the Sumerians). Numerous small Indus-style artifacts have been recovered at locations on Bahrain and further down the coast of the Arabian Peninsula in Oman. Stamp seals produced in Bahrain have been found at sites in Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley, strengthening the likelihood that the island may have acted as a redistribution point for goods coming from Mesopotamia and the Indus area. There were also land routes across Iran that connected

Mesopotamian cities, via numerous intermediary oases and towns, to the Indus region.

Did any travelers complete the arduous journey from the Indus Valley to Mesopotamia (or vice versa) in the third millennium BCE? Whether traveling overland or by sea, the trip would have been well over a thousand miles. There is no evidence from the Indus Valley excavations that suggests the presence of Mesopotamians (of course, ongoing research in the Indus region could establish otherwise). However, there are hints from the digs at Ur, a major Sumerian city-state on the Euphrates, that some Indus Valley merchants and artisans (bead makers) may have established communities in Mesopotamia. One leading researcher at the Indus Valley sites also has put forth the view that the ten attendants buried at Ur with Queen Puabi around 2500 BCE were women from the Indus Valley, perhaps sent to Puabi as part of a diplomatic agreement. DNA analysis of the remains of the attendants, who were interred wearing Indus-style carnelian beads, could confirm this view.

EARLY COMMERCIAL TRAVEL

Shortly after 2000 BCE merchants from the Assyrian capital of Assur on the Tigris River in northern Mesopotamia began regular journeys to Kanesh, then a flourishing city-state and commercial crossroads in eastern Anatolia, 600 miles to the northwest. The Assyrian traders used donkey caravans, often composed of two hundred or so animals, to carry panniers filled with tin and bolts of woolen and linen cloth to the Anatolian commercial center. Because much of the terrain through which they passed was rugged highlands, the trip from Assur to Kanesh usually took at least a month.

Kanesh was home to numerous palaces and temples, but the destination of the merchants from Assur was the *karum* ('commercial quarter') where they planned to sell their goods for silver and gold. The *karum* was the section of the city set aside for the residences, stables, warehouses, and markets needed by merchants, many of whom, like the traders from Assur, were members of firms based in distant cities.

Agreements negotiated with the Kanesh authorities provided the merchants with protection from violence and also granted them a limited form of self-governance. In exchange, the traders made tax payments to the city. One such agreement, one of the many records preserved on thousands of clay tablets found at Kanesh, stipulated that textiles were taxed at 5 percent and tin at 4 pounds per donkey load.

The thousands of clay tablets unearthed at Kanesh beginning in the 1920s are important because they provide us with an abundance of evidence about the workings of an extensive travel network, or trade

diaspora, that flourished for two centuries, ca. 1950–1750 BCE, and was probably more sophisticated than any of its predecessors. One feature of this trade system worth emphasizing, before we turn our attention elsewhere, was the importance of the family firm.

The clay tablets recovered at Kanesh indicate that most of the enterprises active in the Assur–Kanesh circuit were family businesses, the internal workings of which were strongly shaped by the age and gender of the family members. Women are mentioned in some of the tablets, but as wives or mothers rather than as traders. Older men, presumably the senior members of the firm, oversaw the home offices in Assur. Younger men ran the branch operations in Kanesh. The youngest men, presumably those best suited to cope with the rigors of life on the road, probably traveled with the caravans to and from Assur.

The relative silence of the tablets regarding the importance of women in the Assur–Kanesh network should not mislead us. From the Nile to the Tigris, women spinners and weavers working at home produced nearly all of the cloth intended for garments and other purposes, including commerce. It is therefore very likely that women produced the bulk of the wool and linen carried from Assur to Kanesh. Given the large scale of this trade, most of these women cloth makers could not have been members of the Assur merchant families. It is likely that they lived in other parts of Mesopotamia, the cloth they produced arriving in Assur via trade routes that the tablets do not identify.

Women outside of the Assur merchant companies may have aided the functioning of the trade with Kanesh in a second way, namely by operating travelers' inns. In Hammurabi's Code (ca. 1750 BCE) there are regulations governing Mesopotamian inns run by women (who are called 'alewives' in the Code). Perhaps women also operated the inns for travelers on the route between Assur and Kanesh.

HARKUF JOURNEYS SOUTH

Inscribed on an Egyptian tomb built around 2300 BCE at a site on the Upper Nile, near today's Aswan, is a brief record of four overland journeys made by an official named Harkuf. The inscription indicates that Harkuf traveled as an emissary of the two pharaohs that reigned during his lifetime. His destinations cannot be pinpointed because place names have changed many times in the past 4,000 years. However, the inscription seems to indicate that Harkuf's travels took him in a southwesterly direction to the region of Dafur in today's western Sudan, a distance of more than 900 miles.

Harkuf is the first long-distance traveler whose name we know. He is also the first one to leave a written account, or narrative, of his journeys.

The inscription on Harkuf's tomb opens a window on the nature of over-land travel by Egyptians during the period of the Old Kingdom (ca. 2700–2100 BCE). It makes clear that by 2300 BCE Egyptian rulers were actively promoting official travel to sub-Saharan Africa for a mixture of diplomatic and commercial reasons. On his first trip, which lasted seven months, Harkuf explored the route south and returned with unspecified gifts, perhaps intended as tribute to the pharaoh from sub-Saharan rulers. His second mission required eight months to complete and yielded more gifts, this time in 'very great quantity.' He returned from his third trip in a caravan of 300 donkeys carrying incense, ebony, grain, ivory, and 'every good product,' indicating that a main goal of this expedition was trade. On his final journey Harkuf came back with a 'dancing dwarf' (a pygmy?) for the pharaoh, similar to the one, according to the inscription, that had earlier been brought from the land of Punt (perhaps today's Somalia and Ethiopia).

CONCLUSION: HITTITES, EGYPTIANS, AND PHOENICIANS, 2000–1000 BCE

Beginning around 2000 BCE a pair of broader changes in the Nile–Indus corridor significantly altered the circumstances for long-distance travel. First, the collapse of the Indus Valley civilization after 1900 BCE, a development that is poorly understood but may have been caused by mounting environmental difficulties, ended travel between Mesopotamia and the Indus region for nearly 1,500 years. Second, semi-nomadic peoples from Anatolia and seafarers from the eastern Mediterranean directed repeated attacks on Mesopotamia and Egypt during much of the millennium 2000–1000 BCE.

Despite the invasions, travel continued within and between Egypt and Mesopotamia, though for the most part over somewhat shorter distances. Occasionally, in fact, invaders themselves, like the Hittites, moved through much of the Middle East into Egypt itself. Indeed, Hittite craftsman fanned out widely, helping to spread knowledge of the new iron technology after the collapse of the Hittite kingdom around 1200 BCE. However, these incursions were unstable, and did not result in durable travel patterns or even regular trade. Ships moved through the eastern Mediterranean, from Egypt in the south to parts of Greece in the north, also connecting islands like Crete. Egypt also continued its contacts with other parts of northeastern Africa, using the upper Nile River but also the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The sea routes facilitated regular trade with the land they called Punt. The tomb of Queen Hatshepsut features illustrations of a trading expedition to Punt from about 1450 BCE. Egyptian ships take jewelry, tools, and weapons and then load exotic animals, including a panther, and myrrh trees (carefully uprooted and packaged for replanting).

The Phoenician people provided particular stimulus to trade in the eastern Mediterranean. Operating from city-states on the Middle Eastern coast, from about 2500 BCE onward, the Phoenicians emphasized commerce over political expansion or even extensive agricultural development. They traded overland with Mesopotamia, and began to expand maritime trade as well.

Still, however, the second millennium BCE saw a certain pause in adventurous travel patterns—at least ones we know about. Even the Phoenicians would make their greatest contributions to world travel a bit later. The advantages of contact were still realized, but the distances normally covered grew somewhat shorter. It was only after about 1000 BCE that several developments, and the participation of some newer societies, began to expand the travel map once again.

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Part I

The classical period

The classical period—roughly 1000 BCE to 500 BCE—was marked by the development of large and powerful civilizations—in Persia, in the Mediterranean, in China, and in India. The classical civilizations all, at least periodically, formed powerful internal empires, and also developed distinctive cultures and internal trading systems. Great emphasis went on separate development.

Advantages were also seen, however, in contacts outside the civilization proper, particularly for trade but also potentially for other purposes. So longer-distance travel continued, and probably accelerated. Better naval technology and greater knowledge of factors like the monsoon winds in the Indian Ocean contributed to new opportunities for travel by sea. Empires built larger road networks, and often also hostels to accommodate travelers carefully spaced at one-day intervals. While there were no massive changes in the technologies of land-based travel, greater use of horses—for example, in China, which began to import better horses from other areas—and the domestication of the camel around 1000 BCE had huge implications.

So travel expanded. The classical civilizations also encouraged better protection of records, so we have more knowledge of individual travelers—some of whom explicitly wrote reports or tales of adventure. Through these materials we can also see that some individuals were indulging a true curiosity about societies outside their own borders, deliberately delighting in unfamiliarity. Here was another important component.

Two major travel clusters developed. Various peoples used the Mediterranean as an artery, potentially linking western Asia, parts of Africa, and parts of Europe; and land excursions could extend eastward as well. A second center developed in Asia, with travel radiating out from China and (though we know less about it) India, with travelers seeking access to India as well.

The famous travelers of the classical era came from the civilizations—particularly from the eastern Mediterranean and from China. But there were also other travelers, including nomads and others gaining periodic access to one of the civilizations from the outside, who fleshed out the new patterns as well.

The Middle East and the Mediterranean region, 1000 BCE–500 CE

INTRODUCTION

We begin our consideration of the classical period with a focus on the Mediterranean area. The Greeks and Romans were the most visible and influential travelers in this region. They also developed a new capacity to write about their journeys, an important innovation in itself. The Greeks became the most active seafarers in the Mediterranean, and it was the Greek Herodotus who introduced a new use for travel in underpinning a formal account of his journeys, effectively as part of what we today would call a regional history and geography. Romans developed a rich tradition of both overland and maritime travel; it was also within the Roman embrace that early Christian travel emerged, including pilgrimages to Jerusalem between about 300 and 500 CE.

The emergence of the Greeks and Romans as travelers, however, was prepared by two other societies, both operating in the early classical centuries: the Persians, whose institutions greatly encouraged travel throughout the Middle East and provided a model for later societies in the same region; and the Phoenicians, undoubtedly the most daring travelers in world history to that point but whose influence on later travel is more obscure.

PHOENICIANS AND PERSIANS

We deal with the Phoenicians first, partly because, as discussed in Chapter 2, their commitment to commerce and commercial exchange had begun to develop even before the classical period began. Real uncertainty shrouds the Phoenicians: they introduced one of the most effective early writing systems, but none of their records survives, so we have to speculate on several aspects of their history—including their most ambitious travel.

We know that the Phoenicians were extraordinary seafarers, but there is no Phoenician account to tell us so. Fortunately, however, because of their extensive contacts and interactions with neighboring peoples, we have learned a great deal about them from Assyrian, biblical, Greek, and Roman writings. Archaeological evidence from numerous coastal sites in the Mediterranean and from the Atlantic coast of Spain and Morocco is an additional fund of information about the Phoenicians.

These sources demonstrate that by the beginning of the classical period the Phoenicians had established a far-flung network of merchant communities—one of humankind's earliest trading-post empires—that reached from their homeland in today's Lebanon to the Pillars of Hercules (the Strait of Gibraltar) and beyond. Sidon, Tyre, and Byblos were the leading 'homeland' cities; Carthage, on the north coast of Africa in present-day Tunisia, was the most famous of the many diaspora communities. Vessels based in Phoenician ports carried an astonishing variety of finished goods and raw materials from one end of the Mediterranean to the other. Many of the manufactures—textiles, dyes, pottery, metalwares, and glass—were produced in the Phoenician cities. Unfinished goods, including ivory and many ores—tin, copper, iron, lead, silver, and gold—were obtained elsewhere, as were the many slaves transported on Phoenician ships.

The range of Phoenician voyages was extraordinary. Trading colonies on the Atlantic coast of Morocco, the remains of which have been uncovered by archaeologists, enabled the Phoenicians to tap local sources of copper, gold, and ivory; other colonial enclaves, on the Atlantic coast of Spain, provided access to major sources of tin. Some documentary evidence, which is plausible but no more than that, suggests that Phoenician vessels occasionally voyaged far beyond their usual commercial routes. The most famous example of this type of evidence comes from Herodotus, the Greek historian and travel writer, who tells us that around 600 BCE the Egyptian pharaoh Necho II sent a group of Phoenician ships clockwise around Africa to learn whether or not the continent was surrounded by water. According to Herodotus, this amazing expedition was successful, taking more than two years to complete. Present-day scholars regard this story as unproven, but credible.

The Phoenicians almost certainly produced one, and perhaps two, of the greatest early individual travelers, even aside from the possibility of the larger African trip. In the fifth century BCE, a leader named Hanno guided a trip down the Atlantic coast of Africa, reaching at least present-day Sierra Leone, and possibly Nigeria. Less certainly, also in the fifth century, another traveler named Himilco may have reached Britain and Ireland. Obviously, the Phoenicians set a vivid example of frequent and wide-ranging travel. Phoenician voyages also reached island groups in the Atlantic, notably the Canaries and the Azores. Some of the Phoenician

achievements later faded from memory: the excursions to Africa and the Atlantic islands had no clear aftermath; only a vague sense remained that the Canaries and Azores even existed, outside of their own fishing-and-gathering inhabitants. But the network of exchange in the western Mediterranean and up the Atlantic coast of Europe definitely influenced the Romans, whose bitter rivalry with Carthage included some active imitation of Phoenician travel routes.

* * *

Initially far from the sea routes of the Mediterranean, a new Persian empire began to take shape in the Middle East from the seventh century BCE onward. After 556, under the leadership of Cyrus the Great and then Darius, the Persians began to conquer neighboring empires throughout the Middle East, reaching from Mesopotamia to the shores of the Mediterranean and even through Egypt and Libya in North Africa, though an attempt to move into the African kingdom of Kush failed. To the east, the Persians took over the Indus River valley. Attempts to move into Europe (one expedition reached all the way to the Danube River) shattered against Greek resistance. And the Persian empire began a gradual decline in the fifth century.

Still, for many decades this was the largest empire ever formed to that point. Its size obviously encouraged political, military, and commercial travel, though we know little of individual Persian journeys. At its height Persian rulers were receiving gifts from India, from the Arabs to the south, and even elephant tusks and a zebra from sub-Saharan Africa—suggesting a network of contacts that stretched beyond the boundaries of the empire itself. More important still were the innovations Persian rulers introduced to facilitate travel within their vast realm. A major network of roads was built, particularly to facilitate military travel; one present-day scholar estimates the total mileage of the Persian imperial highways at about 8,000. While these roads were carefully guarded, so that official passes were often required, this was a system that travelers could use for various purposes. Cyrus also established a regular postal and message service, along with carefully spaced inns that could shelter merchants and other land-based voyagers and also reservoirs for water. (The communications network founded by Cyrus may have been copied from the earlier and less elaborate one employed by the Assyrians who ruled much of the Middle East from 900 to 600 BCE.) A Greek later described the results of the Persian efforts in transportation and communication: ‘With you (Persians) every way is easy, every river is crossable, and there is no dearth of provisions.’ With this system, Persia and the Middle East became a major hub for travel both from the east (Central Asia and India) and from the Mediterranean—and the system would be preserved or replicated by many later empires.

We will see its role later in the classical period, particularly as described by Greek travelers, and in the post-classical era as well.

GREEK TRAVEL: FRAMEWORK AND FICTION

From 750 BCE onward, Phoenician seafarers faced a group of increasingly powerful maritime rivals based in the Greek city-states that flourished on the coast and islands of the Aegean Sea. Like the Phoenicians before them, Greek merchants dispersed widely, founding trading colonies in many parts of the Mediterranean. Going the Phoenicians one better, the Greeks also established numerous commercial settlements on the shores of the Black Sea. These settlements attracted Persian interest, but the Greeks were ultimately able to beat back Persian attacks and continue the development of their highly commercial society.

Greek seafaring merchants specialized in the export of wine and olive oil packaged in distinctive clay containers called amphorae. In exchange for these high-value manufactured goods, their vessels loaded amber, furs, forest products, wheat, and slaves obtained from trading posts at many locations in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. The nature of this trade—the exchange of Greek finished goods for unfinished foreign products—favored the Greeks for a long time, fueling a cycle of Aegean-wide economic expansion and comparative prosperity that underlay the great achievements of the Greek Golden Age, ca. 500–400 BCE.

It is no secret that the classical Greeks were imaginative storytellers and that some of their most winning tales, especially Homer's *Odyssey*, focused on the experience of travel. Modern scholars recognize that key themes in the *Odyssey*, although a work of fiction, provide insights into aspects of maritime travel during the classical centuries that are historically sound.

Composed around 700 BCE but based on folk memories that were much older, Homer's poem is the story of the many challenges faced by a legendary Greek warrior named Odysseus during his voyage home after fighting in the Trojan War, ca. 1300 BCE. The section near the middle of the book that focuses on the ten, often calamitous, years that Odysseus spent at sea after departing Troy is of special interest to the historian of travel. Here Homer conveys something of the day-to-day experiences—and fears and fantasies—that must have been familiar to many sailors during the classical period. Indeed, much of what we read about Odysseus' voyage was probably inspired by old salts' yarns spun many times before Homer transformed them into his incomparably powerful verse.

As Homer tells it, Odysseus' troubles began soon after he embarked from Troy when 'accursed winds' blew his fleet of ships far off course, eventually bringing the vessels to the fantastic country of the Lotus-eaters, 'a race that eat the flowery lotus-fruit.' Some of Odysseus' comrades were

so taken by the pleasures they discovered in the paradisaal land of 'honeyed fruit' that they attempted to jump ship; he had to force them to resume the voyage. The fleet next came upon the land of the Cyclops, 'a fierce, lawless people who never lift a hand to plant or plough but just leave everything to the immortal gods.' Here Odysseus and twelve of his best men were taken captive by a fierce one-eyed giant. It required all their ingenuity to outwit their tormentor, escape his clutches, and resume the voyage. Once again at sea, Odysseus and his shipmates barely survived temptation by the Sirens, a race of women who sang 'honey-sweet' songs to lure sailors to their doom. Finally, after enduring several storms and shipwrecks—and seven years of captivity at the hands of the goddess Calypso—Odysseus reached the shores of Ithaca. Although more challenges awaited him, he was now home.

A second example of early Greek storytelling is the tale of Jason and the Argonauts, the crew of heroic mariners who braved many dangers to sail into uncharted waters in quest of the magical Golden Fleece. Mentioned briefly by Homer in the *Odyssey*, the story of Jason's epic voyage was expanded and passed on orally and in several written versions until it was put in final form by a third-century BCE writer named Apollonius of Rhodes. In Apollonius' poetic rendering of the legend, known as the *Argonautica*, there is much about the perils of seafaring, the discovery of new lands, and the strangeness of foreign peoples.

In preparing his telling of the Jason story, Apollonius drew on the long tradition of earlier versions. He also borrowed from Homer's *Odyssey*. Indeed, much of what we read in Apollonius about Jason's journey seems to be a reworking of the voyage of Odysseus.

The journey begins after Jason has a marvelous ship called the Argo constructed and assembles a crew of twelve great heroes, each of whom possesses supernatural powers. Their voyage takes them to numerous islands and countries where they encounter a huge cast of exotic peoples and fantastic creatures. At one of their early stops the women of Lemnos seduce them in order to repopulate their island. During another landfall Hercules, one of the heroes, disappears after nymphs kidnap his servant. Farther along, a blind prophet offers sailing advice if his visitors will save him from the Harpies, bird-like women who snatch away his food before he can eat it. When the Argonauts come to the mouth of the Black Sea and the dangerous Clashing Rocks, they send a dove ahead to explore the route and then barely make it through. Reaching their destination (probably the coast of today's Georgia), they obtain the Golden Fleece, but only after Jason overcomes several difficult challenges posed by the local king. With their sought-after treasure in hand, they sail home, in some versions of the story by a very circuitous route that leads to more adventures.

There are good reasons why these two stories form a useful departure point for a closer look at travel in the classical period. The unforgettable

parade of characters in the two epics not only makes for exciting reading but also takes us inside the mental world of premodern sailors. Numerous episodes in the two tales help us to appreciate both the fears that grew out of the dangers mariners experienced at sea and the fantasies produced by male crews coping with occasional doldrums and enforced idleness. As we shall see in subsequent chapters of this book, the themes of terrible danger, exotic 'others,' fantastic creatures, and sexual longing, prominent in these two stories, reappear frequently in later travel writing.

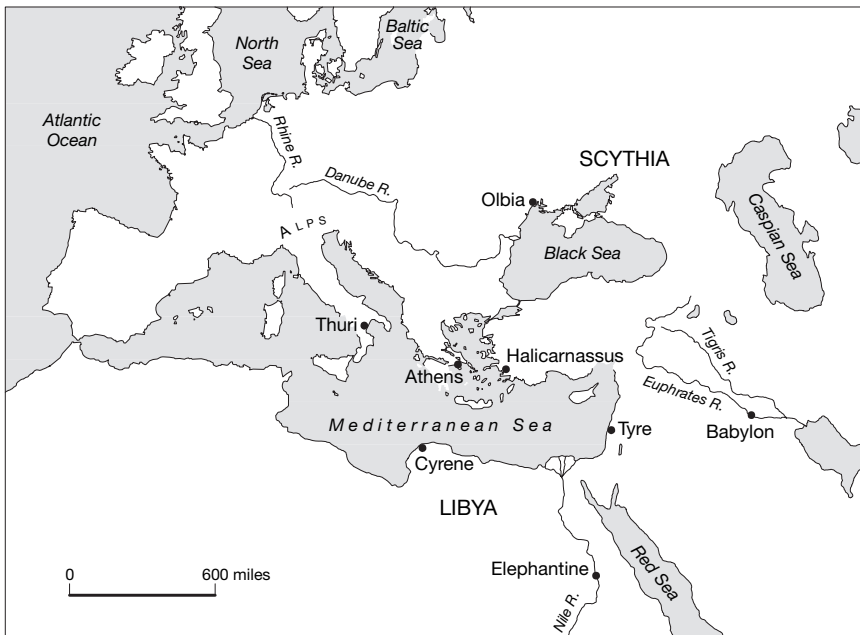
The *Odyssey* is also important to the historian of travel, more so than the vaguer Jason legend, because scattered through the poem are precious bits of information about shipbuilding and the day-to-day details of seafaring. In the following passage, the goddess Calypso has decided to allow Odysseus to resume his journey and helps him build a boat:

[H]e bored through all his planks and wedged them snugly,
Knocking them home together, locked with pegs and bolts.
Broad in the beam and bottom flat as a merchantman
when a master shipwright turns out her hull,
So broad the craft Odysseus made himself.
Working away at speed
he put up half-decks pinned to close-set ribs
and a sweep of gunwhales rounded off the sides.
He fashioned the mast next and sank its yard in deep
and added a steering oar to hold her right on course,
then he fenced her stem to stern with twigs and wicker,
bulwark against the sea surge, floored with heaps of brush.
And lustrous Calypso came again, now with bolts of cloth
to make the sail, and he finished that off too, expertly.
Braces, sheets and brails—he rigged all on board,
then eased her down with levers into the sea.

The Odyssey, trans. Fagles, p. 160

HERODOTUS

Our earliest substantial evidence for the importance of travel among the Greeks comes from Herodotus, the fifth-century BCE historian and traveler whom we have encountered earlier in Chapter 2. Herodotus was the author of one book, a true classic, known in English as either *The Histories* or *The Persian Wars*. Often described as the first genuine work of history, Herodotus' book is an attempt to explain (1) why the Persians, then the leaders of the most powerful empire in the world, and the comparatively weak Greeks, went to war in 499 BCE, and (2) why the underdog Greeks emerged victorious two decades later.



Map I The travels of Herodotus

Herodotus cast his net widely to address these complicated issues. He begins with a kind of ‘tour’ of the Persian-dominated world, essentially the region of the Nile–Indus corridor. Having introduced the Persians and the countless peoples they interacted with (mostly as conquerors or would-be conquerors), Herodotus then devotes the second half of his narrative to a detailed account of the twenty-year conflict that halted the military expansion of the Persians and ushered in the Greek Golden Age.

For the historian of travel, it is the first half of Herodotus’ book, his ‘world tour,’ that is crucial. Here he draws on his own journeys to provide his readers with first-hand descriptions of conditions and lifeways in four key regions or countries: Egypt, the grasslands north of the Black Sea (today’s Ukraine), Mesopotamia (today’s Iraq), and North Africa (called Libya by the Greeks). Much of this information is based on his direct observations (autopsy), but some of it (we cannot always be certain how much) comes from unidentified local informants. In addition, scattered through this section of the book are tidbits of information about other regions and travelers that Herodotus learned about during his research. Adding all of this information together provides us with a picture of much of the Middle East, parts of Central Asia and the Balkans, and North Africa from Egypt to Libya in the middle of the first millennium BCE, a picture that is far from complete but which is unmatched by any other single

classical source. To better appreciate his strengths as a reporter, let's sample some of his observations about two of his destinations, Egypt and the grasslands north of the Black Sea coast.

Herodotus' report on Egypt runs to about seventy-five pages in a modern English translation. Filled with much information about what he saw and what he was told (mostly by local religious leaders), this section of the *Histories* has long fascinated its readers. One of its highlights is his lucid description of the process of mummification. We learn from him that the process of preserving dead bodies was in the hands of professional embalmers who offered the families of the deceased three different price levels. In the 'deluxe,' most expensive method, the brain was removed by means of a metal hook passed through the nostrils and by pouring drugs into the skull. The intestines were removed by cutting into the body with a sharp 'Ethiopian stone knife.' After the intestinal cavity had been cleaned with palm wine and crushed spices, it was filled with myrrh, cassia (a type of cinnamon), and various perfumed spices and sewn up. The body was then soaked for seventy days in a dehydrating agent such as saltpeter to dry up the flesh and give the skin a leathery texture. In the final stage of the process, the desiccated corpse was wrapped in linen bandages and returned to the family for storage in an upright wooden container. According to Herodotus, the less expensive procedures left the brain intact, did not include cutting open the body, and were less thorough in removing the internal organs.

Herodotus' account of the pastoral nomads who inhabited the prairies of today's Ukraine, a people known to the Greeks as the Scythians, is about half as long as his reporting on Egypt, but it is no less interesting or important. Indeed, his writing on the Scythians, based on what he learned from informants in the Greek cities of the Black Sea coast, is the earliest substantial description of the pastoral nomads of Central Asia. Much of what he wrote on the Scythians has been confirmed by modern scholars drawing upon evidence from archaeology.

This holds true even for the pages Herodotus wrote on the Amazons, the women warriors of the grasslands, pages that scholars have traditionally regarded with great skepticism. In Herodotus' telling, Greek soldiers in the Black Sea region once found themselves at war with an army of Amazons. Although the Greeks defeated the women and took many of them prisoner, the Amazons managed to escape and eventually joined up with Scythian men. (The Scythian name for the women warriors meant 'killers of men.') Later, Herodotus was told, the Amazons relocated to a region far to the northeast, where 'they go out hunting on horseback with or without their husbands, they go to war, and they wear the same clothes as men do.'

Modern archaeological researchers, some of whom are women, have unearthed evidence that suggests the historical soundness of Herodotus' account of the Amazons. These scholars have found numerous graves in southern Ukraine dating from the middle of the first millennium BCE

containing the skeletal remains of women buried with military paraphernalia such as lances, arrows, and armor. Some of the skeletons indicate that the deceased had been struck on the head or stabbed with a sharp blade, providing support for the view that these are the remains of warriors rather than of women who were coincidentally buried with weapons. The graves also contain bronze mirrors and gold trim for clothing, as well as jewelry (earrings, necklaces, beads, and arm rings). Perhaps the bodies were buried so that the women would enter the next world with both the weapons they would need as warriors and the ornaments they would desire to enhance their appearance. All in all, the archaeological evidence suggests that Herodotus' account of the Amazons was not, as formerly thought, an illustration of his gullibility, but rather historically sound.

However, Herodotus' credibility drops off sharply when he writes about lands and peoples that he never visited. One notorious example of his unreliability is illustrated by the mixture of fact and (mostly) pejorative fantasy contained in his description of life in India (actually, the region of the Indus Valley in today's Pakistan), a place to which he never traveled and about which Greeks had only the vaguest knowledge. Although he is on solid ground in writing that the Indian people made clothes from cotton, a plant that was in fact first domesticated in the Indus region, the rest of his discussion of Indian lifeways is largely off the tracks. He writes that the Indians were organized tribally (perhaps partly true) and that the people in the south had dark skin and engaged in sexual intercourse in public 'as herd animals do.' Some of the southern tribes, he claims, also practiced cannibalism. In the north, he writes, the tribes were warlike and used camels to go into the desert to search for gold, which they obtained after ants 'bigger than foxes' dug up the ore and heaped it into sandy piles.

In his writing on India, Herodotus gave his Greek readers a picture of an Asian people epitomizing the sensual, bizarre, and exotic 'Other,' a theme that appears in European travel writing in later centuries. 'Orientalism' is the term some modern scholars employ to describe this image of Asians (and Africans) as representing the opposite of European rationality and virtue.

On the other hand, if Herodotus is guilty of 'Orientalizing' the people of India, he does much better in his essentially reasonable account of the Nubians (called Ethiopians by the Greeks), the people living in the region of the upper Nile in today's Sudan. This was a second region that Herodotus did not visit, but it was included (briefly) in *The Histories* in connection with his discussion of Egypt. While in Egypt, he tells us, he traveled up the Nile as far as the First Cataract (the location of today's Aswan High Dam, about 700 miles from the delta) where the Egyptians had built a major religious complex on the island of Elephantine. Unable to proceed any farther, he turned to local informants for information about the Ethiopians to the south. His interlocutors described how to travel

upriver by using boats that were hauled from the riverbanks and by making portages. As for the Ethiopian people, Herodotus was told that they have 'woolly hair,' have established a capital at Meroe (an archaeologically attested site), and worship 'Zeus [actually, the Egyptian god Amun] and Dionysus [the Egyptian god Osiris] alone of the gods.' No mention here of skin color, cannibalism, public sexuality, or bizarre animals.

Having considered the strengths and shortcomings of Herodotus as a travel writer, we cannot conclude our discussion of him without making note of some surprising omissions in *The Histories*, namely the almost complete absence of information regarding how he traveled to the places he visited, what kinds of accommodations he found en route, or how he paid for his travels. Let us briefly examine each of these issues.

Writing in the context of his visit to Egypt, Herodotus provides us with one of the very few pieces of information about how he traveled:

I wanted to understand these matters [religious beliefs and practices in Egypt, and elsewhere] as clearly as I could, so I also sailed to Tyre in Phoenicia.

The Histories, trans. Waterfield, p. 113

As we have seen, Greek and Phoenician trading vessels filled the sea lanes of the Mediterranean during the fifth century BCE. Because there were then no ships designed specially for passengers, merchant skippers often earned extra income by taking on a few travelers and providing them with minimalist on-deck accommodations.

It is likely that Herodotus racked up most of his travel mileage (the total of which cannot be estimated because we are in complete darkness regarding his itineraries) by booking passage on trading ships moored at the docks in Piraeus, the port of Athens and departure point for sailings to harbors in Egypt, North Africa, Phoenicia, and the Black Sea. While in North Africa, Phoenicia, and Ukraine, he probably did not venture very far from port. During his time in Egypt, as we have seen, he traveled upstream on the Nile as far as Elephantine, a journey that he probably made by riverboat. But to get from the shores of the Mediterranean coast to Mesopotamia and Babylon, he would have had to travel overland. He may have done so by joining one of the many donkey caravans that linked the coast to the Euphrates region.

With regard to his overnight accommodations, Herodotus again provides us with no information. The earliest evidence of inns in the Greek world dates from slightly later than his time. (However, as we have seen in Chapter 2, inns for travelers in Mesopotamia had long been in operation; such establishments were the subject of regulation in Hammurabi's Law Code.) Perhaps Herodotus stayed overnight with Greek expatriates in the

cities he visited. The Greeks, like people all over the eastern Mediterranean, placed a high value on hospitality, a tradition that is noticeable in the poems of Homer, where it was known as 'guest-friendship.' Many Greek merchants living abroad might have welcomed a visit from a fellow countryman who was full of stories about far away lands and eager to share them, as we may imagine of Herodotus.

Finally, with regard to how he paid for his travels, we are again left with no evidence. In light of his silence, some scholars have speculated that he was a professional lecturer/writer whose chief subject was his own travels. We might not be too far off in thinking of him as an early counterpart of present-day travel writers who give talks at museums, libraries, bookstores, and colleges. Honoraria from such appearances might have paid for his journeys.

XENOPHON

The Greek Golden Age, which had provided the setting for Herodotus' travels, ended as a result of a ruinous war between Sparta and Athens (the Peloponnesian War, 431–404 BCE). Sparta emerged victorious partly owing to help from Persia. But the cost was high. Economic conditions throughout the Aegean region went into a tailspin. Following the war, Cyrus, a member of the Persian royal family, raised an army of 10,000 or so Greek mercenaries, now eager for military service in foreign lands because of the economic downturn at home. Cyrus hired the soldiers to help him seize the Persian throne from his elder brother Artaxerxes II. To strengthen his bid for power, Cyrus recruited an additional 20,000 non-Greek soldiers from various regions of the empire.

The 30,000 soldiers commanded by Cyrus were accompanied by 20,000 or so camp followers, a force that included wives, children, servants, slaves, merchants, artisans, diviners, bankers, scribes, entertainers, drivers, and civil engineers. Food and gear were carried in thousands of carts pulled by horses, donkeys, mules, and oxen.

As was true of most armies during the classical period, the soldiers Cyrus recruited—the Cyrenes—were mainly infantry fighters. The Greeks, the only Cyrenes we know much about (see below), were either hoplites, armed with long spears and swords, or more lightly armed peltasts specializing in throwing javelins. Cyrus was the overall commander, but individual units, drawn from the various regions and city-states of Greece, identified with their own generals.

In the spring of 401 BCE, Cyrus and his soldiers set off on what would become one of the most celebrated journeys of the classical centuries. They began by marching across Anatolia into Mesopotamia, sometimes covering twenty or so miles a day, a fast pace for a large force. In September, near

Babylon, the Cyrenes were defeated by the forces of Artaxerxes II and Cyrus was killed. The Greek soldiers now split off from the rest of the Cyrenes, morphed into a type of mobile (and armed) polis, and negotiated terms for a retreat. They then marched north through Mesopotamia, fending off attacks by various adversaries along the way. As they approached mountainous and snowy eastern Anatolia, the soldiers abandoned their carts, many of their animals, and most of their camp followers. The survivors of the difficult passage through the mountains reached the Black Sea coast and safety in the spring of 400 BCE. But another year was to pass before their travels ended. Marching and sailing west toward the Aegean, the soldiers reached Thrace in mainland Greece before ending their journey in western Anatolia, not very far from where they had begun.

We are well-informed about the travels of the Greek soldiers because one of them was a talented Athenian writer named Xenophon. After the defeat of the Cyrenes near Babylon, Xenophon emerged as one of the leaders of the roughly 10,000 Greek mercenaries. Many years later, the diaries he must have kept enabled him to produce a meticulous account of the approximately 3,000-mile journey of the Ten Thousand, a book known as the *Anabasis* (Greek for 'expedition').

For historians of travel, the great strength of Xenophon's book is the abundance of information about the specific circumstances the soldiers faced while on the move: the routes they followed, how they coped with adverse weather and difficult terrain, the varying length of a day's march, and how they provided food and shelter for themselves and fodder for their pack animals. What is missing from Herodotus about the mundane details of travel fills the pages of Xenophon. But there is much more. Like Herodotus, Xenophon was a keen observer of the regions in which he traveled. The *Anabasis* is a valuable source of information about circumstances in Anatolia, Mesopotamia and the Aegean region around 400 BCE, a time when both the Persian empire and the Greek city-states had seen their best days.

One of the biggest challenges faced by the Ten Thousand was how to cross rivers in the absence of sturdy bridges and dependable ferries. A look at a map of their route shows that the soldiers crossed numerous rivers during their two years on the move. Xenophon provides us with enough information to indicate that one strategy was to use animal skins as flotation devices. In one incident, while marching south along the Euphrates River, the soldiers came upon a city on the opposite bank where they could purchase supplies. To cross the river

They stuffed the skins that they used as tent-coverings with dry grass, and then drew them together and stitched them up so that the water would not reach the hay. They crossed the river on these and got provisions.

Xenophon: The Persian Expedition, trans. Warner, p. 77

Much later, while marching in the upper reaches of the Tigris toward the Black Sea and coping with attacks by the Persians, the Ten Thousand considered crossing the river. A Greek from the island of Rhodes proposed a way to do this—in exchange for payment of a talent of silver (perhaps fifty to seventy-five pounds). His plan was to construct a huge pontoon bridge by inflating 2,000 animal skins, tying them together with rope, and then covering the skins with a surface of wooden planks and earth. According to Xenophon, the generals considered this plan but decided against it because Persian forces on the opposite bank would have made the crossing too difficult, if not impossible.

Farther along their march to the Black Sea, still harried by the Persians, the Ten Thousand encountered their most difficult conditions in the deep snow of mountainous eastern Anatolia (then known as Armenia). In some places the snow was six feet deep. The soldiers' shoes froze to their feet. Frostbite, hunger, and exhaustion killed many of the marchers and baggage animals. By the time the Ten Thousand reached the Black Sea, their numbers had been reduced to 8,600, an amazingly small number of losses given the many difficulties they encountered.

As they approached the Black Sea near present-day Trabzon, some of the soldiers experienced yet another—and bizarre—difficulty. Here is Xenophon:

[T]here were great numbers of bee hives in these parts, and all the soldiers who ate the honey went off their heads and suffered from vomiting and diarrhea and were unable to stand upright. Those who had eaten only a little behaved as though they were drunk, and those who had eaten a lot were like mad people. Some actually died.

Xenophon: The Persian Expedition, trans. Warner, p. 215

Modern scholars have investigated the 'mad honey' incident and have confirmed that fresh honey made from yellow rhododendrons, a flower that is found in abundance along sections of the Anatolian coast of the Black Sea, can be toxic, can induce something like 'madness,' and can be fatal.

ALEXANDER THE GREAT

As we have seen, Xenophon's *Anabasis* provides clues to the deterioration of political and economic conditions in the Greek city-states and in the Persian empire. These trends accelerated in subsequent decades, creating an opportunity for the conquest of both regions by an ambitious outsider. In 338 BCE Philip of Macedon attacked and defeated a coalition of the Greek city-states at Chaeronea. The Macedonian victory, which

was quickly followed by Philip's assassination and the succession of his 23-year-old son Alexander, ended the independence of the Greeks for many centuries.

Now it was the turn of Persia. Moving quickly, Alexander led an army of 50,000 Macedonian and Greek soldiers (plus approximately 15,000 non-combatants) across the Hellespont to Anatolia in an attempt to take over the Persian empire. In so doing, he began a series of truly astonishing travels, leading his soldiers across Anatolia and through the Phoenician lands to Egypt, then eastward as far as today's Pakistan, Central Asia, and northwestern India. Bivouacked in northwest India and unable to convince his soldiers to follow him still farther east, Alexander halted his march east in 326 BCE and turned back toward Babylon, where he died three years later just before his thirty-third birthday.

Although Alexander seems to have written nothing about his campaigns, one of his generals and at least one of his contemporaries compiled accounts of his battles and conquests. These records were lost long ago, but much information from them survives in the works of later writers such as Arrian and Plutarch who lived in the first and second centuries CE. All in all, the documentary record for Alexander as a traveler, while problematic in many ways, is thick compared to that for Herodotus and roughly comparable to that left by Xenophon.

The most striking characteristic of Alexander's army was its mobility. As we have seen, the force assembled by Cyrus included thousands of carts and approximately two non-combatants for each fighter. By contrast, Alexander—following the example set by his father—made little use of carts and restricted the number of non-combatants to three for every ten fighters. His infantrymen were required to carry their own gear (about fifty pounds) and their own grain and water (up to twenty pounds). Baggage animals—mules, horses, and camels—hailed the tents, heavy equipment, tools, as well as extra grain and water. By minimizing the use of carts and restricting the number of non-combatants, Alexander could strike quickly at his adversaries and travel great distances, perhaps 20,000 miles in all.

One of the most interesting episodes in Alexander's career was the time (from 330 to 327 BCE) he spent campaigning in today's Afghanistan and Uzbekistan, then called Bactria and Sogdia respectively. These areas—rich in pasturelands and irrigated plains, dotted with oases, and crisscrossed by major trade routes—had formerly been under the loose control of the Persians. Now, in fierce fighting, Alexander brought them into his orbit, quickly establishing garrisons and new cities while training local men to fight in Greek-style phalanxes. During this period, he seems to have made his headquarters in the Bactrian capital of Balkh, already a large walled city located a short distance south of the Oxus (today's Amu Darya) River. According to a long tradition, Zoroaster, the Persian prophet

of the sixth century BCE, was born here. It was in Balkh, in 327, that Alexander married a Bactrian princess named Roxanne, perhaps as part of a larger strategy of coming to terms with local elites. As we shall see in later chapters, Balkh's size, fortifications, and location in the heart of Eurasia attracted long-distance travelers—and military aggressors—far into the future.

Alexander's legacy to future travelers was significant. Although the empire he established began to break up soon after his death, the garrisons and cities he founded during his campaigns—which he settled with Greek soldiers, officials, and merchants—continued to flourish long afterwards. Countless anonymous travelers, whose journeys we can document archaeologically, linked these enclaves of Hellenistic culture and commercial practice, transforming them into a network of long-distance trade and cultural exchange that stretched from the Nile delta to the plains and mountains of Afghanistan.

ROMAN TRAVEL

Travelling throughout most of the Roman Empire was easy, swift and secure to a degree unknown until the nineteenth century; occasions for changing residence were far more numerous than today [1907], and water and land alike [were] alive with trade and travel. . . . In the North and West of the Empire there was less vigour than in the nineteenth century: in the South and East very much more.

Friedlander, I: 268 (1907)

The expansion of Roman rule from the third century BCE onward in the Mediterranean and Black Sea regions created new opportunities for travel that lasted to the end of the classical period. Two key changes were at the root of the sharp increase in travel during the Roman heyday. The political unity that the Romans established and enforced throughout the Mediterranean and Western Europe, especially during the first two centuries of the Common Era (the Roman Peace), significantly reduced the dangers associated with overland and maritime travel. Highway bandits and seafaring pirates were not put out of business but they were much less troublesome because of the long arm of Roman law.

The second development promoting an acceleration of travel was the buoyancy of the Roman economy between 200 BCE and 200 CE. Underwater archaeologists have recovered the remains of numerous shipwrecks in the Mediterranean dating from these centuries; the high number of wrecks and the large size of the vessels (cargo ships) points to a flourishing commercial economy. A variety of other evidence suggests increases in the production of wheat, wine, olive oil, textiles, pottery,

lumber, and bricks. Much of this increased output was transported to the city of Rome, the population of which grew to approximately one million by the year one.

Political unity and a vibrant economy put Romans on the roads and sea lanes in unprecedented numbers. Merchants, soldiers, and slaves were doubtless the most numerous travelers. Although records of individual travelers from these groups are very rare, a tomb inscription in the Anatolian city of Hierapolis celebrates the seventy-two voyages to Italy made by a merchant named Flavius Zeuxis. It is unlikely many other traders matched the travel record of Flavius Zeuxis. However, his feat demonstrates that frequent maritime journeys in the eastern Mediterranean during the period of the early empire were feasible.

Numerous other Romans also engaged in land and sea travel. Bits of evidence indicate that imperial officials, envoys, couriers, authors, scientists, students, artisans, entertainers, athletes, pilgrims, missionaries, and tourists traveled frequently, often covering long distances. So, too, did many of the early emperors. Julius Caesar, whose assassination in 44 BCE prevented him from becoming Rome's first emperor, traveled widely as a military leader and provincial administrator in the 60s and 50s BCE, spending varying lengths of time in Anatolia, Spain, Gaul, Britain, Egypt, Syria, and North Africa. Octavian/Augustus (reigned 27 BCE–14 CE) sailed from southern Italy to Alexandria at the head of a large fleet of warships in 31 BCE to seal his important military victory over Antony and Cleopatra. In the years before Tiberius (reigned 14–37) became emperor, he led Roman soldiers on campaigns in Spain, Armenia, and Germany; he also spent eight years on the island of Rhodes in a kind of retirement prior to taking office. As a child, Caligula (reigned 37–41 CE) accompanied his father to Syria; later, during his brief reign as emperor (made brief because of his assassination), he led military campaigns in Germany and Gaul that took him as far as the shores of the English Channel.

Hadrian (reigned 117–38 CE) was the most mobile of the emperors. He spent about half of his time in office on the move. Early in his reign, he made his most ambitious journey, taking most of the years 121–25 to visit many of the Roman frontier areas. This expedition took him from the city of Rome to today's Germany, England, France, Spain, Morocco, and then by ship to Antioch in present-day Turkey. From Antioch he marched north across Anatolia to the Black Sea port of Trabzon and then followed maritime and overland routes back to Rome, with stops at Ephesus and Athens. Three years later Hadrian set out again, this time for a short voyage (by his standards) across the Mediterranean to North Africa to visit Roman soldiers stationed in today's Algeria. Hadrian's final journey, during the years 128 to 132, was an overland and maritime tour of the eastern Mediterranean that included visits to Athens, Ephesus, Antioch, Palmyra, Jerusalem, and the Egyptian cities of Alexandria and

Thebes. By the end of his third trip, the emperor had logged around 18,000 miles.

Hadrian's journeys were facilitated by the Roman empire's excellent network of paved highways, which totaled about 48,000 miles during his reign. The Romans seem to have built the network for a combination of military and administrative purposes. Soldiers were deployed throughout the 1,800,000 square miles of the empire on the highways; indeed, many of the roads were built by the army. The main arteries were commonly fifteen to eighteen feet wide and were made of four layers of stone and gravel bound by mortar; deep drainage ditches added durability. (One can see surviving segments of these roads in present-day Syria and Portugal, as well as in many other parts of the former Roman world.) Stone mileage posts were installed as travelers' aids; more than 4,000 of these markers survive today.

In addition to their military importance, the highways were crucial to the administration of the empire, the population of which peaked at about 50 million in the second century CE. Emperor Augustus began the practice of using the main roads for an official courier system, the *cursus publicus*, to make it possible for emperors to govern their vast state 'by letter.' This network of couriers was probably modeled on the one used earlier by the Persians and described by Herodotus. The centerpiece of the Persian system was the Royal Road that led from Susa, in today's southwestern Iran, to Sardis in western Anatolia, a distance of 1,400 miles. According to Herodotus, there were 111 royal staging posts (at intervals of twelve or thirteen miles), many 'excellent inns,' and some guard-posts along the route. Numerous rivers had to be crossed along the way, for which there seem to have been ferries. Herodotus estimated that most travelers on the Royal Road averaged about fifteen or sixteen miles a day, meaning that the entire trip from Susa to Sardis would have taken ninety days. Official couriers doubtless traveled much faster.

The Romans established locally maintained relay stations or staging posts for changing horses at intervals of every ten to twelve miles along the main highways. Similarly funded hostels for overnight accommodations were built about twenty-five miles apart, the average length of a day's journey on these roads. The typical speed of the official couriers seems to have been about five miles per hour, but when the message was of unusual importance much faster rates were recorded.

Travel on the main highways was mostly confined to individuals on official business: soldiers, couriers, and administrators. Citizens who sought to use the roads for private purposes could do so only if they obtained an official document (*diplomata*) from an administrator. Such documents were issued to a variety of private travelers, but rarely to merchants. The cost of overland transport was far higher (about forty

times greater) than the cost of conveying goods in barges, boats, or salt-water ships. As a result, there was not much commercial traffic on the main highways.

There was, however, a great increase in the number of mercantile voyages in the Mediterranean and Black Sea during the centuries of the Roman Peace. Wheat and many other goods needed by the city of Rome's huge population came from the provinces largely by sea. During the annual shipping season (which excluded the winter months), vessels from Spain, France, North Africa, Sardinia, and Sicily unloaded large quantities of wheat, olive oil, wine, fish, and numerous other commodities at Rome's ports of Ostia and Puteoli (near today's Naples). Rome's most important lifeline was the maritime route from Alexandria. From the great Egyptian port in the Nile delta came huge shipments of wheat destined to feed the Roman poor. Rome also looked to Alexandria for Egyptian linen and papyrus, as well as a variety of commodities from more distant places that were trans-shipped from the Egyptian port: incense from southern Arabia, ivory from Sub-Saharan Africa, pepper and other spices from India, and silk from China. Elsewhere in the eastern Mediterranean, Phoenician ports such as Tyre and Sidon and the Anatolian harbor at Ephesus supplied Rome with a mixture of locally produced commodities and some that were trans-shipped from afar.

PAUL THE CHRISTIAN APOSTLE

A vivid description of a Mediterranean voyage in the first century CE leaps from the pages of chapter 27 of the *Acts of the Apostles* in the New Testament, where we learn of the journey of St. Paul (ca. 1–65 CE) from Judea (today's Israel) to Rome around 59–60 CE. In legal trouble with Jewish leaders and Roman provincial officials, Paul invoked his right as a Roman citizen to a trial in the capital. A Roman centurion was assigned to take him there.

Prior to these events, Paul had spent a good part of his life on the move. Born a Jew, he spent his youth in the southeastern Anatolian city of Tarsus, a major urban center on the Roman highway across Anatolia, where he probably learned the useful craft of tent-making. Following his dramatic conversion to Christianity in his thirties, he lived for several years in the Christian community of Damascus before relocating to Antioch, the city that became his base during his years as a missionary.

Paul made three extended journeys in the eastern Mediterranean and Aegean areas during the mid-first century to introduce the teachings of Christianity to gentiles. His strategy seems to have been to establish churches in cities on the main Roman highways in Anatolia and in key ports in the Aegean; from such urban bases, the new faith could then be carried to nearby rural regions. When Paul traveled overland, he probably walked,

accompanied by a companion or two and a donkey loaded with his belongings. For his maritime journeys, he doubtless adhered to the usual practice of booking passage on small coastal boats for short hops and taking larger cargo vessels for open-sea trips. As for accommodations, *Acts* tells us that he was frequently accorded hospitality by fellow Christians. Perhaps subventions from his co-religionists, as well as his tent-making skills, provided him with enough income to stay at inns when he had no other choice.

Paul was a hardy traveler. During his three missionary journeys, which may have covered 12,000 or 13,000 miles, he was jailed several times and survived three shipwrecks. Neither *Acts* nor his letters to various Christian communities provide much information about the daily challenges of life on the move, but we are more fortunate regarding his final journey, the voyage to Rome that he made under military escort.

This trip began at the port of Caesarea in Judea, late in the sailing season (mid-April to mid-October) when storms became more frequent and more dangerous. Led by a Roman centurion named Julius, Paul and several other prisoners, as well as the author of *Acts*, boarded a freighter headed for the Anatolian port of Myra. Sailing up the Levantine coast, the vessel put in for a time at the Phoenician port of Sidon before turning west into strong winds and struggling on to Myra, where the passengers debarked.

Julius soon found another vessel, a huge grain ship based in Alexandria that had room for 276 (passengers, crew, and soldiers), to take them on to Rome. Departing Myra, the big freighter hugged the Anatolian coast in the face of fierce winds and then made for the south coast of Crete. Paul, and perhaps other passengers, urged a layover in Crete until conditions improved. However, before a safe harbor could be found, a ferocious Northeaster that blew for fourteen days carried the ship far off course. All on board must have feared for their lives. Conditions were so dangerous that some of the crew tried to abandon ship. To keep the vessel afloat, the grain was thrown overboard. Just when all seemed hopeless, the shores of Malta came into view. The crew ran the ship aground on the beach. As it broke up, Paul and everyone else jumped overboard and swam ashore.

Paul and his shipmates wintered on Malta and then resumed their journey. They boarded another ship from Alexandria bound for Rome. Following a brief stop at Syracuse in Sicily, they reached the Italian coast and the port of Puteoli. Still under arrest and guarded by the centurion Julius, Paul spent a week in Puteoli, staying with members of the local Christian community. He then proceeded to Rome, probably using the major coastal highway that connected the port to the capital. *Acts* concludes its account of Paul's travels and proselytizing by telling us that in Rome he was able to continue his preaching for two years 'quite openly and unhindered.' Shortly afterwards, according to tradition, he was killed in Emperor Nero's attacks on the Christians.

MEDITERRANEAN TOURISM

In the middle of the second century BCE, a well-traveled Greek poet named Antipater from the Phoenician port of Sidon wrote the following lines:

I have gazed on the walls of impregnable Babylon, along which chariots may race, and on the Zeus by the banks of the Alphaeus. I have seen the Hanging Gardens and the Colossus of Helios, the great man-made mountains of the lofty pyramids, and the gigantic tomb of Mausolus. But when I saw the sacred house of Artemis that towers to the clouds, the others were placed in the shade, for the sun himself has never looked upon its equal outside Olympus.

Clayton and Price, eds., p. 12

Antipater's poem is the earliest statement of the idea that there were Seven Wonders in the classical Mediterranean world: the walls and Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the statue of Zeus at Olympia, the Egyptian pyramids, the huge statue (Colossus) in the harbor of Rhodes, the massive tomb of the Anatolian ruler Mausolus (reigned 377–353 BCE), and the spacious temple of Artemis in Ephesus. In later versions of the Seven Wonders, the walls of Babylon were eliminated in favor of the great lighthouse on the island of Pharos in the harbor of Alexandria.

The establishment of the tradition of the Seven Wonders was part of a new and larger pattern of travel in the eastern Mediterranean that was interwoven with the expansion of Roman political authority. This new development was the rise of tourism. Herodotus, of course, might well be regarded as the classical world's first tourist. His lively descriptions of the Egyptian pyramids and the sites in Babylon, to cite two famous examples from the *Histories*, suggest that he traveled, at least in part, for the pleasure that comes from learning first-hand about foreign lands and peoples.

Herodotus was far from the only Greek to enjoy visiting the sights in Egypt and Babylon, but travel for pleasure in the Mediterranean accelerated significantly during the Roman empire. Indeed, for the Roman upper classes, tourism seems to have become a major leisure-time activity, especially during the first two centuries of the Common Era when political order and economic well-being in the classical Mediterranean were at their peak.

Two places rich in history—Greece and Egypt—were the favorite destinations of Romans who went abroad for pleasure. For the trip to Greece, which was a combined land and sea journey, there were maps illustrating the most desirable routes as well as the distances between rest stops and inns. During the second century, a Greek writer named Pausanias produced a huge and well-informed guidebook to the important historic sites in Greece, a publication that is the true ancestor of the best modern tourist guides.

Romans usually traveled to Egypt by sea. Large cargo ships with the capacity to carry both freight and several hundred passengers, like the one that took Paul to Malta, made the trip from Puteoli to Alexandria, a distance of 1,000 miles, in about twenty days; in optimal conditions, a ship under a strong wind could cut the time to nine days. (The overland route from Rome to Alexandria on roads through southern Italy, Greece, and Anatolia took about two months.) However, the voyage home took much longer. Prevailing winds from the north, called the Etesian ('annual') winds, forced vessels departing Alexandria for Puteoli to take an indirect route, as we have seen in regard to Paul's voyage. His trip, having begun late in the year, was unusually lengthy because of the need to winter over in Malta. However, even summer-time voyages from Alexandria to Puteoli in good sailing conditions might take up to two months.

Archaeologists have uncovered the remains of numerous inns at sites frequented by Roman tourists. Most of these establishments seem to have been small, dark, and dirty. When inns are mentioned by classical writers, the tone is often whiney. Here is Seneca, the Roman writer of the first century CE, complaining about his accommodations in Byzantium:

I live [temporarily] right over a public bath. Just imagine every kind of human sound to make us hate our ears! When the muscular types work out and toss the lead weights, when they strain (or make believe they're straining), I hear the grunting [and many additional unpleasant sounds]. . . . Then there's the drink-seller with his various cries, the sausage-seller, the cake-seller, and all the managers of the restaurants, each hawking his wares with his own special intonation.

Casson, *Travel*, p. 210

Not surprisingly, many tourists preferred to rent space in private homes—when possible.

EARLY CHRISTIAN PILGRIMS

The man who has seen Judaea with his own eyes, and who knows the sites of the ancient cities, and their names whether the same or changed, will gaze more clearly upon Holy Scripture.

St. Jerome (ca. 342–420 CE)

A trickle of Christian pilgrims journeyed to Jerusalem during the three centuries following the death of Jesus, but dramatic changes during the reign of Constantine (305–37), Rome's first Christian emperor, soon transformed the trickle into a stream. According to the fourth-century historian Eusebius, Constantine converted to Christianity in 312 after winning a great military

victory in northern Italy, the outcome of which he attributed to support from the 'Christ of God.' Soon after this battle Constantine legalized Christianity and began a program of building churches throughout his realm to put his newly adopted faith on an equal footing with the traditional Roman pagan cults. In addition, to promote theological unity, he convened the first Ecumenical Council of Christian bishops at Nicaea in western Anatolia in 325.

It was in this context that Constantine conceived the plan for building a church in Jerusalem on the site of the crucifixion of Christ, a spot then occupied by a Roman temple honoring the goddess Aphrodite. Although Constantine was unable to travel to Jerusalem to supervise this project, he dispatched his elderly mother, Helena, also a Christian, to represent him.

Helena's journey to Jerusalem in 327 is the first pilgrimage to the Christian Holy Land for which there is any substantial record. Eusebius provides us with information about her route, her manner of travel, and her all-important activities in Palestine. She began her trip in Rome, from which she proceeded to Byzantium, her son's newly established eastern capital, shortly to be rededicated as Constantinople. From Byzantium she traveled across Anatolia on the main Roman military road in an 'imperial passage,' i.e. as the head of an entourage of administrators, soldiers, and servants. At each of the sixty or so places where she rested overnight, local officials prepared an elaborate welcome and suitable accommodations. Helena responded to their hospitality with lavish donations to local soldiers, charities, and churches.

Once she reached Palestine, Helena's activities in Jerusalem and its environs ensured that her trip would not be an anomaly but rather the beginning of a new and important tradition of Christian travel, especially for upper-class Roman women. Eusebius credits her with initiating the construction of two churches that were to become central to Christian pilgrims in the Holy Land, those built at the birthplace of Jesus in Bethlehem and at the place on the Mount of Olives where he was believed to have ascended to heaven. Although he does not mention any role for Helena in the building of the Anastasis—the church in Jerusalem located on the site of the crucifixion and burial of Jesus—she was very likely involved in that project too, perhaps significantly so.

In order to construct the Anastasis, the temple to Aphrodite on the site was razed and the ground underneath excavated. During the course of the digging the excavators discovered a tomb which Christians believed to be the tomb of Jesus, i.e. the Holy Sepulcher; it subsequently became the central shrine in the Anastasis. In later decades Christian writers also claimed that during the excavations, in addition to the tomb, fragments of the cross on which Jesus had met his death were uncovered and that Helena was the person who identified them as such. According to these writers, some of the fragments of the cross were reserved for display in Jerusalem while others were sent to the emperor in recognition of his important role in the promotion of Christianity.

In sum, three centuries after the death of Jesus Constantine and Helena effectively reinvented the Roman province of Palestine as the Christian Holy Land, a transformation marked in 335 by the gathering in Jerusalem of bishops from around the eastern empire for the formal dedication of the new Christian buildings. The stage was now set for an influx of pilgrims.

The Christian travelers who followed Helena to Jerusalem benefited from the existing Roman transportation infrastructure that she had used in her journey across Anatolia. Quite revealing in this regard is the record compiled in 333 by the first pilgrim to visit Jerusalem after Helena, an individual known only as the 'Bordeaux pilgrim.' Setting out from the Atlantic coast of Gaul (France), this traveler proceeded overland on the main Roman roads through northern Italy and the Danube valley to Constantinople, a journey of about 2,200 miles that took three months or so to complete. From Constantinople he retraced Helena's route on the Roman military road in Anatolia to Antioch and Jerusalem, an additional distance of nearly 1,200 miles that took another two months or so.

We are well-informed about the Bordeaux pilgrim's trip to Jerusalem because he made a careful record of his route and the stops he made along the way, presumably for the use of future pilgrims. (Less complete is the itinerary of his homeward journey; like many travelers, he may have found the homeward journey less worthy of note.) The itinerary is especially valuable for the light it sheds on the Roman overland transportation system in the fourth century. Even though he was traveling for private rather than official purposes, each of the Bordeaux pilgrim's stops was at a Roman staging post or hostel, indicating that the imperial transportation system was functioning effectively and was available to private persons, so long as they deferred to official travelers.

In the century or so following the journey of the Bordeaux pilgrim, the number of Christians traveling to the Holy Land increased significantly, although the patchiness of our evidence makes it impossible to be precise about the number. However, one significant trend that clearly points in the direction of an increase in pilgrim traffic was the growth of a travelers' hospitality network intended specifically for Christians. This new development may have been inaugurated by Bishop Basil of Caesarea (330–79), who founded a major hostel for Christian travelers on the main Roman road in central Anatolia and promoted the establishment of other such institutions elsewhere.

Wealthy upper-class Roman women were prominent in responding to Basil's call for the creation of facilities for pilgrims. A Roman noblewoman known as Melania the Elder and her religious companion Rufinus of Aquileia established a hostel for Christian pilgrims on the Mount of Olives during the 380s. In the same decade a second Roman noblewoman, known as Paula, together with her religious companion St. Jerome, founded a hostel for pilgrims at Bethlehem. A short time later, during the

420s and 430s, the granddaughter of Melania, known as the Younger Melania, took over leadership of the hostel on the Mount of Olives. During the 440s and 450s, the empress Eudocia, wife of emperor Theodosius II, sponsored major building projects in and around Jerusalem that included the establishment of two new monasteries (which typically included accommodations for pilgrims) and an instantly famous church to house the remains of St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr.

The Christian hostels, known as *xenodochia*, somewhat resembled the earlier Greek and Roman inns. All three establishments served travelers by providing lodging, meals, and stables for pack animals. The three institutions were also similar in that each of them facilitated cross-cultural exchanges and the spread of diseases. But, as we have seen, the Greek and Roman inns were founded by secular authorities for political, military, and fiscal purposes. The *xenodochia* were different in that they were established by Christian leaders and laypeople for religious ends. Pilgrims were encouraged to make financial contributions toward the cost of their stay, but the Christian inns were operated by monks whose main support came from church funds and from donations by wealthy lay benefactors like the two Melanias and Paula (as well as from emperors and empresses).

Important as they were to the establishment of facilities for Christian travelers, we can only see the four Roman women discussed above 'through a glass, darkly' because none of them left any record of her activities. Our knowledge of their important roles in promoting pilgrimage to the Holy Land comes from writings made by their contemporaries, such as St. Jerome in the case of Paula. We do, however, have one extraordinarily valuable record made by a woman pilgrim in the fourth century, that of Egeria, a Roman noblewoman from Gaul or Spain who was in the Holy Land from 381 to 384 and wrote a detailed report of her activities and observations.

Egeria recorded her experiences in a lengthy letter, intended for a group of pious women back home, which she composed in Constantinople shortly after her visit to the Holy Land. Only part of this document survives. Half of it is a meticulous description of the liturgical year in Jerusalem, i.e. the devotional practices at the church of the Holy Sepulcher and the other shrines. This part of the letter helps us to appreciate the accomplishments of Constantine and Helena in 'Christianizing' Jerusalem earlier in the century. The other half of the letter provides us with a vivid picture of Egeria's travels in Palestine, the Sinai region, and Anatolia.

During her time in the Holy Land Egeria seems to have made Jerusalem her base. From the Holy City she made several trips to sacred sites in the Sinai and Palestine, traveling by donkey in the company of monks and lodging at monasteries. In the Sinai she climbed on foot to the peak of Mount Sinai to see the place where Moses had supposedly received the Ten Commandments and was shown the supposed 'burning bush' from

which God had spoken to Moses. Travel in the Sinai must have been difficult. For one segment of her journey in this region she had a Roman military escort and may have lodged at fortresses, suggesting that the threat of attacks by Bedouin raiders was real. In one part of the central Sinai the roads disappeared:

There is no road there at all, only the sands of the desert all around. The Pharanites, who are accustomed to move about there with their camels, place markers for themselves here and there. It is by aiming for these markers that they travel by day. At night, however, the camels follow the markers.

Egeria, trans. Gingras, p. 59

After visits to several other Biblical sites in Palestine, Egeria left Jerusalem to begin her journey home. She traveled north on the main Roman road to Antioch and then headed into Mesopotamia to see the shrine of St. Thomas the Apostle at Edessa and the reputed home of the patriarch Abraham at Carrhae, both places located on the Tigris River in present-day Iraq. For this segment of her travels, which brought her to the frontier between Rome and Sassanian Persia, she seems to have lodged, at least part of the time, in Roman inns.

Returning to Antioch, Egeria departed for Constantinople via the main road across Anatolia. But she had one more important shrine to visit, that of St. Thecla in eastern Anatolia. According to the apocryphal (non-canonical) *Acts of Paul*, Thecla was a noblewoman who assisted Paul in his missionary activities. Her shrine was located near Paul's hometown of Tarsus. Egeria's two-day visit to this shrine seems to have been one of the highlights of her three years on the road. She found the site occupied by 'countless monastic cells for men and women' and while there met a 'dear friend,' the deaconess Marthana, whom she had known in Jerusalem and who was now in charge of the nuns residing there. Following her brief stay, Egeria returned to Tarsus and then headed west along the main road to Constantinople. The manuscript abruptly breaks off as, in Constantinople, she writes to her friends back home of her intention to visit the shrine to St. John in nearby Ephesus. Whether she made this visit or whether she returned home remains unknown.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen in this chapter, from the time of the Phoenicians through the Greeks, Romans, and early Christian pilgrims, there was a great expansion of travel in the Mediterranean and Black Sea regions. Increased political order and expanding trade were probably the two most important developments that promoted the surge in travel, a trend that may have weakened somewhat

following the end of the Roman Peace in 200 CE. Until the third century, however, journeys became more frequent and, on average, covered longer distances. Helena and her pilgrim successors remind us that long-distance travel for religious reasons (and probably for other reasons as well) continued to the end of the classical centuries, ca. 500 CE, and indeed beyond.

Important though they were, the trends toward more frequent and longer journeys were not the only significant developments in travel during the classical centuries. The empires established by the Persians, Alexander the Great, and the Romans made travel safer but also subject to more controls. The Phoenicians and the early Greeks suggested the connection between pioneering travel and economic advance. The range of explicit motivations for travel, in sum, broadened, and this (along with improved transportation and more secure political systems) helps explain the broadening of travel itself. Finally, with Herodotus as the chief but not sole example, the emergence of more explicit writing about travel was an important innovation, extending the effects of travel but also providing inspiration for other travelers later on.

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China, Central Asia, and the establishment of the Silk Road, 200 BCE–500 CE

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we make a second and more geographically extensive survey of travel during the classical period. The main theme of this chapter is how travelers from China and Central Asia began to meet counterparts from Rome and the Middle East in places like today's Afghanistan and India during the first century BCE. Although these encounters were not the earliest contacts between China and the Mediterranean region—new evidence points toward limited contacts as early as the sixth century BCE—it is clear that these connections greatly increased during the first century BCE. By this time, Confucian scholars and Roman senators—5,000 miles distant from one another—were connected, if only indirectly, by an expanding network of roads, trails, and sea lanes. For the past century or so, this system has been known as the Silk Road.

A variety of actors played roles in the expansion of Asian travel during the classical period. Indian merchants began to reach out to Southeast Asia via sea voyages in the last centuries BCE, and soon Southeast Asian merchants, from places like present-day Indonesia, were participating as well. The Chinese also undertook voyages to India; at one point, a Chinese emperor sent an expedition to obtain a rhinoceros for his zoo. Romans sailed to India as well, from ports on the Red Sea, seeking spices and particularly pepper. At the height of the Roman empire annual expeditions were organized and groups of Roman merchants actually settled in south India. We will take a closer look at the travel involved here later in this chapter.

But the great travel—and certainly the clearest travel records—in classical Asia involved overland activities. Here, the Chinese took an important lead. More clearly than in the classical Mediterranean, formal state policy became involved in promoting travel. But the Chinese role also generated some of the great individual adventures in the history of premodern travel, raising all the questions about motivations and results that become essential parts of the analysis of these components of world history.

To establish a context for our main theme, we begin the chapter by focusing on travel in China during the reign of Shi Huangdi, China's First Emperor (reigned 221–210 BCE), some of whose policies sparked the beginning of a new era of more frequent and longer journeys by Chinese. We continue the narrative by examining the reigns of two emperors during the succeeding Han dynasty, Gaozu (reigned 202–195 BCE), the founder of the Han line, and Wudi (reigned 140–87 BCE), the greatest of the Han rulers. Key policies of these two emperors were crucial to the establishment of a new kind of travel for Chinese, i.e. journeys across the western borders to Central Asia, the type of travel that ultimately linked the Chinese capital of Changan to Rome and established the Silk Road.

A key section of this chapter will highlight the extraordinary travels of emperor Wudi's great diplomatic envoy, Zhang Qian, the first Chinese to journey extensively among, and write about, the peoples of Central Asia. The intelligence Zhang Qian provided Wudi about the peoples of Central Asia spurred the emperor to project Chinese power westward. Chinese soldiers, diplomats, and merchants soon poured west as never before. Likewise, Central Asian diplomats, traders, and missionaries began to flood into China.

One of the most important aspects of the increased contacts between China and Central Asia was the expansion of trade between the two regions. Central to this burgeoning commerce was the export of silk cloth from China. By the middle of the first century BCE significant quantities of the Chinese-made fabric began to turn up in Rome, a development that we may consider as the opening of the Silk Road. The chapter will conclude with an examination of the growing importance of silk to the Romans and a sampling of Roman travelers who headed east toward China.

CHINESE IMPERIAL POLICY AND TRAVEL

We begin with a pivotal change in the long history of East Asia, namely the establishment of the Chinese empire in 221 BCE. Until this date, the area that is today's China had not been politically unified. Shang kings had ruled much of the Yellow River region, ca. 1600–1100 BCE, but their authority did not reach to the south. Zhou monarchs succeeded the Shang in the Yellow River area, ca. 1100–1250 BCE, but after 750 BCE the power of the Zhou waned. Their kingdom gradually broke into a group of smaller, more effectively governed, and fiercely competitive states.

During the third century BCE, Qin, the westernmost of the states that emerged as the Zhou kingdom unraveled, began to gain against its rivals, partly because of the experience Qin gained in frequent battles against nearby pastoral nomads. Qin's ruler, later to be known as Shi Huangdi or

the 'First Emperor,' led his massive and well-trained infantry, armed with state-of-the-art iron weapons, to victories in the Yellow River area and in the south. As a result, by 221 BCE Qin had conquered and begun to rule most of the area that comprises today's China (Tibet and the western region of Xinjiang were the two main exceptions).

Shi Huangdi's achievement in unifying China was a turning point in the history of travel in East Asia. According to China's first great historian Sima Qian (145–87 BCE), one of the Shi Huangdi's signature projects was the construction of a network of five great tree-lined 'fast roads' that converged on his capital at Xianyang (near today's Xi'an), linking the city to the eastern, southern, and northern regions of the empire (lesser roads led west). These highways, which totaled over 4,000 miles during the Qin era, were built by the combined efforts of peasant conscripts and convict laborers.

In 178 BCE, a Han dynasty official described Shi Huangdi's accomplishment:

The First Emperor ordered the building of post-roads all over the empire, east to the utter-most bounds of Qi and Yen, south to the extremities of Wu and Qu, around lakes and rivers, and along the coasts of seas; so that all was made accessible. These highways were fifty 'feet' wide, and a tree was planted every thirty 'feet' along them. The road was made very thick and firm at the edge, and tamped with metal rammers. The planting of the green pine tree was what gave beauty to the roads.

Cotterell, *China*, p. 171

Han emperors continued and expanded the road system begun during the Qin period, so that by the end of the second century CE China had a network of about 22,000 miles of paved highways (compared to about 48,000 miles for Rome at the same time). The width of the Chinese roads, which sometimes included a special central lane reserved for the emperor, seems to have varied. The Han official quoted above reported fifty feet widths (compared to the Roman average of about fifteen to eighteen feet). But this measurement likely applied to roads only as they neared the capital. In outlying regions the roads were probably narrower. Although the roads described by the Han official were not as sturdy as those built by the Romans, segments of the Qin-Han network have survived to the present and can be seen today in northern China.

One key reason for establishing the imperial highway system was the need of the First Emperor and his Han successors to dispatch their soldiers to various outlying regions, as was true of the somewhat earlier Persian system. A second consideration, alluded to by the Han official above, was the need to convey edicts to the provinces and to obtain information

about conditions in areas distant from the capital. By the end of the second century CE, Chinese emperors ruled a population of about 50 million spread over 1,500,000 square miles of territory. Accordingly, like the Persians before them, and like their Roman contemporaries, the Qin-Han emperors established an elaborate courier network to facilitate empire-wide communications. Good highways were crucial to the functioning of this system.

By the middle of the Han period, this communications network, which featured teams of horse riders and relay runners, had become quite sophisticated. As we have seen in Chapter 3, the Roman system had two types of stations, one for obtaining fresh mounts and another for overnight lodging. The Chinese network had three kinds of offices and they were spaced at shorter intervals than was true of their Roman counterparts. Post offices, where records were kept of the messages carried, were located every few miles along the Chinese highways. The messages were written on narrow strips of thin wood and carried in bamboo tubes that featured a type of spring lock. Cantonal offices, where soldiers guarding the roads were based, were established at intervals of every six miles or so. Postal stations, where couriers could find fresh mounts and overnight accommodations, were to be found every ten miles. The postal stations also included cells for prisoners being transported under guard and, in some cases, private inns for travelers who were not entitled to use the governmental facilities.

The geographical range of the Chinese network was far-reaching. By 77 BCE messages were being carried as far west as Loulan in today's Xinjiang province and as far south as the border of today's Myanmar (Burma). Toward the end of the first century CE, tropical fruits, such as lichees from the region around today's Guangzhou in southern China, were being sent via couriers to the imperial palace complex in Changan (today's Xi'an), a distance of 1,200 or 1,300 miles.

We lack information about the speed of the couriers during the Qin-Han period but later records, from the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE), are suggestive. During the Tang era, the fastest horses on the imperial roads could cover 150 miles in twenty-four hours, a speed that was probably little different from that in the Qin-Han centuries. Similarly, during the Tang centuries couriers traveling the 1,200 or 1,300 miles from the capital at Changan to Guangzhou in southern China (the 'lichee route' in reverse) typically reached their destination in nine to fourteen days, a speed that probably applied in the Qin-Han period as well.

A third function of the highway system was to make it easier for emperors to tour and inspect their realm. As we have seen in regard to Rome, 'imperial passages' were an important way of demonstrating the authority of the emperor in regions far from the capital. The tours were also intended for information gathering. During his reign as emperor, Shi Huangdi undertook five such expeditions to key locations in northern

China. On each of these trips he was accompanied by a huge entourage of officials who were conveyed in a long train of chariots and carriages. Detachments of soldiers traveled on foot. At each stop along the way, local officials were charged with providing hospitality.

Several of Shi Huangdi's journeys as emperor also included pilgrimages to mountains that were regarded as sacred by the Chinese. Long before the time of the First Emperor, five mountains in northern China had come to be thought of as numinous. The most revered of these peaks was Mt. Tai in Shandong province. Why the mountains were regarded in this way is unclear. One hypothesis holds that, as lowlanders, the Chinese came to see the mountains as their natural protectors.

In the first of his imperial journeys, made in 220 BCE, Shi Huangdi toured the western territories of the empire, perhaps because this area was most vulnerable to attacks by pastoral nomads. A year later, he went on an extensive tour of the provinces to the east. During this expedition, he climbed five mountains, including Mt. Tai. While on Mt. Tai, Shi Huangdi performed the sacred rituals addressed to Heaven and Earth known as the *feng* and *shan* sacrifices. Before departing the mountain, he had a stone tablet (stele) set up with an inscription praising his accomplishments.

During the remaining years of his reign, the First Emperor went on three more tours that included visits to sacred mountains. On the third of these trips, in 210 BCE, he died. But he had one more journey to make. Because Shi Huangdi's advisors feared an uprising against imperial authority, they decided to keep his death a secret until they could return to the capital and install his son as successor. Here is Sima Qian's account of what followed:

The coffin was placed in a carriage that could be opened up for cooling or closed for warmth, with the ruler's oldest and most trusted eunuchs riding in attendance. At each stopping place, food was delivered to the carriage. The various officials continued as before to submit matters for the emperor's approval, and at such times the eunuchs would immediately approve them and hand them down from the closed carriage. Only the emperor's son Huhai, Zhao Gao, and five or six of the trusted eunuchs knew that the emperor had died. ...

The party proceeded from Jingxing to Jiuyuan, but as the weather was hot, the body of the emperor in the closed carriage began to smell. An imperial order was issued to the accompanying officials ordering them to load each of their carriages with a picul's weight of dried fish so as to disguise the odor. In this way they proceeded by the Straight Road to Xianyang, where the mourning was announced. The heir apparent Huhai ascended the throne and is known as the Second Emperor [reigned 210–206 BCE].

Sima Qian, *Qin Dynasty*, pp. 62–63

Although Huhai succeeded his father as emperor, the fears of the Qin courtiers were soon realized. Within a few years, an armed uprising resulted in the overthrow of the Second Emperor and the establishment of the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE). Interestingly enough, Liu Bang, the leader of the anti-Qin forces and the first Han emperor, known subsequently as emperor Gaozu, started out as an official in charge of policing a section of the imperial highway system.

* * *

Once in power, however, Emperor Gaozu seems to have had little time to devote to the roads that he had once policed. Apart from consolidating his authority internally, his biggest immediate challenge was in foreign policy, i.e. the growing military threat posed by the Xiongnu, the pastoral nomads then based in Mongolia. Under the leadership of their *shanyu* (king) Modun (reigned 209–174 BCE), the Xiongnu had united many of the nomads on the grasslands north of China into a large and formidable army of skilled horse archers. In response to this ominous development, Gaozu led an army of peasant soldiers into the northern border region. A fierce battle ensued, which the nomads won. While doing so, they also came very close to taking the emperor captive. Following this stunning defeat, Gaozu negotiated an historic peace settlement with the Xiongnu, one that shaped relations between the Chinese and the nomads for many centuries to come and also had major implications for travel by Chinese to Central Asia.

In the light of his defeat by the Xiongnu, it was probably inevitable that Gaozu would have to make significant concessions to obtain peace with the nomads. One provision of the resulting agreement, named the 'Peace and Friendship' accords by the Chinese, stipulated that the two parties were not to violate their common border. This clause was probably the chief goal of the Chinese in the negotiations. But the remaining three provisions realized key aims of the nomads: (1) the two parties were to treat each other as equals; (2) the Chinese would send annual 'gifts' of silk, wine, rice, and other goods to the nomads; and (3) the Chinese would send a 'princess' (a lady of the court) to the nomads to become one of the wives of the *shanyu*.

The Peace and Friendship accords established a basic framework of relations between the Chinese and the nomads that lasted, despite breakdowns, for about 150 years. They also mark the beginning of Chinese travel to Central Asia. Until this agreement was made, there is very little evidence of travel by Chinese to destinations in the prairies of Central Asia to the north and west. One type of evidence suggesting such travel in earlier times is the presence of jade ritual objects in Shang and Zhou tombs. The ore from which these objects were carved was not from China; it came from a river in the region of the Taklamakan Desert located far to the west of the Shang and Zhou borders.

How the jade ore from the Taklamakan region was transported to the Yellow River region, a distance of at least 1,200 miles, cannot be established with certainty. It is unlikely that traders from either China or the Taklamakan region carried the ore the entire distance. A more probable scenario is one in which the jade was transported via the type of relay system or down-the-line-exchange that Herodotus described in Chapter 2. As we have seen, in such networks objects, often rarities, were carried long distances by being passed from community to community rather than being carried by long-distance travelers.

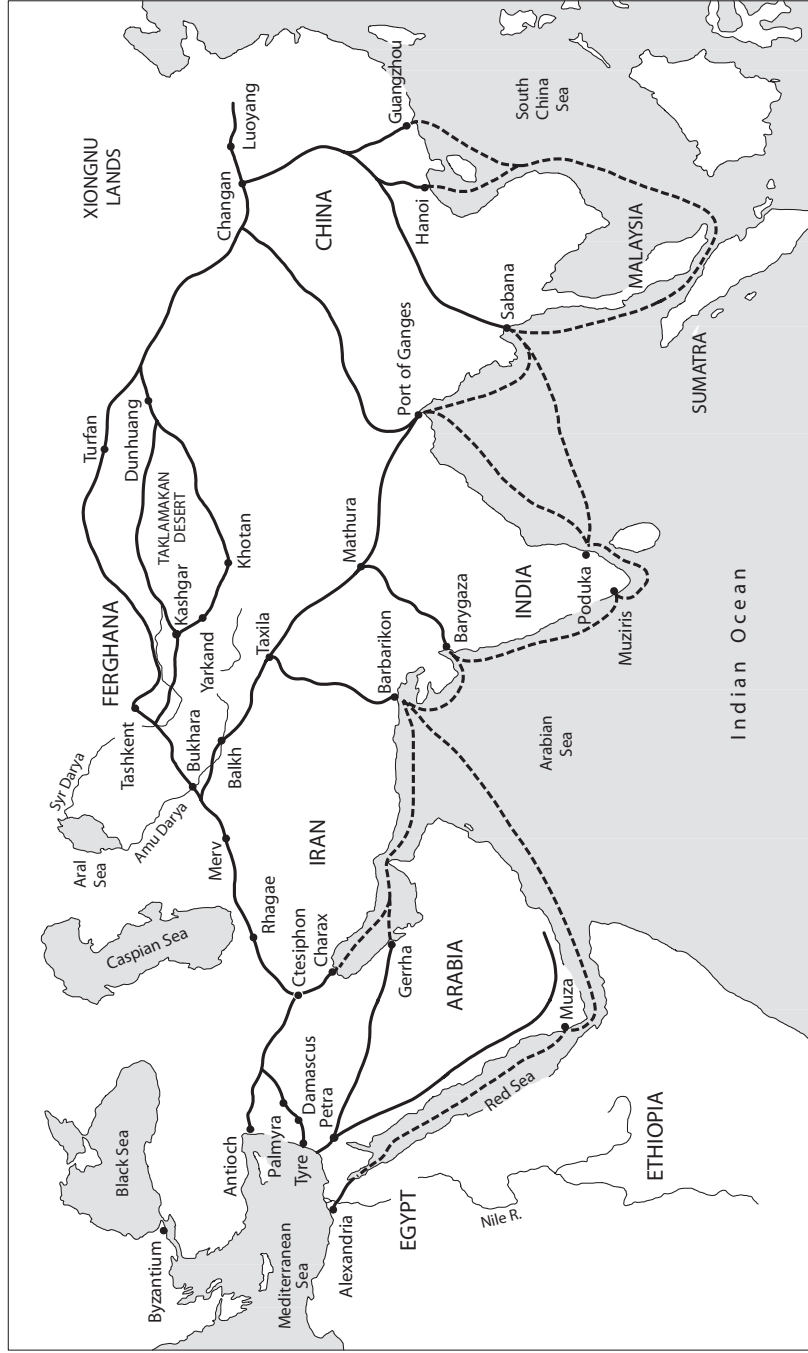
The implementation of the Peace and Friendship accords between the Han emperors and the Xiongnu provides us with clearer evidence of extensive travel by Chinese. Carrying out the terms of the agreement with the nomads required the emperors to send silk and other goods, probably conveyed in Chinese caravans, at least as far as the border of the empire, where they could be unloaded and turned over to the nomads. It is not known whether some of these caravans crossed the border and proceeded into the grasslands to make the handover, but this possibility cannot be ruled out.

There can be no doubt, however, regarding the travels of the Chinese princesses who were dispatched to each new *shanyu* as part of the treaty agreement. These court ladies and their entourages may be considered the first Chinese travelers to Central Asia for whom we have any real documentary evidence. Although the information about them that survives is very limited, we know that their one-way journeys to the grasslands of Central Asia proved irresistible to Chinese poets. The historian Ban Gu (32–92 CE) provides us with a poem about one of them, a late second century BCE court lady named Xizhun who was sent to the Wusun tribe near Lake Balkash in today's Kazakhstan:

My family has married me
In this far corner of the world
Sent me to a strange land,
To the king of the Wusun.
A yurt [tent] is my chamber,
Felt my walls,
Flesh my only food,
Kumiss [fermented mare's milk] to drink
My thoughts are all of home,
My heart aches within,
O to be the yellow crane
Winging home again!

Watson, *Early Chinese Literature*, p. 286

The poem, which vividly conveys the disdain of the Chinese for the nomads, is all the information we have about the life of princess Xizhun.



Map 2 The Silk Road

Presumably, this Chinese pioneer of cross-cultural travel lived out her years at the Wusun court.

EMPEROR WUDI AND ZHANG QIAN

The emperor who dispatched princess Xizhun to the nomads was Wudi (reigned 140–87 BCE). His long reign was in many ways the crucial period of the Han era. This was certainly true of his policies toward the nomads and his promotion of Chinese travel to Central Asia. Early in Wudi's reign, confident of the effectiveness of the Chinese army and dissatisfied with periodic violations of the Peace and Friendship accords by the Xiongnu, the emperor launched a new and aggressive policy toward the nomads. His new 'forward' stance was significant because it projected Chinese military power deep into Central Asia and led to the opening of the Silk Road. Let us now turn to an examination of Wudi's policies and their importance for Chinese travel to Central Asia, drawing once more from Sima Qian.

According to Sima Qian, Wudi conceived the idea of hemming in the Xiongnu by forming an alliance with other nomad tribes who might stand to gain from such an arrangement. To implement this strategy, the emperor decided to act boldly. He announced a plan to send a diplomatic mission far into Central Asia to form an anti-Xiongnu alliance with the Yuezhi nomads, then based in the grasslands of today's Uzbekistan, the region known to the Persians and Greeks as Sogdia. As we have seen in Chapter 3, two centuries earlier Alexander had campaigned extensively here, leaving garrisons and new cities in his wake. Located about 2,500 miles west of the Chinese capital Changan, no known Chinese had ever traveled there. Indeed, at this time the Chinese had only the vaguest knowledge, often wrapped in legends and mythology, of the areas west of their borders.

Wudi chose the Yuezhi as potential allies because he had learned from the interrogation of Xiongnu POW's that the Xiongnu and the Yuezhi were adversaries. According to his informants, the Xiongnu had recently captured the Yuezhi king and made his skull into a drinking cup. Following this humiliating turn of events, the Yuezhi had fled west to the Uzbek area.

Hoping to turn the enmity between the two groups of nomads to his own advantage, Wudi sent out a call for volunteers to lead a mission to the Yuezhi. Among those who answered the emperor's appeal was an official named Zhang Qian. Well-known for his 'great strength, determination, and generosity,' Zhang Qian was selected to head the delegation. As we shall soon see, at least two of these three virtues would serve him very well in the years to come.

Zhang Qian set out on his journey accompanied by more than a hundred men. The party included a Xiongnu slave named Ganfu who is

mentioned several times in Sima Qian's account of the expedition. According to Sima Qian, Ganfu was a skilled archer whose ability as a hunter came in handy when food supplies ran low. The Xiongnu slave probably also served as a guide and translator as the delegation proceeded into Central Asia.

Sima Qian provides us with no information about the specifics of how Zhang Qian and his party traveled to Central Asia. The road leading west from Changan during the reign of Wudi was probably not much more than a trail. (As we have seen earlier, the First Emperor concentrated on the construction of roads leading in other directions.) A famous painting from the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE) shows Zhang Qian departing the capital with horses loaded with baggage. Perhaps he and the others traveled most of the way on horseback, accompanied by various kinds of pack animals carrying provisions and gear. Bactrian camels (the two-humped variety), which were used in northern China at this time, would have been especially valuable because of their ability to travel long distances without water and because of their strength. A mature camel can carry a load of several hundred pounds balanced in two panniers (much more than a horse or donkey), cargo that could include water. Whatever the choice of animals, we can be certain that the delegation headed west at a speed of about three miles an hour and covered, at best, twenty-five miles a day. As for overnight accommodations, the party probably counted on the hospitality of local officials until they reached the Chinese border. West of the border, they were probably on their own. Perhaps their pack animals carried tents.

Sima Qian also tells us nothing about the route that Zhang Qian and his party followed as they headed west. However, we can be reasonably confident that they took the same route that present-day Chinese use when traveling west from Xi'an by train, bus, or, increasingly, by car. We may imagine that Zhang Qian and his group followed the main Chinese highway west, ferrying across the Yellow River where it turns north at today's Lanzhou. They would have proceeded northwest through the Gansu Corridor to the border of the fearsome Taklamakan Desert (the name means 'those who enter do not return') and the western frontier of the Han empire.

We cannot be as certain regarding their route westward from the Chinese border across Central Asia. They might have followed one of the routes that skirts the Taklamakan to the north or south, stopping at oases along the way. Alternatively, they could have decided to follow a more northerly route, one that would have taken them through the lush grasslands of the Ili River valley. There was, however, a major drawback connected with the northern route: the much greater likelihood of being victimized by predatory nomads. Indeed, that is exactly what happened to the Chinese travelers.

Sima Qian tells us that as Zhang Qian and his party headed west, they were attacked by Xiongnu and subsequently held captive for ten years. During this period, the Xiongnu provided Zhang Qian with a wife, by whom he had a son. Then, after more than a decade among the nomads, Zhang Qian, his wife and son, his slave Ganfu, and perhaps other members of his original traveling party escaped from their captors. Rather than return home and face Wudi empty-handed, Zhang Qian and his party, amazingly, resumed their journey west.

Traveling west for twenty or thirty days, they reached the small Central Asian 'kingdom' of Dayuan located in the lush Ferghana Valley 2,000 miles distant from the Chinese capital, a region that is today divided between Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Here, according to Sima Qian, the group was welcomed by the king who expressed an interest in establishing diplomatic relations with China. According to Sima Qian, Zhang Qian promised the king 'countless gifts' from the Chinese if he would provide guides to the land of the Yuezhi. The king responded with guides and translators and the group proceeded on.

More than a decade after his journey had begun, Zhang Qian reached the home of the Yuezhi in the Uzbek (Sogdian) grasslands. Sima Qian tells us that Zhang Qian met with the ruler of the Yuezhi to propose an alliance against the Xiongnu. However, the Yuezhi leader showed no interest in such a plan because his lands were 'rich and fertile and seldom troubled by invaders.' Why pick a fight with a powerful (and distant) force like the Xiongnu? But the Chinese diplomat was not ready to give up. Sima Qian tells us that the Yuezhi had recently established authority over the land of Daxia south of the Amu Darya (Oxus) River in today's Afghanistan and northern Pakistan. As we have seen, the northern sector of this region was known to the Persians and Greeks as Bactria; they called the southern sector Gandhara. Ferrying across the Amu Darya, Zhang Qian and his party spent about a year in northern Afghanistan. He may have hoped that if they remained in the vicinity of the Yuezhi for a time, the king might change his mind and agree to an alliance with the Chinese. Or, realizing that his journey west was close to its endpoint, he may have crossed the Amu Darya out of curiosity.

Zhang Qian's movements during his year south of the Amu Darya are unknown, but the one thing we do know with reasonable certainty is quite interesting: he visited Balkh, the great oasis city and commercial crossroads that had once served as Alexander's headquarters in the region. In the markets of Balkh, Zhang Qian saw bamboo canes and cloth from southwestern China. When he inquired about how the Chinese goods had come to the area, he was told: 'Our merchants go to buy them in Shen-tu [India].' Here is the earliest documentary evidence of a trade route leading from southwest China to India, and then on to Central Asia.

When a year passed and the Yuezhi king had still not shown any interest in the Chinese offer, Zhang Qian decided to return to the Chinese capital. Sima Qian tells us he chose a more southerly route for the home-ward journey—doubtless to avoid capture again by the Xiongnu. Despite these precautions, as Zhang Qian and his party headed east toward Changan they were captured a second time by the Xiongnu. This second period of captivity, however, lasted only about a year. In the midst of an internal dispute among the Xiongnu, Zhang Qian, his wife, and Ganfu, the latter no longer a slave, fled their captors and resumed their journey back to the Chinese capital.

In 126 BCE, thirteen years after setting out for Central Asia, Zhang Qian returned to the Han capital, having traveled well over 6,000 miles. Of the more than one hundred members of the original delegation, only Zhang Qian and Ganfu survived the journey. In recognition of their extraordinary efforts, Wudi conferred honors upon both of them. Zhang Qian was promoted to the post of Palace Counselor and Ganfu was awarded the title, ‘Lord Who Completes His Mission.’

ZHANG QIAN'S REPORT

Although Zhang Qian had been unable to establish alliance with the Yuezhi, his journey proved immensely valuable to Wudi. Zhang Qian returned to the capital with the earliest first-hand account by a Chinese about the lands and peoples of Central Asia. In some ways, the report Zhang Qian submitted to Wudi detailing his observations in Central Asia resembles the letters Christopher Columbus addressed to the rulers of Spain about conditions in the Caribbean around 1500. In effect, Zhang Qian's most important achievement was the ‘discovery’ of Central Asia for the Chinese. Let us now turn to this document as summarized by Sima Qian (the full version having disappeared long ago).

Zhang Qian's report reads like a carefully crafted intelligence memorandum written to inform the emperor about military, political, and economic circumstances in the regions he had visited or had learned about from others. As we have seen in Chapter 3, Herodotus seems to have written about his travels partly to entertain. There is no hint of such an aim in Zhang Qian's report. The Chinese envoy is all business. Here, for example, is part of his famous section on the Ferghana Valley:

Dayuan lies southwest of the territory of the Xiongnu, some 10,000 *li* [about 3,000 miles, an exaggeration] west of China. The people are settled on the land, plowing the fields and growing rice and wheat. They also make wine out of grapes. The region has many fine horses that sweat blood [perhaps as a result of insect bites]; their forebears

are supposed to have been foaled from heavenly horses. The people live in houses in fortified cities, there being seventy or more cities of various sizes in the region. The population numbers several hundred thousand. The people fight with bows and spears and can shoot from horseback.

Sima Qian, *Han Dynasty*, II, p. 233

From Wudi's point of view, Zhang Qian's passages on Ferghana were probably the highlight of the report. To implement his new forward policy against the Xiongnu, the Chinese needed stronger horses for his cavalry units. Wudi raised horses in large breeding parks but they were not as hardy as those ridden by the nomads. As we shall see, access to the 'blood-sweating' and 'heavenly' steeds from the rich pastures in the Ferghana region helped to fill this gap in the emperor's military arsenal.

The remaining sections of Zhang Qian's report are similar to those on Ferghana in their focus on matters that would be of serious concern to a ruler with an ambitious foreign policy agenda. Potential allies among the nomads, such as the Yuezhi on the Uzbek steppe and the Wusun in the Lake Balkash region, are discussed mainly in terms of their military strengths.

Although Zhang Qian did not venture as far as India, Persia, or Mesopotamia, these lands appear in his report from information provided to him by (unidentified) informants in Central Asia. His brief notes about these areas—their earliest appearance in Chinese writing—are too limited to be of much value, but they do contain enough information to indicate the probable existence of travel networks linking Central Asia to these regions. As a result of Zhang Qian's journey and subsequent report to emperor Wudi, the traffic on these networks—now extended to China—soon increased.

FROM 'PEACE AND FRIENDSHIP' TO THE TRIBUTARY SYSTEM

Zhang Qian's mission was one aspect of Emperor Wudi's newly aggressive approach to the Xiongnu. Wudi used the information in Zhang Qian's report to begin a series of military offensives against the Xiongnu. The emperor's aim was to drive the Xiongnu away from China's western border and secure the routes running west from Changan to Ferghana, the home of the 'heavenly horses.' By 100 BCE, after much hard fighting, Wudi had largely achieved this goal. The oases bordering the Taklamakan Desert were now under Chinese control for the first time. In addition, the Chinese had gained *de facto* control of Ferghana, which now became a Chinese client state.

The expansion of Han military power had major implications for travel by Chinese. Sima Qian tells us that as the Chinese build-up in the Taklamakan region unfolded, Wudi sent numerous envoys and embassies

farther west to visit potential allies and trade partners in India, Persia, and Mesopotamia. Although we are given no specifics about these travel missions, Sima Qian's account is plausible. According to him, six to ten delegations departed the capital annually. The parties often included several hundred members and frequently spent many years on the road. In response, many of the countries visited by the Chinese delegations sent missions of their own to the court of Wudi.

The increasing contacts and exchanges with Central Asian peoples brought important changes to China. Trade missions to Ferghana returned with increasing numbers of 'heavenly horses,' boosting the strength of the Chinese cavalry and exciting the imagination of poets. A poem from 101 BCE, which may have been written by Wudi, conveys the strong feelings aroused by the handsome animals:

The Heavenly horses are coming,
Coming from the Far West.
They crossed the Flowing Sands,
For the barbarians are conquered. ...
The Heavenly Horses are coming
Across the pastureless wilds
A thousand leagues at a stretch,
Following the eastern road. ...
The Heavenly Horses have come
And the Dragon will follow in their wake.
I shall reach the Gates of Heaven,
I shall see the Palace of God.

Waley, *'Heavenly Horses,'* p. 96

Wudi seems to have believed that when he died the divine horses would convey him to Heaven, a view that may also have been widespread among the Han aristocracy. Tombs unearthed from the Han period have yielded large numbers of sculptured horses of various sizes. Perhaps, like emperor Wudi, the deceased believed that their horses would transport them to the Sacred Hereafter.

Horse imports accelerated in the decades following Wudi's reign. To consolidate their position in the Taklamakan region, Wudi's successors expanded the chain of fortified checkpoints along the main routes that he had begun. The wind-eroded remains of some of these structures are still visible today. Garrisons were constructed in oases so the soldiers could grow their own food. In 60 BCE, to coordinate overall policy in the conquered territories, the Chinese created the office of Protector General of the Western Regions. These measures gave the emperors who followed Wudi a firm grip on the Taklamakan region and led to major changes in the Peace and Friendship accords.

Between 53 and 51 BCE the Chinese and the Xiongnu negotiated a new set of agreements, called the ‘tributary system’ by the Chinese, to govern their relations. The new framework stipulated that instead of gaining a Chinese princess for marriage, the Xiongnu *shanyu*, or his representative, was now required to travel to the Han court and pay homage to the emperor. In addition, the nomad ruler was obliged to send one of his sons to the emperor’s court to reside there as a hostage. Finally, the *shanyu* was required to send ‘tribute,’ usually horses and cattle, to the emperor in exchange for ‘gifts’ of silk and gold. Although in centuries to come the military strength of the Xiongnu gradually faded, the tributary system governed relations between the Chinese and their various nomad neighbors until about 1750 (despite periodic breakdowns).

The tributary system was clearly a product of the growth of Chinese military power, but the new set of arrangements was far from one-sided. Indeed, the nomads derived much from their new understanding with the Chinese. As the new system went into operation, trade between the Chinese and the nomads—disguised by the Chinese as the exchange of ‘gifts’ and ‘tribute’ payments—flourished as never before. The two key commodities in the accelerated trade were silk produced by the Chinese and horses raised by the nomads. One side of this trade, in its early stages, is illustrated in the following table:

Chinese ‘Gifts’ of silk to the Xiongnu		
Year (bce)	Silk Floss (Catties)	Silk Fabric (Pieces)
51	6,000	8,000
49	8,000	9,000
33	16,000	18,000
25	20,000	20,000
1	30,000	30,000

Note: 1 catty = 1/2 lb.

Although we lack comparable data for horses to China during the period, there can be no doubt that they grew in tandem with the silk exports.

NOVELTIES IN CHINA

Many other novelties from the west, in addition to the growing numbers of horses, reached China during the Han era, brought by anonymous travelers using the routes first secured by Wudi. Soon after the return of Zhang Qian, Sima Qian tells us that grapes and alfalfa from Ferghana were introduced into China:

The people [of Ferghana] love their wine and the horses love their alfalfa. The Han envoys brought back grape and alfalfa seeds to China and the emperor for the first time tried growing these plants in areas of rich soil. Later, when the Han acquired large numbers of the 'heavenly horses' and the envoys from foreign states began to arrive with their retinues, the lands on all sides of the emperor's summer palaces and pleasure towers were planted with grapes and alfalfa as far as the eye could see.

Sima Qian, *Han Dynasty*, II, p. 245

From Persia came 'eggs as large as pots' (perhaps ostrich eggs) and entertainers who were 'very skillful at performing tricks.' Here is Sima Qian again:

When the Han envoys [to Persia] set out again to return to China, the king [of Persia] dispatched envoys of his own to accompany them, and after the latter had visited China and reported on its great breadth and might, the king sent some of the eggs of the great birds which live in the region, and skilled tricksters of Lixian [near the Caspian Sea], to the Han court as gifts. ... After the skills of the foreign magicians and tricksters had been imported into China, the wrestling matches and displays of unusual feats [sponsored by Emperor Wudi] developed and improved each year, and from this time on became increasingly popular.

Sima Qian, *Han Dynasty*, II, p. 243

THE ARRIVAL OF BUDDHISM

In long-term perspective, the coming of Buddhism was probably the most important innovation for the Chinese that resulted from Zhang Qian's journey and the subsequent surge in traffic from Central Asia. Buddhism first trickled into China around 50 BCE, brought by monks and merchants whose journeys began in India, Central Asia, and Persia. Around 150 CE monks in Luoyang, the Yellow River city that served as the Chinese capital during the second half of the Han dynasty (25–220 CE), established the first center for translating Buddhist teachings from Sanskrit into Chinese. Given the abstractness of the texts and the vast differences between the two languages, the work of translation must have been very difficult.

The leading translators at Luoyang were Persians, Indians, and a variety of Central Asians who had traveled to China to spread the teachings of the Buddha. A few of their names survive (in their Chinese forms). The head of the Luoyang translation project was a Persian monk named An Shigao. He arrived in Luoyang in 148 CE and spent the next twenty years engaged in translation work. One of An Shigao's most important collaborators, An

Xuan, was also a Persian, having come to Luoyang as a merchant. By the end of the century, other expatriate translators, from India and Daxia, were working in Luoyang, now assisted by Chinese.

Small in number and led by expatriates, the Han dynasty Buddhist community had little or no impact on most Chinese. But the second-century translations were an important first step. In later periods, as we shall see, Buddhist teachings were increasingly accepted by Chinese and spread widely, becoming a major force in both elite and popular culture.

CHINA, THE NOMADS, AND ROME: THE SILK ROAD

In reviewing the impact on the Chinese of the increased contacts and exchanges with Central Asian peoples, we have omitted at least one important issue, namely, the fate of the large quantities of silk that the Chinese sent to the Xiongnu. What became of the luxury fabric? The answer to this question will take us on a journey from China across Central Asia to Rome, where some of the fine cloth reached its ultimate destination.

Nomad rulers used silk in much the way that Chinese emperors did. They clothed themselves in beautiful robes to set themselves apart from their subjects, thereby reinforcing their political authority. Like Chinese emperors, they also rewarded favored subordinates with robes of silk, solidifying the type of patron–client relationships that many elites—past and present—rely upon. But the nomads received far more silk than they could ever use in these ways. So, again like Chinese emperors, they used silk as a diplomatic tool in their relations with other nomad tribes and also used it in trade. As a result, large quantities of silk entered into the type of relay network, or down-the-line exchange, of which we saw evidence in connection with the transport of jade to China during the Shang and Zhou periods.

As we saw in the case of the jade, we know that the ore traveled a long distance to get to the early Chinese kingdoms, but we lack any real evidence about how this happened. In the case of the silk, the picture is clearer, although not as sharply focused as we would prefer.

Scholars agree that deep in their past the Chinese invented sericulture, the technique of producing cloth from the fiber secreted by a certain kind of worm (the *Bombyx mori*) for its cocoon, and retained a monopoly over this process until about 500 CE. Accordingly, silk found outside of China during the classical period implies some kind of contact with the Chinese. We have already seen how Chinese data illustrate the rise of silk exports to the Xiongnu in the first century BCE. But we have not yet addressed the issue of how far west the silk traveled.

Recent research by archaeologists and textile historians indicates that small amounts of Chinese silk reached the Middle East (Persia), the

Danube region, and the Aegean area by the sixth century BCE, probably via a northern route through the grasslands that connected to the Black Sea. But the quantities of silk were quite limited. The real influx of Chinese silk into the Mediterranean came later. Scattered references by Roman writers suggest that silk in quantity entered the Mediterranean region during the first century BCE. Florus, a Roman historian of the second century CE, claims that at a key battle between the Romans and the Persians in 53 BCE (a major defeat for the Romans), the Persian army had ‘standards with gold and silken pennons.’ But Florus wrote long after this battle; perhaps he is not entirely reliable on a detail like silk banners. A second Roman historian, Dio Cassius, tells us that around 50 BCE Julius Caesar sponsored a lavish festival during which he provided silk canopies to shield his guests from the sun. However, like Florus, Dio, who lived in the third century CE, wrote long after the events he describes, perhaps undercutting his credibility.

If Florus and Dio are somewhat shaky as evidence for silk in Rome during the first century BCE, other writers make it clear that by the early stages of the Roman Peace (ca. 1–200 CE) silk was not only present but was also a subject of controversy. Here is Seneca, the writer and moralist of the first century:

I see there raiments of silk—if that can be called raiment, which provides nothing that could possibly afford protection for the body, or indeed modesty, so that, when a woman wears it, she can scarcely, with a clear conscience, swear that she is not naked.

Seneca, *Moral Essays*, III, trans. Basore, p. 479

Writing a little later than Seneca, Tacitus, one of Rome’s finest historians, records the outcome of a debate in the Senate regarding the wearing of silk:

The use of gold plate for private entertainments was prohibited, and so were the silk clothes into which male costume had degenerated.

Tacitus, *Annals of Imperial Rome*, trans. Grant, p. 92

Our final piece of evidence regarding silk during the early empire comes from Suetonius, the second-century CE historian who wrote a classic series of biographies of Roman rulers. Suetonius’ account of Caligula (reigned 37–41 CE), one of the most notorious emperors, records the Roman ruler’s defiance of Roman law and masculine convention:

Caligula paid no attention to traditional or current fashions in his dress; ignoring male conventions and even the human decencies. Often he made public appearances in a cloak covered with embroidery and

encrusted with precious stones, a long-sleeved tunic and bracelets; or in silk (which men were forbidden by law to wear) or even in a woman's robe. ...

Suetonius, *Twelve Caesars*, trans. Graves, pp. 179–80

The Romans knew that silk came from somewhere in the east, but they knew nothing else regarding its provenance. For the Romans, the eastern border of the 'known world' ended somewhere in India. We have no evidence of a Roman going to China and returning home. However, such a journey would not have been impossible and may in fact have occurred more than once. Chinese historical records record a visit by a delegation of 'Romans' to the Chinese capital of Luoyang in 166 CE. The Chinese account states that the visitors from the west traveled via the Indian Ocean. Although there is no confirmation in Roman records of an embassy to the Chinese capital, enterprising merchants from the Mediterranean might have traveled by sea to China and represented themselves as ambassadors. Did the Roman travelers return home? Neither Chinese nor Roman records contain any information to help us answer this question.

If we lack evidence of a round trip journey from Rome to China, we may nevertheless conclude this chapter with a brief examination of two Roman travelers who went about half-way (to India), one by traveling overland and the other by sea. Isidore of Charax was a Greek merchant involved in the east–west trade across Persia during the latter decades of the first century BCE. His home city of Charax was located at the head of the Persian Gulf and was part of the hotly contested border region between Rome and Parthian Persia (Parthian dynasty, 250 BCE–224 CE). Our only evidence about Isidore's travels is a brief document known as the *Parthian Stations*, a list of the itinerary he followed from Antioch in Roman Syria across Mesopotamia and Persia as far as Kandahar in today's Afghanistan (then under Parthian authority). According to the *Parthian Stations*, the trip took more than three months to complete and seems to have covered nearly 3,000 miles (although the air distance between the two cities is only about 1,700 miles).

Isidore's record of the network of inns stretching from the Mediterranean coast and across the Persian plateau to the border of India, with distances between them specified, is strong evidence of one means by which silk sent from China across Central Asia was subsequently carried westward. Isidore and the many other merchant travelers who passed through Parthian Persia probably used the major east–west artery known as the Khorasan road, then more than 500 years old, and conveyed their goods in donkey caravans, a method of transporting commodities that, as we have seen in Chapter 2, was well established by 2000 BCE. In effect, Isidore provides us with the Silk Road's missing link. His brief itinerary enables us to see how Chinese silk that reached Central Asia then made its way across Persia and Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean.

The maritime counterpart to the *Parthian Stations* is a brief handbook by an anonymous sea captain, also Greek-speaking, based in Alexandria during the first century CE. Known as the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (Guidebook to the Indian Ocean), this little manual provides information—for the most part, based on first-hand observation—about sailing conditions and commercial opportunities from the Red Sea and the East African coast eastward to India. The *Periplus* was clearly written for the many other Roman ship captains and maritime merchants who plowed the waters of the Arabian Sea during the first centuries of the Common Era.

From the *Periplus* we learn that ships from Roman ports on Egypt's Red Sea coast made regular voyages down the African coast to trade for ivory, tortoise shell, frankincense, and myrrh. At Arabian ports they picked up frankincense, myrrh, and aloe, as well as numerous products transshipped from India, i.e. pepper and other spices, gems of various kinds, and cloth made from cotton and silk.

It is also clear from the *Periplus* that by the first century there were many voyages from Red Sea ports that terminated in Indian harbors. Sometimes these sailings were direct, as opposed to journeys that hugged the coasts. By this time Roman ship captains understood the monsoon wind patterns that shape sailing conditions throughout the Indian Ocean region. Shooting across open water to Indian harbors during the summer months could save much time and, if properly scheduled, make possible a relatively quick return.

Included among the many commodities in the commerce across the Arabian Sea trade listed in the *Periplus* is silk. Shipped by caravan from China, the fabric is mentioned in connection with four Indian ports. Silk cloth and yarn were available at Barbarikon at the mouth of the Indus River, at Barygaza on India's northwest coast, and at Muziris on the southwest (Malabar) coast. The most interesting of the references to silk in the *Periplus* are associated with a port named Ganges on the east coast of India near the mouth of the river of the same name. Here is the *Periplus*:

Beyond this region ... where the sea ends somewhere on the outer fringe, there is a very great inland city called Thina [China] from which the silk floss, yarn, and cloth are shipped by land via Bactria to Barygaza and via the Ganges River back to Limyrike [the Malabar coast]. It is not easy to get to this Thina: for rarely do people come from it, and only a few. ...

Periplus, trans. Casson, p. 91

This passage from the *Periplus* provides us with not only the first reference to China in a western language, but also with evidence confirming that by the first century of the Common Era a great diversity of intrepid travelers,

most of whose names are lost forever, had established connections between China and Rome. Caligula's togas symbolized one small aspect of changes that reached from the Mediterranean basin to the Yellow River valley.

CONCLUSION: THE WORLD HISTORY CONTEXT

Asian travel—including Roman travel to Asia—both revealed and promoted significant changes in world history during the classical period. The trade links were obvious: many travelers directly focused on trade, particularly silk, and the results formed an important if subordinate part of the economies of several societies. Travel also connected representatives of established states, notably China, with nomadic groups, another key kind of contact. Travel furthered cultural connections as well, as the transmission of Buddhism to Central Asia and China demonstrates. Official Chinese sponsorship of travel was a vital sign of the growing importance of the Chinese state but also of its recognition of the diplomatic as well as commercial importance of travel. While some of these contacts would be disrupted by the fall of the Han dynasty in China and the later collapse of Rome, the utility of the connections was not forgotten. Other travelers would soon pick up the task of restoring linkages and extending them still further.

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Part II

The post-classical period

Travel in the centuries after about 500 CE took on new dimensions, compared to its counterpart in the classical period. The most heroic individual travelers now covered longer distances, contacting even more diverse societies. The rate of travel increased. Travel also began to generate more significant consequences, particularly in supporting new trade contacts and the spread of world religions. Travel indeed became an integral part of an accelerating network of contacts among Asia, Africa, and Europe.

Several factors account for the changing dimensions of travel. The advent of new religions, notably Islam, or growing interest in other religions such as Christianity and Buddhism was crucial. As religion became less localized, travelers could gain a sense of divine support even as they penetrated far-flung lands. They could also find fellow believers, even in very different cultural and political settings, who would help them in their journeys and provide some familiarity amid strangeness. Religion also provided a new motivation for travel, to promote conversion or to seek contact with the wellsprings of faith in distant places.

Political change could be crucial. New or revived empires—the Arab caliphate, the reestablishment of empire in China—provided political protection for travelers across considerable geographic space. The interlocking Mongol empires, toward the end of the post-classical period, promoted security and offered explicit invitation to travelers over an unprecedented range of territory.

Technology would enter in as well, though partly as a result of travel and trade. New ship designs, particularly by the Arabs, encouraged wider use of the Indian Ocean. New navigational devices would enter in toward the end of the period, headed by the compass. Travel and trade, particularly initially from Islamic lands, provided maps of unprecedented accuracy as well, another result of travel that could promote further travel in turn. Finally, as we will see, the increased output of travelers' accounts provided both motivation and knowledge for other ventures, as travel began to feed on itself.

With all the changes, long-distance travel remained arduous and uncertain. Precisely because the leading travelers became more ambitious, they subjected themselves to a host of discomforts and dangers. Their achievements were both impressive and historically meaningful.

* * *

Three major travel patterns emerged, though there were numerous other variants. The Buddhist impulse to travel arose even before the post-classical period and continued in its early centuries. Buddhism was the oldest of the world religions, and it spurred missionaries and pilgrims alike to move through Central Asia and into India. Particularly interesting were religiously inspired trips from China and later Japan. Islam's encouragement to travel developed from the seventh century onward. Political as well as religious changes were involved, and technology would later play a role as well. Arab and North African travel fanned out to Africa and through the Indian Ocean, with major efforts continuing through the fourteenth century. Christian travel developed well before the advent of Islam, and initially used the expanses of the Roman empire. Missionary and pilgrim travel reemerged after the fall of Rome, focusing on journeys within Europe or through the Mediterranean. European travel expanded greatly, however, with the advent of the Mongols, facilitating journeys not just to the Middle East, but through Central Asia and beyond. Obviously, the chronologies of Christian and Muslim travel overlapped, and there were some shared routes as well, both overland and through the Indian Ocean.

Buddhist journeys, 400–900 CE

INTRODUCTION

Buddhist monks from China were among the most adventurous long-distance travelers during the first millennium CE. From the third century to the tenth century thousands of Chinese monks headed west for the Buddhist holy places in India. Most of these pilgrims traveled via the Silk Road through Central Asia; a smaller number used the maritime routes that linked Chinese ports to South Asian harbors.

Buddhism inspired other travelers as well. Earlier, in the classical period, Buddhist missionaries had fanned out from India for Central Asia, China, and Southeast Asia, though we have little precise evidence on specific journeys. In the post-classical period, Buddhism also linked travelers from Japan to the Asian mainland. Buddhism, thus, forms the first of the great new religious frameworks for heightened travel, with primary emphasis on overland routes in Asia but some use of sea lanes in the Indian Ocean as well. In turn, travel helped solidify Buddhism's role in a number of Asian societies, but also helped spur further trade connections as well.

* * *

In 629 the most famous of the Buddhist travelers from China, a monk named Xuanzang (ca. 600–664), departed the Chinese capital of Changan for a journey through Central Asia to India. His goal was to obtain Sanskrit copies of Buddhist texts that either had not yet been translated into Chinese or for which he believed more accurate renderings were needed. In collecting these writings and preparing new or revised translations of them, Xuanzang hoped to resolve doctrinal disputes that had divided his fellow monks in China and to settle doubts that had arisen in his mind regarding the meaning of Buddhist teachings.

During the following sixteen years Xuanzang covered much of the same ground that Zhang Qian had traversed 700 years earlier, but much more besides. Unlike Zhang Qian, Xuanzang reached India and traveled



Map 3 The travels of Xuanzang

widely there. While in India, he visited the sites most sacred to members of his faith, studied with learned Buddhist scholars at major monasteries, and collected hundreds of Sanskrit manuscripts.

When the monk returned to the Chinese capital in 645, after having traveled more than 10,000 miles, he was greeted with acclaim. Within weeks of his homecoming he was granted an audience with Emperor Taizong. The emperor was so impressed with what he heard from Xuanzang that he asked him to write an account of his travels and to become one of his advisors. Xuanzang agreed to write the book but declined the offer of an official appointment. Instead, the monk asked the emperor to finance his ambitious plan to translate the many manuscripts he had brought back to China. Taizong agreed to the monk's appeal, enabling Xuanzang to spend the rest of his life engaged in translating and

teaching. Again, the connection between Chinese state policy and travel is worth noticing.

The translations that Xuanzang completed during the remaining two decades of his life—work that he did in collaboration with a team of scholar/monks that he assembled—were major contributions to the vitality of Buddhism in China and other East Asian countries. Xuanzang's travels also had important political implications. Like Zhang Qian's report to the Han emperor, Xuanzang's travel book provided Emperor Taizong with valuable information about conditions in Central Asia and India at a time when the Chinese leaders were pursuing an expansionist foreign policy. Let us now turn to some of the highlights of Xuanzang's great journey.

A MONK RECOUNTS HIS TRAVELS TWICE

We possess two major sources for Xuanzang's travels, the fact-filled treatise he wrote at the request of Taizong and an informative account of the monk's early life and travels authored by one of his younger monastic colleagues. Both books are extremely valuable to modern researchers.

Xuanzang's book, *The Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions*, is one of the most significant works of cultural geography written during the first millennium CE. Completed shortly after his return to China, it is a detailed account of 130 or so 'countries' (states or regions) in Central Asia and India during the early seventh century. The book is based on Xuanzang's memory, his travel notes, and research in (now lost) Sanskrit histories and geographies that he obtained in India.

The style and structure of Xuanzang's *Record of the Western Regions* recall Zhang Qian's report to Emperor Wudi. Xuanzang's book also resembles the travel writings of Chinese monks such as Faxian and Sung Yun who preceded him in Central Asia and India. Both Faxian (traveled 399–414) and Sun Yun (traveled ca. 516–20) wrote brief and valuable reports of their journeys. Xuanzang's book, however, surpasses the writings of these earlier travelers because he provides us with far more information.

Our second major piece of evidence is the biography of Xuanzang written by Huili, a monk who was a member of the team of translators that Xuanzang assembled following his return from India. Huili's book, *A Biography of the Tripitaka Master of the Great Cì'en Monastery of the Great Tang Dynasty*, is based largely on testimony from Xuanzang and contains much information about the latter's itinerary and personal experiences that is not found in the *Record of the Western Regions*. Perhaps in discussing his memories with Huili, Xuanzang was seeking to produce a record of his journey that was more revealing of his daily experiences than the report he had prepared for Taizong.

Drawing on Xuanzang's two accounts of his travels, the book written for the emperor and the as-told-to-Huili version, let us now follow in his footsteps.

EARLY LIFE

Xuanzang was born around the year 600, a pivotal moment in Chinese history. About a decade prior to his birth, Emperor Wendi, the founder of the brief but important Sui dynasty (581–617), had reunified China for the first time since the collapse of the Han empire in the third century. Both Emperor Wendi and his son and successor Yangdi (reigned 604–17) were promoters of Buddhism, partly because they saw the Buddhist monks as useful political allies against a variety of opponents, including Confucian scholars and Daoist clerics. To provide support to the Buddhists, the Sui emperors sponsored the construction of numerous monasteries, authorized the ordination of many new monks and nuns, and encouraged the veneration of relics.

We may speculate that Xuanzang's decision to become a monk was influenced by the religious policies of the Sui emperors. On his father's side, Xuanzang was the descendant of three generations of learned Confucian scholars. (Our sources tell us nothing about his mother or her forebears.) Moreover, according to Huili, as a child Xuanzang was tutored in the Confucian classics by his father and took his studies very seriously. At other times in Chinese history such a promising beginning in Confucian learning might have served as a springboard for more advanced studies in Confucian teaching and subsequent appointment as a governmental official.

However, when he was about twelve years old Xuanzang changed course and decided to enter a Buddhist monastery. One of his elder brothers, who was already a monk, seems to have encouraged him to join the growing number of Chinese youths from elite families who were becoming Buddhist clerics. Xuanzang spent the next decade and a half in various monasteries, first as a novice, and then, from approximately his twenty-second year, as a fully ordained monk. During this period he became well known for his unusual ability to memorize long and complex texts quickly and for his impressive Buddhist learning.

These were years of considerable political uncertainty in China. In 617 a military uprising triggered by widespread dissatisfaction with the policies of the second Sui emperor resulted in his overthrow. The unrest surrounding the fall of the Sui dynasty spilled into the first decade of the succeeding Tang dynasty (618–907).

Somewhat sheltered from the political disorder that surrounded him, Xuanzang devoted himself to the study of the major Buddhist teachings then available in China. His texts were from the Mahayana (literally, 'Great

Vehicle') branch of Buddhism, which had spread earlier from India to Central Asia and then to China, Korea, and Japan. One of the main features of Mahayana Buddhism was the prominence given to bodhisattvas, i.e. saintly individuals who were eligible to enter nirvana but instead chose to help others in their efforts to attain salvation. Bodhisattvas came to symbolize compassion and inclusiveness, two leading Mahayanist virtues.

A second characteristic of the Mahayana tradition was the huge number of varied and occasionally contradictory texts that Mahayanists accepted as authentic statements of Buddhist doctrine. The great size and diverse nature of the Mahayanist canon led to frequent disagreements among the monks and to the formation of numerous monastic sects, each devoted to a particular text.

Xuanzang was troubled by the doctrinal disputes that divided his colleagues. He believed that some of the disagreements were the result of weaknesses in the translations they depended upon, translations that left him confused as well. He knew also that some important Mahayanist texts, which had not yet been translated into Chinese, could be obtained in India. Such considerations were foremost in his mind when, not yet thirty years old, he decided to leave China for the journey to India.

ON THE ROAD

In keeping with Chinese practice, Xuanzang sent a petition to Emperor Taizong requesting permission to travel to India. But the request went unanswered, probably because in the early and somewhat unstable years of the Tang dynasty the Chinese authorities were unwilling to authorize travel of any kind in the border regions. Undeterred, Xuanzang passed through the massive western gate of Changan and set off on the same caravan route west used by thousands of travelers since the time of Zhang Qian. For reasons of safety, Xuanzang began his journey in the company of another monk who was returning from the Tang capital to his home in Gansu. After the two monks subsequently parted, Xuanzang encountered other individuals—monks, merchants, and local officials—who assisted him in various ways as he moved west. When one Gansu official ordered Xuanzang to return to Changan, local monks came to his rescue, secretly escorting him westward under cover of nightfall. Another official, impressed by Xuanzang's piety, tore up a warrant for his arrest (for violating the restrictions on travel) and urged the monk to move on quickly.

Having eluded his pursuers and passed through Gansu, Xuanzang reached the vicinity of the Jade Gate, the Chinese checkpoint marking the border between the Tang empire and the vast Taklamakan Desert. How would he, a lone monk, cross the fearsome desert? A series of oases from which he could obtain water and other provisions ringed the Taklamakan

north and south, but the distances between them were formidable and the roads were not well marked. In addition, the prospect of being robbed by bands of thieves was very real.

Huili tells us that in this moment of uncertainty, Xuanzang, like many Mahayanists in similar circumstances, turned for assistance to the Maitreya Bodhisattva, the Buddha of the Future. While praying at a shrine to the Maitreya Bodhisattva, the monk's appeal was seemingly answered. According to Huili, a man from the 'Hu tribe' approached Xuanzang and offered to guide him to Hami, the first oasis on the northern route around the desert. ('Hu' was the general term Chinese used for the pastoral nomads of Central Asia; it suggested deep-set eyes, a prominent nose and a bushy beard.)

Accepting the man's offer, Xuanzang clip-clopped into the barren desert on the back of an old red horse that he had taken in trade from a friend of his guide, a horse said to be familiar with the road to Hami. However, disaster struck quickly. During his first night under the stars, Xuanzang's guide approached the monk at knifepoint, apparently intending to rob him. Uncertain about what to do, Xuanzang now sought help from the great bodhisattva of compassion and enlightenment, the Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva. As the Hu man moved closer, the frightened monk recited scriptures and chanted the name of the Bodhisattva. Once again, Xuanzang's prayers were apparently answered; the would-be assailant backed off and Xuanzang was able to go back to sleep. But the next day his guide told the monk that the route to Hami was too dangerous and that he was going to return home.

Xuanzang rode on alone, following trails littered with skeletons and horse dung. He was able to obtain water and other provisions from soldiers stationed at two Chinese watchtowers. But after leaving the second watchtower he lost his way and dropped his water bag, the contents immediately vanishing in the parched sand. For the next four nights and five days he and his aged mount wandered in the desert without water. Suddenly, with both of them near death, the horse sensed water; they soon came upon an oasis. After a day of recuperation, the man and beast were strong enough to undertake the two-day journey to the Hami oasis.

While Xuanzang was resting in Hami, Qu Wentai, the King of Gaochang (present-day Turfan), the next oasis on the route around the Taklamakan, invited the monk to visit him. According to Huili, Xuanzang had originally planned to proceed northwest from Hami, most likely by way of the verdant Ili Valley. However, the monk was impressed by Qu Wentai's invitation and decided to alter his route to include a layover at Turfan. Delighted at the prospect of meeting Xuanzang, Qu Wentai dispatched one of his officials with numerous horses and a herd of camels to set up rest houses along the road. Six days after leaving Hami, Xuanzang arrived in Turfan.

BUDDHISM AND SILK IN TURFAN

The Turfan oasis is in a great geologic depression that lies as much as 150 yards below sea level, making it one of the lowest points on the earth's surface. Because the region receives very little annual rainfall, agricultural life in the oasis has always depended on snowmelt from the nearby Tianshan Mountains. Abundant quantities of cold, clear water have long reached Turfan's wheat lands, melon patches, and vineyards by means of a network of underground channels known as qanats.

From the time of Zhang Qian onward, Turfan was a major center of long-distance trade and cross-cultural interchange. Merchant caravans heading west from China and east from Central Asia stopped in Turfan to rest from the rigors of desert travel, to obtain water, food, and fresh animals; and to exchange commodities. Some of the long-distance traders, notably those from Sogdia in today's Uzbekistan, established permanent communities in Turfan.

When Xuanzang arrived in Turfan, the oasis had been under the rule of the Qu family, one of several prominent local clans, for about a century and a half. The boundaries of their state measured approximately 100 miles from east to west and 150 miles from north to south, and included about 30,000 people. Although the ethnicity of the Qu kings is in doubt, hundreds of documents found in Turfan graves indicate that by the time of Xuanzang's arrival most of the inhabitants were Chinese. It is likely that they were the descendants of migrants who had fled west in the fifth and sixth centuries in order to escape political strife in northern China.

One other aspect of Turfan in the early seventh century is worthy of note, namely its importance as a center of Buddhism. According to Huili, 'several thousand' Buddhist monks resided in Turfan at the time of Xuanzang's visit. If true, then roughly 10 percent of the kingdom's population belonged to the Buddhist clergy (compared to less than 1 percent in China at this time). Although it is possible that Huili's figure is an exaggeration, scholars have discovered much archaeological and documentary evidence pointing to the importance of Buddhism in Turfan. Indeed, of the dozen or so oases skirting the Taklamakan at this time, Buddhism seems to have made its most significant impact in Turfan.

We learn from Huili that Qu Wentai, Xuanzang's host, was a devout Buddhist. When the monk arrived at the Turfan capital around midnight, the king and his courtiers were waiting to welcome him. For the next ten days Qu Wentai lavished attention on Xuanzang, providing accommodations for him in a monastery next to the palace and appointing eunuchs to attend to his needs. The king also tried to persuade Xuanzang to prolong his stay, perhaps because he wanted the monk to become his religious advisor and to assume leadership of the local Buddhist community. Qu Wentai may also have thought of Xuanzang as a possible liaison to Emperor Taizong.

But Xuanzang was determined to continue his trip to India as planned. The result was a dramatic face-off between king and monk. When Qu Wentai threatened to force Xuanzang to return to China, the monk went on a Gandhian-type hunger strike that lasted for three days. On the fourth day, seeing Xuanzang's health in jeopardy, the king bowed to his will and promised to allow the monk to resume his journey.

With his right to depart clearly established, Xuanzang agreed to remain in Turfan for an additional month of teaching. Qu Wentai had a large tent put up for the monk's lectures, a shelter large enough to seat 300 worshippers. Each day the king would escort Xuanzang to the pulpit and, while kneeling down, serve as a footstool to assist the monk as he climbed to his seat.

When Xuanzang was finally ready to leave, Qu Wentai saw him off in grand style. He gave the monk thirty suits of religious garments, a variety of cold weather clothing (face covers, boots, gloves, and stockings), and four novice monks to serve as his attendants. Qu Wentai also provided Xuanzang with funds to cover expenses while on the road: 100 ounces of gold, 30,000 silver coins, and 500 rolls of silk and satin cloth. To transport these goods, the king sent along thirty horses and twenty-five porters.

But there was still more. The king wrote letters of introduction to the twenty-four heads of state in the countries that Xuanzang would likely visit, and had a roll of fine silk attached to each of the letters. To the Khan of the Western Turks, whom we will soon meet, Qu Wentai sent a special letter of introduction together with 500 rolls of silk and two cartloads of fruits and other edibles (presumably dried). In addition, Qu Wentai sent two of his highest officials—his palace attendant and his royal secretary—to escort Xuanzang to the court of the Khan.

Xuanzang's splendid send-off by Qu Wentai provides us with a vivid illustration of the multiple uses of silk and the westward flow of the fabric during the first millennium. The religious garments Qu Wentai gave Xuanzang probably included robes made of fine silk; some of the cold weather clothing the monk received was likely made of coarser grades of the same fabric (which, as campers know, can serve as a very effective insulator). Five hundred rolls of silk were to serve Xuanzang as currency. The twenty-four rolls of high-quality silk attached to the letters of introduction were intended as diplomatic tools, strengthening Qu's relations with counterparts in states to the west. Finally, the 500 rolls of silk sent to the Khan of the Western Turks were doubtless a form of tribute paid by vassal to sovereign.

THE GREAT KHAN OF THE WESTERN TURKS

Leaving Turfan, Xuanzang and his party of men and animals proceeded west along the desolate northern border of the Taklamakan Desert. They stopped in several oases, notably Kucha, which resembled Turfan because of its

importance as a center of both long-distance trade and Buddhist worship. From the oasis of Aksu, their next major stop after Kucha, the group angled northwest and headed into the Tianshan Mountains, the steep, snowcapped range that has challenged the fortitude of travelers for millennia.

Traversing these mountains was one of the most harrowing experiences in Xuanzang's life. Huili explains why:

The mountains were so dangerously steep and tall that they seemed to touch the sky. Since the creation of the world, they had been covered with ice and snow, which had accumulated and turned into icicles [that] never melted in spring or summer. Cold mist mingled extensively with the clouds, and when one looked up one could only see a vast whiteness without limit. Ice peaks a hundred feet high, or tens of feet in breadth, broke down and lay across the road, rendering the rugged mountain path difficult to climb. Moreover, as the blasts sent the snowflakes flying, one would tremble in the flurry, though one had put on double shoes and heavy fur coats. At the time of eating or sleeping, there was no dry place to stop. One could only hang the pot to cook food and sleep on the ice.

Huili, *Biography*, p. 41

It took seven days for the group to struggle through the Tianshan range. The casualties were high. Huili tells us that between 30 and 40 percent of the party (ten to fourteen people) died of cold and hunger and that the loss of animals was even greater.

When the survivors came out of the mountains, they found themselves on the southern shore of Lake Issyk in today's Kyrgyzstan. A march of several days brought them to Tokmok, the summer capital of Yehu Khan, the Great Khan of the Western Turks. Before turning to the meeting between Xuanzang and Yehu Khan, let us pause momentarily and examine the rise of Turks in Central Asia.

The Turks were horse-riding, pastoral nomads who had much in common with their predecessors on the grasslands, the Scythians, and the Xiongnu. Originating in the region of the Altai Mountains, they gained control of much of Central Asia rather suddenly in the middle of the sixth century. By 600 the borders of the Turk empire reached from Mongolia in the east to the Black Sea in the west, making it the largest of the nomad polities yet established.

Because the Turks lacked the resources to control their vast empire from a single center, they divided their lands in half. Khans from the senior branch of the ruling clan, who were based in Mongolia, managed the eastern territories. Control of the western zone was in the hands of rulers from the junior branch of the ruling clan; these khans maintained base camps in the region of the Tianshan and Kyrgyz mountains.

Yehu Khan (reigned 618–30), Xuanzang's host, was one of the most formidable khans of the Western Turks. His authority seems to have reached as far west as the Caucasus Mountains. During his reign, Western Turk soldiers also conquered the territory south of the Amu Darya (Oxus) River, in today's northern Afghanistan, a region we have encountered (as Bactria) in earlier chapters. Amazingly, the khan carried on diplomatic relations with the Byzantine emperor Heraclius in Constantinople and the Tang emperors in Changan, as well as numerous smaller states such as Turfan.

Huili gives us a fascinating portrait of Yehu Khan, his court, and his army:

The khan was dressed in a green silk robe, with his hair exposed, and wearing a turban of white silk about ten feet long that wrapped his forehead and hung behind his back. More than two hundred attendant officials, all with plaited hair and dressed in brocade robes, surrounded him. All his soldiers wore furs, felt, or fine woolen clothes; carried spears and large army banners; or held bows in their hands. So many were his cavalry of packhorses that they stretched out of sight. ...

Huili, *Biography*, p. 42

Huili tells us that the khan welcomed Xuanzang to his mobile palace, a great felt tent decorated with 'dazzling golden flowers.' Inside the tent, the Turks sat on double mats spread on the ground but provided Xuanzang with a folding chair made of iron. According to Huili, the Turks did not use wooden furniture because they were 'fire worshippers' and believed that wood contained the element of fire.

Messengers from Taizong and Qu Wentai soon appeared and presented their credentials to the khan. After receiving the envoys, Yehu Khan hosted a lavish feast. He provided wine for the messengers and his courtiers, and a special order of grape juice for Xuanzang. The khan also ordered that music be performed. Xuanzang's response to the Central Asian music, which must have sounded very different from what he was accustomed to in China, is somewhat patronizing. Here is Huili:

The music of the alien tribes tinkled and clanged in symphony, and although the melodies were foreign and lacked refinement, they were quite amusing to the ear and delightful to the mind.

Huili, *Biography*, p. 43

After much toasting and exchanging of cups, piles of fish, lamb, and veal appeared. In deference to Xuanzang's Buddhist vegetarianism, the khan

arranged a special menu for the monk—pancakes, rice, butter, milk, sugar, honey, and grapes.

Huili tells us that following the meal Yehu Khan, despite his practice of ‘fire worship,’ asked Xuanzang to preach. The monk obliged, using an interpreter. Xuanzang chose as his subject the Mahayanist teaching on personal conduct known as the *Ten Good Deeds*. In reality, a list of prohibitions rather than ‘good deeds,’ this teaching urges believers (1) not to kill, (2) not to steal, (3) not to engage in illicit sexual practices, (4) not to lie, (5) not to utter harsh words, (6) not to utter words that cause enmity among people, (7) not to engage in idle talk, (8) not to be greedy, (9) not to be angry, and (10) not to have wrong views.

According to Huili, when Xuanzang finished his lecture, Yehu Khan ‘bowed down and delightedly accepted the teachings with faith.’ Although Huili is our only source for this striking scene in which a fierce, fire-worshipping nomad leader submitted to a Buddhist apostle of non-violence, it may actually have happened. Many of the Central Asian nomads who swept into northern China following the collapse of the Han dynasty were drawn to Buddhism for political reasons. Perhaps Yehu Khan’s apparent receptivity to Xuanzang’s message of non-violence was rooted in the khan’s desire for good relations with China, about which his messengers kept him well informed and where Buddhism was on the rise. The ruins of two large Buddhist temples found near Tokmok suggest that, regardless of the Khan’s convictions, Buddhism was well established in the region at this time.

Like Qu Wentai, Yehu Khan attempted to dissuade Xuanzang when the monk announced his plan to resume his journey. Failing in this effort, the khan presented the monk with departure gifts of silk: a set of religious robes made of red damask silk and fifty bolts of fine silk. In addition, the Khan appointed a young man who had lived in the Chinese capital for several years to be Xuanzang’s official translator. The translator was instructed to write letters of introduction for the countries ahead and to accompany the monk as far as Kapisa, near today’s Kabul in Afghanistan, the southern limit of the khan’s authority.

IN SOGDIA AND BACTRIA

Leaving the Khan of the Western Turks, Xuanzang and his party followed the major caravan route southwest as far as Samarkand in today’s Uzbekistan. Turning south, they traversed the pass known as the Iron Gate, crossed the Amu Darya (Oxus) River, and entered present-day Afghanistan (Bactria). As they moved through Afghanistan, the travelers stopped in the caravan cities of Kunduz, Balkh, Bamian, and Kapisa. In reaching Kapisa, Xuanzang and his party had arrived at the border of India. Before we

follow the monk farther south, let us pause to examine the route he followed through Sogdia and Bactria, a journey of about 1,000 miles.

We have encountered these regions twice before, in Chapters 3 and 4. As we saw in Chapter 3, Alexander the Great spent several years here in the 320s BCE. In Chapter 4 we saw how the Zhang Qian traveled to Sogdia and Bactria in the 120s BCE, returning home with news about the region's lush grasslands and vibrant commerce.

By the time Xuanzang passed through these regions, commerce had greatly increased. The cities that he visited were key components of the network of Silk Road cities that flourished following Zhang Qian's journey. Xuanzang's reporting helps us to understand this development. Here is the monk on Samarkand:

The country of Samarkand is sixteen or seventeen hundred *li* (500 to 600 miles) in circuit, long from east to west and narrow from south to north. The capital city [also named Samarkand] is more than twenty *li* in circuit and is a completely invulnerable stronghold with a large population. Precious goods from many different countries are stored up here. The soil is rich and fertile, and all kinds of crops are cultivated. The trees of the forests are luxuriant and have profuse flowers and fruits. This country yields many good horses, and its skillful craftsmen are the best among various countries.

Adapted from Li Rongxi, *Record of the Western Regions*, p. 29

Xuanzang also provides us with information on the importance of Buddhism in Sogdia and Bactria. Because he arrived just prior to the regions' conquest by Arab Muslim armies, his observations regarding the strength of Buddhism are important. He enables us to see that much of Central Asia, soon to become part of the Islamic world, was still Buddhist in the early seventh century.

His observations about conditions in Balkh, Bamian, and Kapisa illustrate the importance of Buddhism. In Balkh, where Alexander married a Bactrian princess, Xuanzang found over 3,000 Buddhist monks and more than 100 monasteries. He tells us that the monks in Balkh were not Mahayanists, but rather belonged to the older and more conservative school of Buddhism known as Theravada (literally: 'the Doctrine of the Elders'). Although the Theravada form of Buddhism never made much headway in East Asian countries, Xuanzang found many communities of Theravada monks in Central Asia, where they seemed to live in harmony with their Mahayana rivals.

Outside Balkh, Xuanzang found several major Buddhist monasteries, suggesting that in Central Asia Buddhism was important in rural areas as well as in the cities. Southwest of the city he visited a monastery that was a leading center of Buddhist studies. Known as the New Monastery, it had

halls decorated with ‘precious substances’ and a statue of the Buddha adorned with ‘famous jewels.’ Apparently an important destination for pilgrims, the New Monastery was also home to a collection of Buddhist relics, thought by the faithful to include one of the Buddha’s teeth and two utensils that he was believed to have used, i.e. a wash basin and a broom. These Buddhist relics were the first of many that Xuanzang subsequently saw on his journey.

North of Balkh Xuanzang saw two large Buddhist stupas, each more than thirty feet high, built to honor a pair of local merchants who were believed to be among the Buddha’s earliest disciples. According to local tradition, just as the Buddha was about to deliver his first-ever sermon near the Indian city of Varanasi, the two Balkhi merchants offered him sustenance in the form of parched grain and honey. To demonstrate his gratitude, the Buddha took time to instruct the traders in some of his key teachings, the Five Precepts and the Ten Good Deeds. He then sent them home with some of his hair and fingernails, along with instructions for constructing a type of hemispherical monument to house the relics. For Balkhis, this shrine was the earliest Buddhist stupa and thus a source of great local pride (and income from pilgrims).

Xuanzang is our only source for the meeting between the Buddha and the Balkhi merchants and the origins of the Buddhist stupa. Although his intriguing story cannot be corroborated, it is clear that merchant travelers were important in the spread of Buddhism from India. In the tale of the Balkhi merchants, we probably have a personalized version of a protracted historical process involving large numbers of merchants over many centuries.

The story is also interesting because it calls our attention to the way in which the originally rather austere message of the Buddha was modified after his death. His disciples gradually reached out to and absorbed older traditions of religious devotion, a development that opened the way for the veneration of fragments of his cremated remains in sacred structures constructed to house them. When the stupas began to attract pilgrims, the monks, who were forbidden from engaging in manual labor, found donors to support their various activities.

The route south from Balkh led Xuanzang toward the steep and snow-covered Hindu Kush Mountains, where according to Huili, travel was even more difficult than it had been in the Tianshan range. In the foothills of the Hindu Kush, Xuanzang came to Bamian Valley where he found ‘several thousand’ Theravada monks living in rock caves and two gigantic statues of the Buddha. Here is Xuanzang’s description:

To the northeast of the royal city, there is at a corner of the mountain a rock statue of the Buddha standing, one hundred forty or fifty feet in height, a dazzling golden color and adorned with brilliant gems. To

the east there is a monastery built by a previous king of the country. To the east of the monastery there is a copper statue of the Buddha standing, more than one hundred feet tall. It was cast in separate pieces and then welded together into shape.

Li Rongxi, *Record of the Western Regions*, p. 38

Xuanzang was now in the presence of the two largest Buddhist statues ever sculpted. For reasons that remain unclear, he was mistaken about the ‘copper’ used for the smaller Buddha. Both statues were carved out of the sandstone cliff that dominates the site around the end of the classical period. Perhaps the gold leaf and the bright paint that then decorated the surfaces of the huge Buddha images were the reason for Xuanzang’s confusion. Or, perhaps one of the local monks told him the smaller statue was made of copper.

At Bamian Xuanzang turned east and made his way across the Hindu Kush to Kapisa (today’s Bagram), a key center of long-distance trade and former summer capital of Kanishka (reigned 78–96 CE), the Kushana king and supporter of Buddhism. Xuanzang enables us to see that Kanishka’s efforts on behalf of Buddhism had produced lasting results. The monk tells us that the current king, who was probably descended from a branch of the Huns, was so devoted to the teachings of the Buddha that each year he made a ‘silver image of the Buddha eighteen feet in height.’ In the capital there were over a hundred monasteries and more than 6,000 thousand Mahayana monks.

Xuanzang tells us that in the surrounding countryside there were at least six major monasteries, most of which seem to have been important destinations for pilgrims. Two of the rural monasteries possessed important relics of the Buddha, namely, a tooth, a strand of his hair and a piece of his skull bone. Another of the monasteries, this one built by King Kanishka, featured a stupa that was more than one hundred feet tall. A stupa made of gilt copper, also measuring more than one hundred feet high, dominated the grounds of yet another of the monasteries. Reinforcing this picture of a strong Buddhist presence in rural Central Asia, Xuanzang tells us that a third great stupa, this one attributed to the Indian emperor Ashoka (reigned 268–232 BCE), rested on the top of a mountain located southwest of the capital.

The Ashoka stupa indicated to Xuanzang that he was nearing India. So also did the presence of communities of Jain and Hindu ascetics in Kapisa. Xuanzang’s first encounter with Jains and Hindus was shocking to him:

There are over ten deva-temples [Hindu or Jain temples] with more than one thousand heretical believers, either going naked or smearing dust [cow dung?] on their bodies; some wear strings of skulls as head ornaments.

Li Rongxi, *Record of the Western Regions*, p. 40

ENTERING INDIA: GANDHARA AND KASHMIR

Xuanzang introduces his readers to India with a comprehensive overview of Indian culture, social life, economic practices, and political institutions. To produce this minor masterpiece of ethnographic writing, he probably drew on works by Indian scholars as well as his own observations. In these pages, which remain today a valuable introduction to seventh-century India, we find descriptions of the caste system, religions, language, the system of writing, cities, domestic architecture, costume, personal adornment, education, governmental administration, military matters, laws, taxes, burial practices, agriculture, dietary practices, and personal hygiene.

For Xuanzang, India began in today's eastern Afghanistan and included northern Pakistan (Gandhara to the Persians and Greeks). Both Ashoka and Kanishka had promoted Buddhism here by sponsoring the construction of many monasteries and stupas. During the reign of Kanishka Gandhara became the first great center of Buddhist sculpture.

As Xuanzang passed through Gandhara, he found that the region was a major center of Buddhist legends and relics. Despite his powerful intellect and wide learning, Xuanzang believed in supernatural events and miracles. At Nagarahara (today's Jalalabad in Afghanistan) he entered a grotto known as the Shadow Cave, famous because of the widespread belief that the Buddha had once been there on a supernatural visit and had departed leaving his shadow. Like many of his co-religionists, Xuanzang exited the cave believing that his prayers had been answered and that he had seen the Buddha's shadow. Nearby, he visited stupas thought to contain pieces of the Buddha's skull and one of his eyeballs that was 'as large as a crab apple.'

While in Gandhara Xuanzang also saw much evidence of the destruction of Buddhist buildings, especially monasteries. The attacks on the monasteries were most likely the work of a branch of the Huns, the pastoral nomads who ruled the region for about a century beginning in 450. Xuanzang's notes on the ruined monasteries in Gandhara make it clear that, at least in this region, the decline of Buddhism was well under way by the time Arab Muslim armies began to arrive during the second half of the seventh century.

In Kashmir, the region to the east of Gandhara, Xuanzang found himself in another center of Buddhist culture. He tells us that in this area there were more than 100 monasteries and over 5,000 monks. At least one of the Kashmiri monasteries was a major center of Buddhist scholarship, attracting scholar-monks from other regions. Kashmir was also home to four great stupas built by Ashoka, each of them thought to contain a pint of the Buddha's bones.

The Kashmiri king welcomed Xuanzang to his capital, probably located on the shore of Dal Lake near present-day Srinagar. Impressed with

Xuanzang's Buddhist learning, the king provided the monk with twenty copyists to assist him in collecting texts and five servants to attend to his personal needs.

Xuanzang remained in Kashmir for the next two years. During that time he studied with a leading Buddhist scholar named Samghakirti, who taught him several key *sastras* (Mahayana treatises). Perhaps during this period he studied Sanskrit. It is also possible that Xuanzang decided on an extended stay in Kashmir, in part, because of the extraordinary natural beauty of the region. After two years on the road, during which time he had traversed two of the most formidable mountain ranges in the world, Xuanzang may have been ready for a long rest. What better place for a respite than Dal Lake?

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE BUDDHA

After leaving Kashmir, Xuanzang spent the next four years traveling through northern India, then under the rule of King Harsha Vardhana (reigned 606–47). Drawing on the well-established Buddhist tradition of hospitality for travelers, Xuanzang stayed at numerous local monasteries. Not all the going was easy. Gangs of thieves robbed him on two occasions; he barely escaped being killed during the second incident. Ever resilient, Xuanzang continued on. Some of his layovers in monasteries lasted many months. He used these breaks for more study of key Buddhist texts, sometimes including leading Theravada writings.

In 637, eight years after setting out from Changan, Xuanzang reached his destination. He was now in the middle reaches of the Ganges River, the area where the four places most sacred to Buddhists were located. One of these sites, the birthplace of the Buddha, is located in today's Nepal. The other three—the places where the Buddha achieved enlightenment, gave his first sermon, and died—are in India. For the next five years Xuanzang remained in this region, walking in the footsteps of the Buddha.

The highlight of his lengthy stay in the Buddhist holy land was doubtless the time he spent near the Bodhi (enlightenment) tree, the spot that for Buddhists marks the center of the universe. According to Buddhist tradition (which Xuanzang accepted as true), the tree that he saw in the 630s was descended, via cuttings, from the tree under which the Buddha had achieved enlightenment 1,100 years earlier. Huili tells us that when Xuanzang saw the tree, it was about fifty feet tall and had yellowish white bark and sleek, green leaves. The tree that spreads its branches over this site today, perhaps an issue from more recent cuttings, looks much the same.

Huili's account of Xuanzang's visit to the Bodhi tree is charged with emotion:

Upon his arrival there, the Master [Xuanzang] worshipped the Bodhi tree and the image of the Buddha attaining enlightenment made by the Maitreya Bodhisattva. After having looked at the image with deep sincerity, he prostrated himself before it and deplored sadly, saying with self-reproach, 'I do not know where I was born in the course of transmigration when the Buddha attained enlightenment. I could only come here at this time, the end of the Image Period. It makes me think that my karmic hindrances must have been very heavy!' As he was saying so, his eyes brimmed with sorrowful tears.

Huili, *Biography*, p. 90

Xuanzang spent eight or nine days in the immediate vicinity of the Bodhi tree, where numerous other sacred sites were located (as is true today). Because his visit coincided with the end of the monastic summer retreat, several thousand other monks were also in the area.

From the Bodhi tree, Xuanzang traveled sixty miles to Nalanda University, the large complex of temples and monastic buildings that attracted scholars from all over the Buddhist world. Huili tells us that at the time of Xuanzang's visit, there were 10,000 monks and six separate monasteries on the Nalanda campus, the remains of which are open to visitors today. Gupta emperors, the rulers of India from 320 to around 550, were probably the founders of the university. To support the activities of the monks, the Gupta rulers and their successors, including King Harsha, taxed local farmers. While Xuanzang was at Nalanda, farmers appeared daily at the monastery gate with cartloads of rice, butter, and milk.

Huili describes the Nalanda buildings and grounds as extraordinarily attractive. Here is his account of the monastic residences:

All the monks' chambers in the different departments had four stories. The ridgepoles were carved with little dragons, the beams were painted with all the colors of the rainbow, and the green beam supports contrasted with crimson pillars. The frontal columns and railings had ornamental engravings and hollowed-out carvings. The plinths were made of jade, and the tips of the rafters were adorned with drawings. The ridges of the roofs stood high in the sunlight, and the eaves were connected with ropes from which hung colored silk pennants.

Adapted from Huili, *Biography*, p. 94

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The beauty of the monastic complex impressed Xuanzang but he was drawn to Nalanda because it was the leading center of Buddhist learning in the seventh century. Nalanda's huge library, learned faculty of 2,000, and attraction to scholars from abroad made it the South Asian successor

to the great Greco-Roman library and ‘think-tank’ that had flourished in Alexandria during the classical period.

Most of the monks in residence at Nalanda seem to have been students who had come to study with master scholars such as the elderly Silabhadra, who became the mentor of Xuanzang. Huili tells us that each day the students attended hundreds of lectures given by experts in Mahayana and Theravada teachings. We also learn from Huili that the Nalanda curriculum included the study of the Hindu Vedas, logic, Sanskrit grammar, medicine, and divination. For a scholar like Xuanzang, arriving at Nalanda must have seemed a little like entering nirvana.

Welcomed by the monks, Xuanzang made Nalanda his base for the next several years. According to Huili, the monk’s hosts were generous in providing for his needs. The typical monk at Nalanda had two lay servants; Xuanzang was given ten. In addition, he received a daily allotment of 120 betel leaves (a mild narcotic), twenty areca nuts, twenty nutmegs, one ounce of incense, a pint of special non-glutinous rice, and as much butter and milk as he needed. He also received a monthly supply of three pints of vegetable oil (for cooking and lighting).

During his years at Nalanda Xuanzang devoted himself primarily to the study of major Mahayana and Theravada teachings. Like Buddhists everywhere at this time, the Nalanda scholars emphasized the importance of learning from lectures rather than from the study of written texts. It is clear that Xuanzang gained much from the lectures of his great teacher, Silabhadra. But Xuanzang was also drawn to the library of Buddhist texts (handwritten on birch bark and palm leaves) that the monastery housed. Because these writings were in Sanskrit, he made the mastery of this Indo-European language one of his chief goals while at Nalanda. Fluency in Sanskrit would enable him to make accurate copies of key texts and, once he had returned to Changan, to begin the work of translating them into Chinese. Huili tells us that by the time Xuanzang left Nalanda he was ‘thoroughly versed in this language and could talk with the people of that country in a scholarly manner with great elegance’ (Huili, *Biography*, p. 104).

MEETING KING HARSHA

Xuanzang had gained much during his years in the Buddhist holy land. He had worshipped at the Bodhi tree and at the many other sites sacred to Buddhists. At Nalanda he had greatly enriched his already considerable learning in Buddhist teachings, had mastered Sanskrit, and had obtained copies of numerous *sutras* and *sastras*. Was it now time to return to China? For Xuanzang the answer was no.

Instead of reversing his steps and heading back to Changan, Xuanzang decided to explore eastern and southern India. His reasons for doing so

remain something of a mystery. Part of the explanation seems to have been his desire to visit the island kingdom of Sri Lanka, a major center of Theravada Buddhism. However, when Xuanzang reached southern India, perhaps the city of Kanchipuram, he encountered some Sri Lankan monks who told him that their homeland was rent by political conflict and should be avoided by travelers. Xuanzang then turned northwest and followed a meandering course that eventually brought him back to Nalanda. Although the details of his 'side trip' to south India cannot be documented, it is likely that during this segment of his journey he covered about 3,000 miles.

It was during his second visit to Nalanda that Xuanzang began to prepare for his return to China. However, his departure was delayed. First, King Kumara of Assam, whose capital was located 600 miles east of Nalanda, insisted that Xuanzang pay him a visit. Next, while in Assam, Xuanzang was summoned to the temporary headquarters of King Harsha on the eastern reaches of the Ganges River. Because Harsha was the ruler over most of northern India, this second 'invitation' could hardly be ignored. Assembling a flotilla of riverboats, Kumara escorted Xuanzang up the Ganges.

When Xuanzang and Kumara arrived at the place designated for their meeting with Harsha, there was no sign of their host. Understanding the importance of a well-timed and a well-choreographed entrance, Harsha appeared after nightfall. Here is Huili's account:

Someone reported, 'Several thousand torches and candles are burning on the river and the noise of the pacing drums is heard.' The king [Kumara] said, 'This must be King Harsha coming.' Then he ordered that candles be lit and went personally with his ministers for a great distance to bid welcome.

Whenever King Harsha went out, he always had several hundred metal drums beaten once for each step he walked. This was known as beating the rhythmic pacing drums. King Harsha alone had this privilege. ... Upon his arrival he worshipped at the Master's [Xuanzang's] feet, scattered flowers, and looked at him with reverence. ...

Adapted from Huili, *Biography*, p. 143

Although he was somewhat eclectic in matters of religion, Harsha had long planned to sponsor a great public assembly/debate in his capital at Kanauj that would feature a lecture by Xuanzang. The king's apparent intention was to provide Xuanzang with an opportunity to demonstrate the superiority of his Mahayana teachings over the ideas of all other religious groups, Buddhist as well as non-Buddhist.

Representatives of India's major religious traditions, together with the various regional rulers, would be invited to Kanauj to hear the lecture. Participants in the meeting who disagreed with Xuanzang's ideas would be given five days to offer refutations. After an additional grace period of

thirteen days, a winner would be declared. Having explained his plan to Xuanzang, Harsha issued the call for the meeting. King and monk then sailed up the Ganges to Kanauj.

In Huili's telling the assembly at Kanauj was a splendid affair. In attendance were eighteen regional kings, 3,000 Mahayana and Theravada monastic scholars from around India, 1,000 monks from Nalanda, and 2,000 Brahmins and Jains. The meetings were held in two large thatched halls that Harsha had built for the occasion. Each day the sessions began with a colorful procession headed by an elephant carrying a golden statue of the Buddha. Harsha and Kumara, dressed as the Hindu gods Indra and Brahma, escorted the lead elephant. Here is Huili's account of the daily procession:

Both of them [Harsha and Kumara] wore celestial crowns and garlands and were adorned with pearl necklaces and jade pendants. Two more caparisoned elephants carried precious flowers and followed behind the Buddha's image; flowers were scattered as the elephants proceeded along the way. The Master and the king's teachers were asked to ride on different elephants that followed behind the king in the procession. Three hundred more elephants were arranged for the kings of different countries, the ministers, and the monks of great virtue to ride on. ...

Huili, *Biography*, p. 146

Because the number of attendees at each session was so large, Xuanzang had to use several methods in presenting his ideas. He lectured from a special chair on the dais but his remarks were probably audible only to a small portion of the assembled. For those too far away to hear him, a monk from Nalanda read a written copy of the lecture. In addition, a second written copy of the lecture was posted outside the gate of the hall for all to read.

No refutations were put forth by the assembled during the five days that Xuanzang lectured or in the succeeding thirteen-day grace period. However, Huili tells us that after Xuanzang completed his lectures, a group of Theravada monks and 'heretics' (Hindus or Jains) attempted to murder him. In Xuanzang's version of the same incident, a group of Brahmins set fire to one of the buildings and then tried to have Harsha assassinated. We may conclude from these two reports that there was at least some opposition to Xuanzang's ideas but that fear of Harsha made it impossible to articulate opposition in debate.

Declared the winner of the 'debate,' Xuanzang was offered numerous gifts by Harsha and the eighteen regional rulers. He accepted none of them. Did he have doubts about the reasons for his 'victory'? We do not know. In any case, Harsha now prevailed upon Xuanzang to accompany him to the Site of Almsgiving, a place located near the juncture of the Ganges and

Jumna rivers, where the king planned to preside over a most remarkable ceremony. Every five years Harsha invited his subjects to this spot so that he could give his wealth to them (and then shortly receive it back). Delaying his departure for home once again, Xuanzang joined Harsha for the almsgiving ceremony. He and the king traveled to the ceremony in the company of the eighteen other rulers who had participated in the Kanauj assembly.

Huili tells us that when Harsha and his party arrived at the almsgiving site, they found more than 500,000 monks and lay people waiting for them. The proceedings were filled with ceremony and took more than two months to complete. Here is Huili on the first four days:

On the first day the Buddha's image was installed in the thatched hut hall at the site of almsgiving, and [Harsha's] best valuables and robes as well as delicious food were offered to it. Music was performed and flowers scattered until nightfall when the devotees returned to their encampments. On the second day the image of the [Hindu] God of the Sun was installed, and half the amount of the valuables and garments offered on the first day was presented to this image. On the third day the image of [the Hindu deity] Siva was installed, and the offerings presented to it were the same as those offered to the God of the Sun. On the fourth day alms were given to more than ten thousand monks. ...

Huili, *Biography*, p. 152

Then it was the turn of the Brahmins, who received alms for the next twenty days. Next came the Jains. Gifts to them were distributed over the following ten days. Travelers from long distances then received alms for ten days. Finally, the 'poor and desolate' could step forward. Alms were distributed to them during the concluding thirty days of the ceremony.

By the end of the ceremonies, Harsha had given away everything but his elephants, horses, and weapons. Wearing a coarse suit, the king prayed to the Buddha, declaring that he only desired possessions so that he could give them away as alms.

Now it was the turn of the eighteen kings—Harsha's vassals—to intervene on his behalf. They did so by promptly buying back all the goods he had given away and then returning the items to their overlord. Within a few days, Harsha again possessed all that he had distributed as alms! In purely economic terms, the net effect of the elaborate ceremony was to transfer some of the wealth of Harsha's vassals to some of his subjects. Harsha was not the only Indian ruler to have a policy of 'taxation as theater'; on his way back to China, Xuanzang witnessed two additional almsgiving ceremonies conducted by the king of Kapisa.

HOMEWARD BOUND

In 643, after more than a decade in India, Xuanzang started for home. Harsha provided him with an elephant together with a large quantity of gold and silver coins. The Indian ruler also sent four officials to the countries through which Xuanzang would pass with letters requesting that the monk be supplied with horses and escorts. From Kumara, Xuanzang accepted a wool cape, a garment that would be especially useful for the first 1,000 miles of his homeward journey, during which the monk would encounter the Hindu Kush Mountains for a second time and then cross the equally formidable Pamir range.

Huili does not tell us how large Xuanzang's travel party was, but the monk could not have departed alone. His luggage included more than 500 bundles of manuscripts, seven statues of the Buddha, at least one container of relics, and some packets of rare Indian flower seeds. A Chinese source tells us that when Xuanzang arrived in Changan in 645, twenty horses were needed to carry his baggage.

As Xuanzang rode north out of India into Bactria, he followed his practice of staying at local monasteries, where he was received as an honored guest. The rulers he encountered provided him with guides, escorts, and porters. Nonetheless, the trip back to China, a journey of perhaps 3,500 miles, was extremely difficult. While crossing the upper reaches of the Indus River, the boat carrying some of his luggage capsized. Fifty bundles of manuscripts and the packets of flower seeds floated away. Trudging across the icy and windy passes of the Hindu Kush and Pamir ranges—at elevations of more than 10,000 feet—pushed the monk to his physical limits. He lost most of his porters in the Hindu Kush. His elephant died in the Pamirs.

When Xuanzang descended the eastern slopes of the Pamirs in 644, he was once again on the edge of the Taklamakan Desert, a region that was now coming under Chinese control. His first stop was in the oasis of Kashgar, a major center of long-distance commerce and Buddhist worship that had recently become a Chinese vassal state. From Kashgar, he followed the southern route around the desert to the flourishing oasis of Khotan, which had also recently moved into the Chinese orbit as a vassal state. A strong supporter of Mahayana Buddhism, the ruler of Khotan welcomed Xuanzang.

Xuanzang remained in Khotan for seven or eight months. Huili tells us that the small oasis kingdom had a hundred monasteries and more than 5,000 monks, a claim that seems plausible in the light of research by modern archaeologists. During his layover in Khotan, Xuanzang gave lectures to the monks and also sent requests to other oases for copies of the texts that he had lost in the Indus River.

Xuanzang's main reason for pausing in Khotan seems to have been his desire to obtain official permission to re-enter China. Shortly after arriving in the oasis, he sent a letter, via a merchant caravan, to Emperor Taizong,

whose palace in Changan was located 1,500 miles farther east. In the letter, Xuanzang confessed that in 629 he had ‘ventured to act against the law’ and ‘set out privately for India’ to study the teachings of the Buddha. Now, fifteen years later, the monk continued, he was returning to China with numerous scriptures and wished to have an interview with the Emperor. Taizong’s reply, which arrived many months later, warmly welcomed the monk and included the information that local officials would provide him with the carriers and horses necessary to transport his baggage. Xuanzang now began the last leg of his long journey, the one that would take him to the Tang capital.

In the spring of 645, as Xuanzang and his entourage approached the walls of Changan, they passed fields of green wheat and millet, crops that drew their water from the elaborate network of irrigation canals located along the Wei River. At the huge western gate to the Tang capital, the same gate that he had departed from sixteen years earlier, a delegation of imperial officials and a crowd of admirers greeted Xuanzang. He was home.

A JOURNEY IN RETROSPECT

Within days of Xuanzang’s arrival in Changan, the authorities organized a huge ceremony on his behalf. The relics, statues, and texts that he carried home were put on public display and then transported in a colorful parade to a monastery that Emperor Taizong had built recently to honor his mother. A few weeks later Xuanzang met with Taizong at his eastern, secondary capital in Luoyang. It was at this meeting that the emperor urged Xuanzang to write a report on the lands and peoples he had visited and, unable to convince the monk to become an imperial official, agreed to sponsor his translation work.

Xuanzang spent the remaining nineteen years of his life based in monasteries located in or near the two Tang capitals. Working with the team of translators that he brought together following his meeting with Taizong, Xuanzang quickly set to work on the texts he had brought back from India. One of his associates assisted him in the writing of the *Record of the Western Regions*. In addition to this work, he somehow found the time to do a considerable amount of teaching.

Xuanzang was one of the greatest Chinese translators of Buddhist scripture. In two decades of intensive labor he and his team translated seventy-five texts—approximately one quarter of the entire Buddhist canon—from Sanskrit into Chinese. Although his immense accomplishment as a translator did not put an end to sectarian disputes among Chinese Buddhists, the translations he produced greatly increased the importance of Buddhist teachings in Chinese literary culture.

His translations also had a significant impact on Buddhism in Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, three countries in which fluency in Chinese was the mark of an educated person. During the Tang dynasty a steady stream of monks from Korea and Japan (and a smaller number from Vietnam) came to Changan to study with Chinese Buddhist masters. After spending a year or so in the Tang capital, the monks went home with copies of Buddhist scriptures, many of which had been translated by Xuanzang. In this way, Xuanzang's influence radiated beyond China to the wider East Asian area.

The issue of Xuanzang's impact on Emperor Taizong's expansionist foreign policy is also worth considering. During the 630s and 640s—the period of Xuanzang's travels—Taizong reestablished Chinese authority in the Taklamakan region for the first time since the collapse of the Han dynasty. In 630 a large Chinese army destroyed the forces of the Eastern Turks, giving the Chinese control of most of the Mongolian grasslands. Almost simultaneously, a skillful Chinese policy of divide and rule led to the collapse of the empire of the Western Turks (whose ruler, Yehu Khan, had hosted Xuanzang in 630). Soon after these triumphs over the most powerful nomads in Central Asia, the Chinese regained control over the oases surrounding the Taklamakan Desert. As we have seen, Kashgar and Khotan, both of which Xuanzang visited on his homeward journey, became Chinese vassal states in the 630s. By the end of the next decade, the oases of Turfan and Kucha, both of which Xuanzang spent time in on his way west, had come under Chinese rule. As a result of these territorial gains, for about a century the Chinese once again took charge of the section of the Silk Road that stretched from the Chinese capital to the region of the Ferghana Valley.

Like most of the emperors during the first half of the Tang dynasty, Taizong was a promoter of Buddhism. For this reason alone, the emperor would likely have wanted to meet Xuanzang. But Taizong must also have been eager to meet the famous monk for reasons that had nothing to do with matters of faith. Xuanzang had just returned from the regions that Taizong was in the process of absorbing into his empire. Information provided by the monk might facilitate the process of conquest. We may speculate that Xuanzang's *Record of the Western Regions* provided Taizong and his successors with information that strengthened their grip on the Taklamakan region and Kyrgyzstan for the next century.

Certainly, China gained knowledge of some new products, mainly from India, in this period—such as refined sugar. The kinds of connections travelers were forging, amplified by new inter-regional trading links, obviously generated these changes in material culture. Take, for example, the chair, introduced in India well before the idea reached China. Xuanzang explicitly reported on the use of chairs by high-ranking Indian authorities—'officials employ beautifully painted and decorated seats, according to their tastes.'

Knowledge of this item from travelers led Chinese Buddhists to adopt chairs more widely—warning however about what kinds of comfort to avoid during meditation. From this in turn, chairs entered Chinese usage more generally, at least in the upper classes. Travel could have widespread but surprisingly prosaic payoffs.

Some historians have also argued that Chinese Buddhist travelers, and the nomadic traders they had contact with, influenced Chinese economic practice as well as foreign policy. They suggest that Chinese businessmen gained a new appreciation of the possibilities of foreign trade and commercial principles, which would help spur a significant increase in urban mercantile activity in the Song dynasty that followed the Tang. There is no question that Chinese trade and manufacturing heated up by the tenth and eleventh centuries (the Song dynasty began in 960). The possibility of stimulus from foreign example, brought home not only by traders but by Buddhist traveler-reporters, cannot be discounted. This would not be the first time, or the last, that religious inspiration had somewhat unintended, but considerable, economic effects.

One other enduring legacy of Xuanzang is worthy of note. In the centuries following his death, Xuanzang's journey became the subject of popular folktales and songs. In village squares and markets throughout China, storytellers and singers entertained their audiences with humorous tales loosely based on the monk's travels. As time passed, the storytellers added a heroic monkey and a greedy pig, each possessing supernatural powers, to Xuanzang's travel party. Gradually, the monkey, called Sun Wu-kung, became the central character in the tale, and Xuanzang faded into the background.

In 1592 this rich oral tradition, initially inspired by Xuanzang's travels but now featuring a hilarious monkey, appeared in writing as the novel, *Journey to the West*. Literary scholars regard *Journey to the West*, attributed to a writer named Wu Cheng-en, as one of the great and enduring classics of Chinese literature. Perhaps equally important is the survival of the oral tradition that gave rise to the novel. In today's China, storytellers, puppeteers and street singers continue the long tradition of entertaining audiences with tales that have their ultimate origin in the travels of a learned and hardy seventh-century Buddhist monk.

OTHER BUDDHIST TRAVELERS

Buddhism inspired other travelers as well, whose journeys provided new connections among various parts of eastern and southern Asia. By the sixth century, for example, pioneering Korean monks were traveling to India for study, learning Sanskrit as well as deepening their understanding of Buddhist teachings. In 526 a monk called Kyomik undertook this trip,

and brought an Indian monk back with him along with a number of Sanskrit religious texts. The local Korean king welcomed the delegation and began sponsoring additional scholarly efforts. Buddhism also brought Korean monks to religious centers in China.

Japanese students, also during the sixth and seventh centuries, made numerous trips to China to further their grasp of Buddhism. Their journeys brought more than new religious inspiration: other aspects of Chinese culture were transmitted as well, and artistic styles associated with Buddhism made a deep impression in Japan. Student connections and pilgrimages continued to inspire travel within Japan and among China, Japan, and Korea. As late as the thirteenth century, Japanese regional rulers continued to sponsor study trips and also to invite Chinese priests to Japan to head up Buddhist institutions. One such Chinese visitor trained a Japanese woman, Mugai Nyodai, as his successor, again suggesting how religious contacts could generate wider influences.

The Buddhist travel network also embraced Southeast Asia, particularly before the arrival of intense Islamic influence. A major Buddhist educational center in Palembang in Sumatra (present-day Indonesia) drew numerous Chinese visitors. Another venturesome Chinese pilgrim, Yijing, inaugurated this connection in 671. He reached Palembang en route to India, obviously by sea, and spent six months there. (He would later spend almost twenty-five years in India.) Yijing studied Sanskrit and Buddhist doctrine, and brought many texts back to China, translating them for wider use. He also wrote numerous biographies of other Chinese pilgrims, not only to India but also to Palembang, and his work encouraged a steady stream of pious travelers.

It was also Yijing who expressed some of the emotional challenge this kind of pioneering travel could involve, even when sustained by religious faith: 'I passed through thousands of different stages during my long solitary journey. The threads of sorrow disturbed my thought hundred-fold. Why did the shadow of my body walk alone on the borders of Five Indies?' But he answered his own question, in terms of Buddhist resolve: 'If I am sad for a short span of life and be sorry for that, how can I fill up the long [age of eternity]?' Here, in a nutshell, was the deep connection between religious motivation and the challenge of long-distance travel in the post-classical centuries.

CONCLUSION

The great age of Buddhist travel began to draw to a close by the eighth century. There were still important pilgrimages within and among the Buddhist lands, and students continued to travel to major centers of learning. Paths continued to crisscross from Japan and Korea in the north

to Southeast Asia. Economic activity flourished within this zone as well, with Chinese merchants active throughout the region; indeed, China's only needs for outside products, mainly tea and spices, operated in this zone.

Heroic travel, however, outside the now-familiar pathways, faded. Buddhist decline in India reduced the original missionary impulse and the desire of other Buddhists to visit the subcontinent; Hindu leaders were far less interested in religious outreach. The later Tang emperors in China turned against Buddhism, another discouragement to travel under these religious auspices. Perhaps most important, Islamic military and religious activity increasingly displaced Buddhism, and Buddhist travel facilities, in Central Asia (see Chapters 6 and 7). This provided new opportunities for travelers from other regions, but it discouraged Buddhist ventures. More broadly, Islamic traders began to dominate the Indian Ocean, another deterrent to Buddhist outreach.

In this context, the focus of adventurous travel shifted to the Middle East, North Africa, and, a bit later, to Europe. Religious stimulus continued, but it highlighted Islam and, more gradually, Christianity.

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A decisive new framework

INTRODUCTION

The post-classical period quickly began to establish new religious incentives for travel, as the Buddhist journeys attested. New commercial ventures soon followed. By the tenth century, Arab and Persian sailors frequently embarked on eighteen-month trips to the coast of China. Although these long journeys were later replaced by somewhat shorter hops, conducted by Indian and Southeast Asian Muslims, the trade contacts continued.

It was the three centuries after 1000, however, that saw the most decisive changes in the systems relevant for travel and contact in Afro-Eurasia. These changes would combine with religious impulses, particularly from Islam and Christianity. They involved political systems and economic advance above all, but several new technologies were tucked in, particularly on the maritime side. It was this framework, in turn, that would allow the amplification of Muslim and Christian travel beyond the levels forged by the Buddhist pioneers.

Several broad developments in religious practice, in economic life, and in forms of governance combined to produce a marked increase in the number and length of overland and maritime journeys during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Soldiers, sailors, merchants, pilgrims, missionaries, slaves, prisoners of war, artisans, scientists, entertainers, diplomatic envoys, official couriers, imposters, adventurers, and renegades traveled east and west in numbers that were much larger than ever before.

FROM BUDDHISM TO ISLAM IN CENTRAL ASIA

As we have seen in the previous chapter, Xuanzang traveled in Central Asia just prior to a major turning point in the history of that region. In 651 Arab Islamic armies, fresh from their conquest of Persia, swept to the northeast and captured the caravan city of Merv (now Mary in Turkmenistan). The conquest of Merv marked the entry of Muslim military forces onto the

plains of Central Asia. During the next century, they pushed steadily eastward, gaining numerous allies and converts among Turkic peoples along the way. In 751 Muslim forces were successful in defeating a large Chinese army at the Talas River in the Pamir Mountains near Ferghana (today's Kyrgyzstan).

The victory at Talas gave Islamic military leaders control of most of Central Asia west of the Pamir range. In Xuanzang's day this region had been mostly Buddhist; it now became Islamic. Although the documentary record is thin, the evidence we have suggests that by 850 Central Asian city dwellers west of the Pamirs had converted to Islam and that by 950 the people in the countryside had followed suit.

One important consequence of the change in the Central Asian religious landscape was the decay of the network of Buddhist monasteries upon which Xuanzang and countless other travelers had depended. Islamic soldiers often targeted monasteries because they saw the Buddhist statues and paintings located there as manifestations of idol worship. In addition, as the peoples west of the Pamirs gradually converted to Islam, the monasteries that survived the initial Muslim onslaught faced steadily shrinking revenues. As a result, by 1000 little remained of the Buddhist 'hospitality network' that had provided refuge for numerous travelers in much of Central Asia for about a millennium.

However, the overall impact of the spread of Islam to Central Asia and to other world regions was clearly beneficial to travelers. For example, the early caliphs in the Abbasid dynasty (750–1258) brought political unity to large parts of the vast region stretching from the Indus River to the Atlantic. For perhaps 150 years the Abbasid *Pax Islamica*, presided over by caliphs such as Harun al-Rashid (ruled 786–809), was a boon to travelers of all types across a wide swath of Afro-Eurasia.

More enduring than the political order established by the Abbasids was the spread of Islamic teachings and lifeways. Wherever they went, Muslim military leaders, administrators, missionaries, and scholars encouraged the use of the Arabic language, founded Islamic educational institutions, and established legal systems grounded in Islamic law. Gradually these efforts led to the establishment of a new sense of cultural unity among the diverse peoples who converted to the new faith.

Because Muslims increasingly saw themselves as members of a great international community of believers (Arabic: *umma*) sharing in common practices, the potential for 'culture shock' on the part of travelers moving from one region to another in the *dar al-Islam* (Arabic: 'lands under Islamic law') was reduced. Moreover, two of the Five Pillars (essential obligations) required of Muslims had specific relevance for travelers. The pillar that called upon the faithful to make at least one pilgrimage to the holy places in Mecca spurred an increase in the number of caravans to Arabia from cities such as Cairo, Damascus, and Baghdad, and from

more distant locations in the Islamic world. Similarly, the pillar requiring Muslims to contribute to charitable institutions produced revenue that Islamic authorities used to establish a network of inns or hostels that usually included warehouses for goods and stables for pack animals. Called caravansaries, the inns served the needs of merchants, pilgrims, officials, and scholars. As the number of such travelers increased after 1000, the new Islamic 'hospitality network' became increasingly elaborate, replacing its Buddhist predecessor and spreading over a wider area.

CHINA LEAPS FORWARD

Beginning around 1000 China was the source of a second major series of changes that benefited travelers, in particular those who journeyed by sea. After their defeat by Arab Muslim forces at Talas in 751, the Chinese withdrew from two key regions east of the Pamir range, namely the Taklamakan Desert and the Gansu corridor, territories they were no longer able to defend from attacks by nomads. In abandoning the garrisons in the Taklamakan and Gansu, the Tang emperors relinquished authority over a crucial section of the Silk Road. For the next several hundred years the Taklamakan and Gansu regions fell prey to a succession of Central Asian peoples, causing trade and travel between China and the Central Asia to fall off somewhat.

The Tang dynasty's exit from its western territories was only one aspect of a broader series of changes that reshaped life in China in significant ways beginning about 750. Continuing internal conflicts and ongoing attacks by Turkic nomads from the west and the north led to the collapse of the Tang regime in 907. Following a brief period of political confusion, a general named Zhao Kuangyin founded the Song dynasty (960–1279) and reestablished central authority in China (albeit over a much truncated area when compared to the borders of the early Tang empire).

The Song era was a time of major economic and social transformation in China. Earlier, during the second half of the Tang dynasty, many Chinese had fled the political and military troubles in the region of the Yellow River—the country's traditional political and economic heartland—for the relative safety of the sub-tropical Chinese south, i.e. the lower reaches of the Yangzi River and the coast. This trend seems to have continued during the tenth century so that by 1000, for the first time in Chinese history, the number of people in the southern regions, the 'land of fish and rice,' exceeded that in the semiarid north, the home of millet and wheat.

The Chinese south now emerged as the center of a great economic surge that lasted for several centuries, producing ripples that reached as far as the Mediterranean. New varieties of quick-ripening rice and innovations in farming techniques boosted agricultural output, fueling

rapid population growth and the expansion of cities. The production of tea, textiles, paper, ceramics, coal, iron, and steel shot upward. So also did the trend in commercial activity. To facilitate the increase in trade, the Song government began to print paper money. In addition, the Song authorities continued the policy introduced by the Tang emperors of relying increasingly on tax payments in cash rather than in kind. As a result of these developments, for several centuries after 1000 China was the home of the most productive, most technologically innovative, and most commercialized economy in the world.

One of the most important aspects of the rapid economic growth during the Song dynasty was the great acceleration in China's involvement in overseas commerce. In the past, as we have seen in earlier chapters, most of China's foreign trade had been oriented toward the Silk Road through Central Asia. These routes continued to carry merchant travelers and others during the first half of the Song dynasty, although at a somewhat reduced rate.

Nonetheless, the Song emperors strongly promoted maritime trade from the beginning of their regime, probably because they saw it as a potentially valuable source of additional tax revenues. During the Tang period only one Chinese port, Guangzhou, had been authorized to engage in foreign trade; the Song emperors increased the number to nine. In each of these coastal cities a Maritime Trade Commission was established to supervise the merchants, inspect ships, and levy tariffs on imports. Chinese merchants who increased tax receipts from maritime trade were rewarded with appointment to official posts. The Song emperors also improved conditions for seaborne commerce by undertaking the dredging of harbors and the construction of shipyards, piers, docks, warehouses, and naval stations.

In 1127 the Song capital at Kaifeng on the Yellow River fell to an army of hunter/farmers from Manchuria known as the Jurchens, who quickly seized control of all of northern China. The loss of the Yellow River valley had the effect of reinforcing the 'southern strategy' of the Song emperors. During the second half of the Song period, the period known as the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279), the emperors transferred their capital to the great southern center of commerce, Hangzhou. Having lost their ability to collect taxes in the north, the emperors attempted to compensate, in part, by intensifying their efforts to boost maritime trade.

In consequence, by the middle of the twelfth century China's shippers had at their disposal a huge and technologically sophisticated commercial fleet that probably had no equal anywhere in the world. Chinese junks (from the Malay: *jong*) featured multiple masts, sturdy bamboo sails, hulls with watertight compartments, fixed rudders (rather than steering oars), and the mariner's compass. Some of these vessels were 200 feet long and could carry up to 500 tons of cargo. Although the junks were designed mainly to carry freight, they also made provision for passengers, most of whom were

doubtless merchants. The amenities for travelers included private cabins, fresh bathing water, and fresh vegetables cultivated in huge on-deck baskets.

These ships were major participants in what the Chinese referred to as the *Nanhai* (Southern Seas) trade, i.e. the commerce conducted in the China seas and the Indian Ocean. Vessels from Guangzhou, and from newly emerging ports farther up the coast such as Quanzhou, carried silk, tea, rhubarb, ginger, porcelain, and metal goods to harbors in Southeast Asia (present-day Vietnam, Java, the Malay Peninsula, and Sumatra), South Asia (Sri Lanka and India), and the Persian Gulf. For the homeward voyage, they took on ivory, incense, pepper, cotton cloth, cinnamon, nutmeg, mace, a variety of *Nanhai* rarities—and numerous merchant travelers.

THE MONGOL PEACE

A third great boon to travelers during the post-classical period was the Mongol Peace, the century of relative stability across much of Eurasia, ca. 1250–1350, following the conquests of Chinggis (Genghis) Khan (d. 1227) and those of his immediate successors. In 1251 when Mongke, the grandson of Chinggis, was installed as Great Khan, the lands ruled by the Mongols stretched from Korea and northern China across Central Asia to the Black Sea and the edge of the Hungarian Plain, a distance of about 6,000 miles. The extent of the Mongol empire was unprecedented in world history.

But the Mongol appetite for expansion was far from satisfied. In 1253 Mongke ordered one of his younger brothers, Hulegu, to gain control of western Asia, much of which was still under the nominal authority of the Abbasid caliphs in Baghdad. Within five years Baghdad had fallen to the invaders, the last caliph had been executed, and the Mongol frontier had been pushed beyond the Euphrates River to Syria. Here, not far from Jerusalem and the shores of the Mediterranean, the westward advance of the Mongols was finally halted. In 1260 at a site near Nazareth in present-day northern Israel, an Egyptian army defeated the Mongols and forced the nomads to drop back to the Euphrates, which then became the western border of the Mongol realm in the Middle East (i.e. greater Persia).

As Hulegu and his soldiers marched west toward Baghdad during the 1250s, Mongke and another brother, Khubilai, resumed the Mongol attempt to conquer China, a prime goal of the nomads since the time of Chinggis. It had taken the Mongols more than two decades of fighting, from 1211 to 1234, to wrest northern China from the Jurchens. The nomads needed even more time to defeat the Southern Song forces and gain control of the marshy and hilly terrain in the Chinese south. After initial gains during the 1250s, the operations in the south came to a temporary halt when Mongke's death in 1259 set off a bitter conflict among the imperial princes over who would become the new Great Khan.

By 1264 Khubilai had come out on top in the struggle to succeed Mongke and soon renewed the effort to conquer the lands of the Southern Song. To prevail in the south, Khubilai and his generals used various stratagems they learned from non-Mongols. Chinese defectors and POWs taught the nomads how to produce explosives. Middle Eastern Muslims with expertise in siege warfare built sophisticated catapults that the Mongols used to throw fiery missiles over southern city walls. When Khubilai realized that his soldiers would have to fight on rivers and in coastal waters, he called on Chinese and Korean defectors—and two notorious Chinese pirates—to assemble and lead a ‘Mongol’ navy. Assistance by these foreigners was important to the Mongols and helped them to crush the last resistance of the Southern Song in a naval battle fought near Guangzhou in 1279.

Having reunited north and south China for the first time since the 1120s, Khubilai was now the ruler of the richest and most populous country in the world. He was also, in theory, the Great Khan, the preeminent Mongol leader to whom the khans based in other regions of Eurasia were obliged to defer. However, the succession crisis that broke out after Mongke’s death marked the effective end of political unity among the Mongol princes. During the 1260s the Mongol empire broke up into four basically independent khanates. In Russia the Mongol rulers were known as the khans of the Golden Horde. In Persia they were called the *il*-khans. Central Asia, the least stable of the khanates, was the realm of the Chaghadaï khans. And in China, Khubilai reigned as a Chinese-style emperor.

The break-up of the Mongol empire after Mongke’s death means that we must take the term ‘Mongol Peace’ with a grain of salt, for during the following century there was considerable conflict between—and within—the various khanates. Especially sharp was the rivalry between the khans of the Golden Horde in Russia and the *il*-khans in Persia, both of whom sought control of the rich pasturelands in the Caucasus region. In addition, the khans of the Golden Horde and the Chaghadaï khans feuded continually with Khubilai. There were also many localized and sporadic struggles within the various khanates that were rooted in longstanding regional, ethnic, tribal, and family tensions.

Nonetheless, compared to earlier and later periods, the Mongol century was a time of unusual stability across much of Eurasia. In general, the khans were successful in establishing and enforcing political order (if not peace) over distances that were unprecedented.

One indication of the effectiveness of the khans in this regard was the sharp increase in the number and variety of travelers on the Silk Road. Soldiers, merchants, pilgrims, missionaries, artisans, scientists, painters, sculptors, entertainers, diplomatic envoys, and official couriers were on the move, more so than in any previous age. Large numbers of Europeans, Russians, Persians, and Arabs journeyed east to Central Asia and China. A somewhat smaller number of Chinese and Central Asians traveled west to Persia. In one

case, a Turkic Nestorian Christian from northern China traveled to Persia and then proceeded on to Western Europe as an envoy for the il-khan.

Specific Mongol policies contributed to the increase in long-distance travel in numerous ways. When Hulegu's soldiers marched west toward Baghdad in the 1250s, they forced the people of the regions they passed through to build roads and bridges for their wagons and carts. The roads were not paved but they were wider and sturdier than the trails they replaced. The bridges were usually made of boats placed side by side and covered with a surface of timbers and dirt, a technique used by the Persians during their invasion of Greece in the fifth century BCE. Mongol khans and princes helped boost the number of caravans on the Silk Road by loaning silver to Muslim and Turkic traders who organized merchant companies called *ortoys*. To speed the travel of Mongol couriers and envoys, the khans established an extensive postal-relay network, known as the *yam* system, which included inns and supplies of fresh horses located at regular intervals on the main routes. Authorized users of the *yam* system carried Mongol passports called 'tablets of authority' (Mongolian: *gerege*, Persian: *paiza*) that greatly improved the prospects for journeys free from attacks by brigands.

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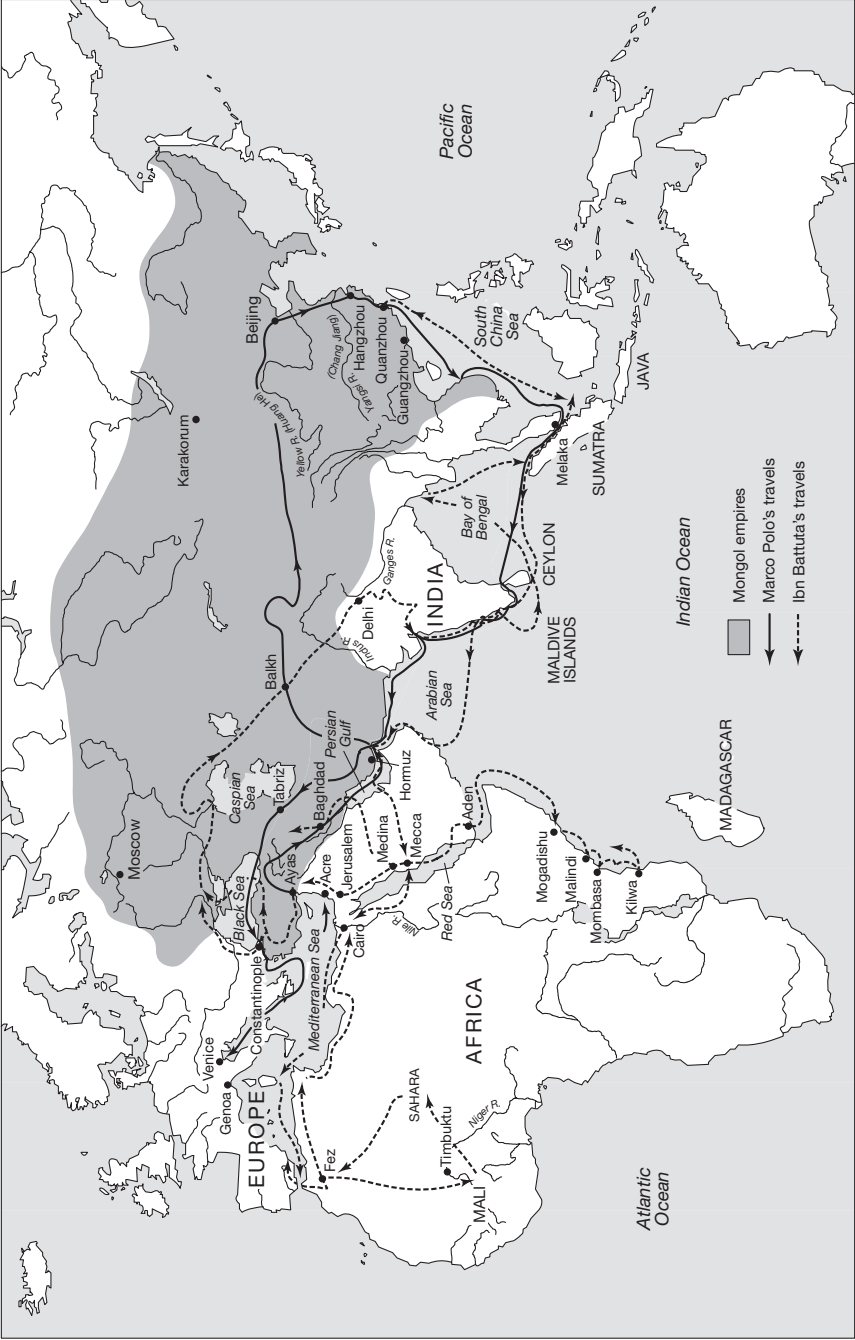
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Map 4 The travels of Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta

Muslim travelers, 700–1400 CE

INTRODUCTION

Not surprisingly, Muslim travelers were obvious beneficiaries of the great changes in the framework for contacts in the later centuries of the post-classical period. We will see that the greatest traveler of all, Ibn Battuta, benefited directly from the network of roads and inns through the Middle East and Central Asia; from the stability provided by Mongol rule; and from the prosperity of trading centers scattered from the Mediterranean to Africa to Asia. But Muslim travel patterns had been launched earlier in the post-classical period, for several purposes. The more ambitious routes extended overland, into Central Asia, but also through various parts of the Indian Ocean. This chapter explores these precedents and then their culmination in the great Muslim journeys of the twelfth to fourteenth centuries.

COURIERS AND DIPLOMATS

During the second half of the seventh century the Umayyad caliphs (reigned 661–750) established an imperial communication network, known as the *barid*, based on a corps of mounted couriers and an elaborate archipelago of inns and stables that linked their capital Damascus to other important cities of the Arab-Muslim empire. As we saw in Chapter 2, this type of communications system had long been used in the Middle East and in other regions.

Little evidence survives regarding the Umayyad post system, but the picture becomes a bit clearer following the regime change of 750 and the founding of the Abbasid dynasty (750–1258). The Abbasid caliphs expanded the Umayyad system, re-centering it on their new capital Baghdad, so that by the ninth century couriers riding camels, donkeys, horses, and mules covered the length of the empire, roughly the lands between present-day Kabul and Algiers, a distance of perhaps 4,000 miles. Still later, in the tenth century, the system was expanded to include more than 900 post stations, each spaced six

to twelve miles from its nearest counterpart. The historian al-Tabari provides us with information regarding the speed of the Abbasid courier network, reporting that mounted messengers typically covered ninety miles per day, a distance that could only have been achieved by riding both day and night.

Travel on the imperial communications network was mostly government-related. The main users were the caliph's officials, although there was also some private correspondence. In addition, the mail carried to and from Baghdad was intended to reinforce the authority of either the caliph or the various military elites who ruled in his name. Thus, when the courier system broke down in the mid-eleventh century, the fragmentation of the Abbasid realm accelerated. However, well before this downward trend culminated in the Mongol sack of Baghdad in 1258, the caliphs sponsored another type of travel, namely diplomatic missions to neighboring and distant states.

A few examples of long-distance travel by Abbasid-era diplomats will serve to illustrate the importance of this type of travel. Limited evidence from Carolingian Europe seems to establish that on three occasions Charlemagne (reigned 786–814) dispatched embassies to the court of Caliph Harun al-Rashid (reigned 786–809) in Baghdad. According to the European sources, Harun al-Rashid returned the courtesy by sending envoys to accompany two of the Carolingian parties as they made their way back to the Frankish court at Aachen. A short time later, in 821 CE, Tamim ibn Bahr traveled as an Abbasid envoy to the capital of the Uighur nomads in present-day Mongolia. A century after this, in 921 or 922, Caliph al-Muktadir sent Ibn Fadlan from Baghdad as an emissary to the king of the Bulgars, then based near the lower reaches of the Volga River in southeastern Russia.

Although the evidence regarding the Abbasid diplomatic missions is slight, the fragments that we possess nonetheless add to our understanding of Arab-Muslim political travel. For example, the brief account of Tamim ibn Bahr's journey to Central Asia informs us that once he reached the grasslands east of Samarkand, Tamim continued his journey east on a succession of relay horses provided by the Uighur khan. According to Tamim, the Uighurs had their own extensive network of post stations staffed by men who dwelt in tents. Tamim reports that he traveled on this system for forty days before reaching the Uighur capital, a distance of approximately 2,000 miles. This works out at an average speed of about fifty miles per day, an entirely plausible figure.

MARINERS

Tamim ibn Bahr's journey from Baghdad to Mongolia, a total distance of approximately 3,500 miles, while impressive in its own right, looks somewhat less so when compared to contemporaneous travel by Muslim

merchants across the Indian Ocean. The distance from Basra, one of the main Abbasid ports in the eighth and ninth centuries, to Guangzhou, the key contemporaneous Chinese entrepot, is more than 6,000 miles. During the early ninth century Muslim merchants—a mixture of Arabs and Persians—began to make sailings between these two harbors (with many stops along the way), and in so doing established one of the longest commercial routes in the world prior to 1500 CE.

The written evidence for these early voyages across the Indian Ocean to the China coast is scanty but illuminating, especially when considered along with material remains. Chinese records inform us of a huge massacre of Arabs and Persians in Guangzhou during an uprising against the Tang authorities in 878 CE, evidence that seems to make it clear that a large community of Muslim merchants had somehow made its way across the Indian Ocean by this time. Two key Arab-Persian sources dovetail with the Chinese report. *The Account of China and India*, a book dating from the ninth to tenth centuries and attributed to a Persian merchant named Sulayman, is based on the experiences of merchants and sailors who traveled frequently from the Persian Gulf port of Siraf, then in its heyday, to Guangzhou. Equally important is the collection of seaman's tales entitled *The Book of the Wonders of India*, which dates from the tenth century and is attributed to a Persian sea captain named Buzurg ibn Shahriyar. In the *Wonders of India*, one of the most interesting stories centers on a skilled seaman from Siraf named Captain Abhara who, in Buzurg's telling, was the first sailor to travel regularly from the Persian Gulf to the China coast. Another of Buzurg's tales concerns a Jewish merchant from Oman, one Ishaq ibn Yahuda, who sailed to China and returned with a large quantity of musk and other rarities.

Although there is real value in both Sulayman and Buzurg for the student of Indian Ocean commercial voyages, both books are vague about when the sailings began. Here is where archaeological evidence comes into play. Digs at the site of Siraf in present-day Iran have unearthed significant quantities of Chinese porcelain, which scholars date from the early ninth century. Thus it seems that Arab-Persian merchants based in Gulf ports began to book passage for the long voyage to Guangzhou sometime during the reign of Harun al-Rashid.

These journeys must have been fraught with danger. Buzurg's tales are full of storms, shipwrecks, and marauding pirate convoys that seem to be based on a residue of fact and probably express the genuine fears that sailors and merchants felt as they contemplated the long voyage east. Key stops along the route included ports on the Malabar coast of India, Malaysia, and southern Vietnam. Sailing to each of these destinations seems to have taken about a month, with an additional month needed for the final leg from Vietnam to Guangzhou. Taking into account necessary downtime at each of the three major stops en route (for trading, taking on new supplies,

and ship maintenance), the total time needed for the voyage from the Persian Gulf to the China coast was probably about six months.

EARLY PILGRIMS

If merchants were the most frequent Islamic travelers during our period, it is likely that pilgrims to Mecca were the second most likely group of Muslims to undertake long journeys. Scholars of early travel thank their lucky stars for the pilgrims because religious travelers were far more likely than anonymous couriers and secretive merchants to leave written records of their journeys. Indeed, the Islamic travel narrative or *rihla*, a major genre for Muslim writers, was largely invented by pilgrims to Mecca. Let us now turn to a consideration of how the experiences of two early pilgrims help us to understand Muslim travel for religious reasons.

Queen Zubayda (763–831), the wife of Harun al-Rashid, made several pilgrimages to Mecca (as did the caliph). She did not leave a narrative of these journeys, but other evidence, some of which is archaeological, testifies to her importance in upgrading the travel facilities needed by pilgrims, especially those who were part of the annual caravan to Mecca organized by Abbasid officials in Baghdad. For these pilgrims, the difficult part of the journey began at Kufa, the caravan city on the lower Euphrates River near present-day Najaf in Iraq. Between Kufa and Mecca there are about 800 miles of forbidding Arabian Desert. Along this key route Zubayda sponsored the construction of reservoirs, the digging of wells, and the building of rest houses. As a result of the queen's efforts, several sites along the Kufa–Mecca road were named in her honor. By the twelfth century, when the pilgrim traffic had greatly increased, the road linking Kufa and Mecca was known as *Darb Zubayda* (Zubayda's Road).

Our second pilgrim to Mecca, Nasir-i Khusraw, was born in the early eleventh century near Balkh, the Central Asian crossroads that we have encountered several times in earlier chapters. Nasir became an administrative official for the Seljuk Turks, then in the process of extending their hold over the eastern provinces of the Abbasid empire. At age forty-two Nasir decided to take a leave from his position with the Seljuks and go on pilgrimage to Mecca. During the next seven years, from 1046 to 1052, he traveled widely in the Middle East, lived for three years in Cairo, and made four pilgrimages to Mecca. After his return home, Nasir wrote an account of his travels, known as the *Safarnama*, which is the earliest substantial record of the Muslim pilgrim experience now available in English.

Nasir-i Khusraw's book contains a wealth of information about many aspects of travel in the Islamic heartland during the eleventh century. He is careful to specify his routes, often precise about the distance between stages, and meticulous about indicating the dates of his arrival at key

points along the way. These features of his book come through clearly in his record of his initial pilgrimage to Mecca.

Nasir informs us that he set out in March 1046 from the caravan city of Merv (Mary in present-day Turkmenistan), where he had been based as a Seljuk official, accompanied by his brother and an Indian slave. The three-some headed west via Nishapur, Tabriz, Lake Van, Aleppo, and Beirut, reaching Jerusalem exactly one year later. They spent the next three months visiting the sacred sites in Jerusalem and in several other Palestinian towns. Nasir (and perhaps his brother) then joined a party of pilgrims for the trip to Mecca on foot, arriving in the Holy City in June 1047.

The Persian pilgrim reckoned that by the time his rather circuitous route brought him to Jerusalem he had traveled 876 parasangs, or about 3,000 miles. If we add another 1,000 miles for his trip from Jerusalem to Mecca, we arrive at an estimate of 4,000 miles for the fifteen-month journey from Central Asia to Mecca.

In recounting his experiences en route, Nasir provides us with some interesting tidbits of information about the regions he traversed, the cities he visited, and the peoples he encountered. We learn about the mountainous landscape of northwestern Persia, the sale of pork in Armenian bazaars, the massive walls surrounding the city of Diyarbakir in eastern Anatolia, the water wheels and Roman ruins in Syria, the spacious harbor at the Mediterranean port of Acre (today's Akko in Israel), and the majesty of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem.

Richly informative in many ways, Nasir nonetheless leaves us guessing at the answers to some intriguing questions. Let us consider three: Apart from his walking trip from Jerusalem to Mecca, how did he get from place to place? What precautions did he take in the interest of safety? Why did he skirt Baghdad and avoid Zubayda's Road on both his outward and homeward journeys? Answers to these questions are critical to any rounded reconstruction of Khusraw's movements and to an understanding of the broader issue of early Islamic travel in general.

It is very likely that Nasir rode most of the way from Merv to Jerusalem on a succession of donkeys and camels. As we have seen in earlier chapters, merchant caravans composed of lengthy strings of donkeys and camels had long crisscrossed the Middle East and were in wide use during his lifetime. It would have been very easy for him to join any number of caravans and in so doing gain added security from bandit raids. Nasir's frequent comments on the price of goods in bazaars, his occasional mention of tolls paid by merchants, and his scattered references to caravansaries suggest that he probably traveled as far as Jerusalem in this way. His route also suggests a link with the caravan trade: Nishapur, Tabriz, Diyarbakir, Aleppo, and Acre were important stops for merchants hauling cargo on major overland routes in the Middle East.

At one point in his journey, while making his way westward from Tabriz through the highlands of Armenia, Nasir tells us that he traveled with a soldier who had been dispatched to assist him. Who was responsible for this aid is unclear. Farther ahead in Armenia, Nasir was accompanied for a time by a courier, otherwise not identified, but possibly a messenger from Baghdad. Perhaps in mountainous Armenia, where banditry was endemic, extra safety measures in the form of official escorts were advisable.

Before leaving Nasir-i Khusraw, let us return to the issue of the routes he followed on his outward and homeward journeys. It is clear that he used major trade routes for much of the way, but what is striking about the routes he chose is how indirect they were, especially the outward journey. After setting out from Merv, why did Nasir not head directly for Baghdad via the great Khurasan Road across Persia, proceed on to Kufa, and then proceed to Mecca via Zubayda's Road? The same question arises from an examination of his route home. Again, he avoided the Darb Zubayda and Baghdad, choosing instead a difficult southerly road to Basra and then a very challenging passage over the Zagros Mountains to Isfahan.

Nasir does not tell us his reasons for avoiding Baghdad, so we must guess why he did so. The answer may lie in the complicated religious and political situation that prevailed in mid-eleventh century Baghdad. Nasir was an adherent of the minority Shiite sect known as the Ismailis or Seveners. The Abbasid caliphs were the heads of the majority Sunni branch of Islam. Although the effective military and political rulers in Baghdad since the mid-tenth century, the Buyids, were Shiites, they were about to be shoved aside by the Seljuks, who were Sunnis. If Nasir had gone to Baghdad, he would have been in a city where both religious and political authority was in question. Perhaps he steered clear of the Abbasid capital to avoid being caught up in conflicted and changing religious and political circumstances.

A NEW PHASE

On his first pilgrimage in 1047 Nasir-i Khusraw had to walk from Jerusalem to Mecca because, he tells us, there were no pilgrim caravans that year. In addition, Nasir reports that in Mecca many of the hostels constructed by the caliphs for pilgrims from Iraq, Persia, and Central Asia had 'fallen to ruin' and that the reservoirs constructed to catch rainwater for the pilgrims were empty. Nasir's comments about the hardships he faced may indicate that Muslim pilgrimages fell off somewhat during the eleventh century.

By the next century, however, Muslim pilgrimages seem to have revived and in some cases began to combine with what might be called scholarly travel—trips that yielded richer and more detailed published reports about the places visited and the sights seen. Ibn Jubayr, born in Spain in 1145, provided an initial model here.

According to legend, Ibn Jubayr, an official for a Muslim governor in Spain, was forced by his employer to drink several glasses of wine, forbidden by Islamic law. His guilt was such that he decided on a trip to Mecca, and kept a journal or travelogue (*rihla*). He left southern Spain in 1183 and was gone for over two years. Although he traveled during the period of the crusades, he was quite comfortable in booking passage on Christian ships and indeed commented that Christian and Muslim merchants mingled easily, simply charging appropriate fees, even though their societies were at war. Thus he took an Italian ship to Egypt. He disliked sea travel, and encountered several storms that terrified him and at one point was actually shipwrecked, but he persevered. Once in the Middle East he visited not only the holy cities, Mecca and Medina, but also Jerusalem, Damascus, and Baghdad, offering rich descriptions of the architecture he encountered. And he gained a lifelong travel bug: he took two other trips, one another two-year effort and a final voyage to Alexandria, Egypt, on which he died. His work and its format would powerfully influence his great successor traveler, Ibn Battuta, who indeed used the same title for his work.

One other aspect of Muslim travel deserves attention: it fanned out not only between Spain/North Africa and the Middle East/Central Asia, and also across the Indian Ocean, but also south toward other parts of Africa as well. Thus, Buzurg, the Persian sea captain we have met earlier in this chapter, wrote one of his stories about his travels from Oman down the coast of East Africa. This story also covers the Africans, some of them sold in the slave trade, who themselves traveled to the Middle East and in a few cases back to Africa. By the tenth century, some traders were routinely journeying from the Persian Gulf down the coast as far as present-day Mozambique.

Many travelers and traders moved between the kingdoms of West Africa, like Ghana and later Mali, and the North African coast. A number of accounts were written, most of which have since been lost. A Spanish Muslim scholar, al-Bakri, though not himself a traveler, pieced these accounts together in a study of Africa in the eleventh century. He provides elaborate information about African governments, religion including the spread of Islam, and trading patterns. Like many travelers and those dependent on accounts of strange lands, he accepted some preposterous information, like the story of a type of female goat that could become pregnant simply by rubbing against a tree. And he also repeated dubious accounts of rampant cannibalism. For the most part, however, al-Bakri's work provided detailed information about various African kingdoms and

both interest in and tolerance for customs different from his own. As we will see, knowledge of Africa would play an important role in Ibn Battuta's ventures, just as Ibn Battuta would add greatly to what was known about the great subcontinent.

There were other pioneering travelers as well. Ibn Battuta himself told of meeting the pious sheikh Abdallah al-Misri, known as 'the traveler'—though while he praised his 'saintly life' he was careful to note that al-Misri had never visited China, Sri Lanka, Spain, or Mali 'so that I have outdone him by visiting these regions.' Islam provided an elaborate, far-flung network and active encouragement to travel, plus abundant precedents for journeys of various types. But it was Ibn Battuta who capitalized on all this for an unparalleled life of adventure.

THE WORLD'S GREATEST TRAVELER?

Abu 'Abdallah ibn Battuta was born into a family of Muslim legal scholars in the coastal city of Tangier, Morocco, in 1304. He also studied law, receiving the best education available, and in 1325 embarked on a pilgrimage to Mecca—thus launching an amazing career of travel in a fashion well-established in the Islamic world. He took a year and a half on his trip, also visiting North Africa, Egypt, Palestine, and Syria. After the visit to Mecca, he also went to Iraq and Persia, taking advantage of the familiar travel network within the Middle East. While the Middle East was politically divided at this point, after the collapse of the caliphate, travel persisted, and Ibn Battuta benefited, as he reached Persia and ultimately points eastward, from the firm political rule of the Mongols.

EARLY YEARS

As in the case of many great travelers, we know little of Ibn Battuta's early life or even, save by speculation, his personal motivations. His family's wealth and standing undoubtedly facilitated a life of considerable travel. Tangier was a commercial city, participating actively in Mediterranean trade, and this trade was itself increasing. But the obvious context for Ibn Battuta's travels was the expansion of the Islamic community from Spain and Morocco, in the west, to Southeast Asia, and the east–west trade routes that had accompanied Islam in its development during the post-classical centuries. Ibn Battuta was an amazing traveler, covering distances greater than any other traveler had achieved to that point, but he was working within an established system, not routinely pushing into unfamiliar territory. As we will see, when he did press

beyond the Islamic world, he immediately felt uncomfortable, though he often persevered.

Islam framed Ibn Battuta's travels in several specific ways. First, as a legal scholar and a polished gentleman, Ibn Battuta had professional access throughout the Muslim world. The importance of Islamic law meant that lawyers were not tied to particular political states, but could work over a range of territory wherever Islam predominated. Though we lack personal details, we can assume that Ibn Battuta even dressed in a fashion common to Muslim lawyers and we know that, like his colleagues, he was bearded. Second, Ibn Battuta was steeped in the intense piety of the Sufi movement within Islam. Much of his travel involved visits to pious Sufi holy men and shrines, where he could report about Islamic religious life to a wider audience of educated Muslims eager for religious news and inspiration. Further, Ibn Battuta was undoubtedly influenced, particularly in his early travels, not only by a basic commitment to the pilgrimage but also by a desire to take advantage of the advanced centers of Islamic learning, like Cairo and Baghdad, that far surpassed what was available in Morocco at the time. Finally, Ibn Battuta also benefited from the Islamic obligation of charity. Frequently, in his travels, even during his initial trip through North Africa toward Mecca, rulers or pious wealthy individuals would give him funds or other goods, for helping wayfarers was a key category for the charity enjoined as one of the five sacred pillars of Islam. Later, in the Middle East, Muslim jurists or local rulers frequently aided Ibn Battuta, either with funds or by providing camel caravans and other travel provisions. Ibn Battuta's obvious piety, and his social and educational standing, made him a prime target for sympathetic assistance.

Ibn Battuta made his religious impulses clear, in describing how he set out from home, in what turned out to be the first step toward many years away:

My departure from Tangier, my birthplace, took place ... with the object of making the Pilgrimage to the Holy House and of visiting the tomb of the Prophet, God's richest blessing and peace be on him (to Mecca and Medina respectively). I set out alone, having neither fellow-traveler in whose companionship I might find cheer, nor caravan whose party I might join, but swayed by an overmastering impulse within me and a desire long-cherished in my bosom to visit these illustrious sanctuaries. So I braced my resolution to quit all my dear ones, female and male, and forsook my home as birds forsake their nests. My parents being yet in the bonds of life, it weighted sorely upon me to part from them, and both they and I were afflicted with sorrow at this separation.

Dunn, p. 31

FIRST PILGRIMAGE

The pilgrimage itself, which inspired Ibn Battuta's first trip, involved a journey of 3,000 miles from Morocco to Mecca. While it was possible to use European or Islamic ships along the North African coast, most pilgrims went overland, traveling in groups for security against the many dangers, including robbery, that constantly threatened. Ibn Battuta could safely start out alone, for Morocco was under a stable monarchy at this point, but he could expect to find groups along the way. As he moved on, he did indeed pick up companions, but also some unexpected problems. At one point he fell ill, and was urged to stop until he recovered, but he argued that if God decreed his death he would prefer to die on the road, so he pressed on. Later on, his party was attacked by a band of robbers on camels, but, as he put it, 'the Divine Will diverted them and prevented them from doing the harm they had intended.' At another juncture he was overwhelmed with loneliness, when townspeople greeted some others in his party but ignored him; but another pilgrim befriended him and kept him company until they were all safely housed in a new city. By the time he left Tunis, farther east in North Africa, he had managed to advance his Islamic studies and had been named a leader of the traveling group on the strength of his erudition and legal credentials. Ibn Battuta also became engaged to a member of the traveling party, but then fell out with her father as the trip progressed so the contract was broken; but he then married another companion (the first of several marriages he would report on his travels, with no information about the women involved or his ongoing relationship with them).

In Egypt, Ibn Battuta met with a Sufi mystic who grasped the young man's passion for travel. The mystic urged his visitor to plan trips to India and China, to meet fellow Sufis there—another indication of the vast extent of Islamic connections in the post-classical period and beyond. Ibn Battuta later wrote that he was 'amazed' at the mystic's prediction, 'and the idea of going to these countries having been cast into my mind, my wanderings never ceased until I had met these three that he named and conveyed his greeting to them.'

Ibn Battuta's participation in a considerably embellished pilgrimage made him unusual but hardly exemplary among Muslim travelers. He was, after all, visiting Islamic highlights. Few people had the time or resources to spend so long on the road, but others had done so—like Ibn Jubayr. Ibn Battuta's later description of this first trip, while very interesting to historians in his perceptions of Mecca, Cairo, Damascus, and Baghdad, also fit within a fairly well-known framework: by now there were numerous other accounts of the same places available in Arabic. To be sure, Ibn Battuta did make a brief overland excursion from Baghdad on

into Persia and Central Asia, again benefiting from the stability of Mongol control, but this too was no longer an unusual experience during the decades of the Mongol empire.

It was the next series of steps that began to single out Ibn Battuta as someone with a particularly great comfort in reaching out to the broader reaches of Islam, and an apparently insatiable travel bug. Indeed, Ibn Battuta began to find himself in places he never intended to go.

WANDERINGS

After an extended stay in Mecca, on a second visit, he set out for Yemen and the Persian Gulf (known in the region, still today, as the Arabian Gulf). Again, he found opportunities for religious and legal study, but soon he went on to Aden, probably now thinking that if he could find a ship heading for Africa, he would go along as well (even though he disliked travel by sea). He was now involved in a center of Indian Ocean trade, mixing with a greater diversity of peoples than he had encountered in his travels to that point. He also began to meet a wider range of wealthy merchants, who may have contributed to his itinerary but whom he could praise in any event because they offered charity ‘as the law commands.’

In Africa, a first stop brought him to what he termed ‘the dirtiest, most disagreeable, and most stinking town in the world,’ but soon he reached Somalia and specifically Mogadishu, a booming African port city where Arabic was widely spoken and where Ibn Battuta’s religious credentials brought him into contact with the leader of the local Muslim school and with the town’s ruler. It is at this point, also, that Ibn Battuta’s account becomes more varied, as he describes costumes and habits that, though usually combined with Islamic observance, are strange to him. His report thus combines wonder at the colorful robes and musical processions of the African coastal rulers, while also noting their pious habits and their respect for ‘men of religion and noble descent.’

From East Africa Ibn Battuta returned to the Arabian peninsula, the trip enlivened by fears that his guide was going to kill him in order to steal clothing—but Ibn Battuta brandished a spear and got away, arriving exhausted at the town of Qalhat where he took six days of rest at the home of the local governor. Next stop, back across the Arabian peninsula, was Mecca once again.

Ibn Battuta’s next destination, in principle, was India, where he hoped to get a job with the Delhi sultanate, an extensive Islamic empire on the subcontinent. But efforts to arrange the most direct transportation failed—this would have involved crossing the Persian Gulf—and so instead he headed overland to the Turkish-dominated lands of the northern Middle East. He took an Italian boat up the eastern Mediterranean coast—Europeans now

dominated these shipping routes—and then planned to move overland across Anatolia. He was befriended by Turkish associations of artisans that provided hospitality as he moved from town to town. As always, he met with a number of religious scholars and members of the political elite. His learning brought him new attention from Turkish rulers, eager to learn more about Islamic law and to gain legitimacy as Muslim leaders, and he was commissioned to write about the *Hadith*, the key traditional legal compilation of Islam. He began to acquire growing wealth, including his first slave, which made his travel more elaborate but, at least on occasion, more comfortable. He also found, increasingly, that he needed to hire interpreters, for finding Arabic speakers became more unpredictable.

Still in theory heading to India, but probably eager to explore the fringes of Islamic civilization, Ibn Battuta next crossed to the Crimea, heading for the massive Mongol kingdoms, or khanates, of Russia and Central Asia. At one point he interacted with a European merchant compound, filled with churches whose bells infuriated him as a sign of religious sacrilege—but he quickly moved on to cities that were more firmly Islamic.

Ultimately, by 1332, Ibn Battuta reached the center of Mongol power in Russia, north of the Caspian Sea on the Volga River. By now he was moving by wagon train, a new experience given his greater experience with pack animals (donkeys or camels), but the common means of travel in Central Asia. Like European visitors a few decades earlier (see Chapter 8), he found the khan both tolerant and eager to deal with foreign visitors. The court was in principle Muslim, but Ibn Battuta had much to say about the free-wheeling habits of the Mongol women, accustomed to a significant, and public, social and political role. To him, the women looked like servants, and he was amazed at the courtesy with which they were treated at banquets, with the ruler sitting only after his queen had taken her seat. And he added, ‘All of this is done in full view of those present, and without any use of veils.’

Somewhat ironically, it was one of the ruler’s wives who opened the way to his next adventure. A Greek princess named Bayalun, sent in vain hopes of alliance by the beleaguered Byzantine emperor, wept when Ibn Battuta told her of the distances he had traveled from his native land—his travels reminded her of how far she was from home. But she received permission to go back to Constantinople to give birth to her child, and Ibn Battuta contrived an arrangement to accompany her—his first experience definitively outside the borders of Islam. He was distressed that the princess dropped any pretense of being Muslim as soon as she left the castle—as she entered what he termed the ‘land of infidelity’. But he admitted that the party carefully tolerated his own prayers.

He had a month in Constantinople, which he toured extensively without much editorial comment. Then, though the princess stayed with

her father, he returned to the Mongol center in Russia. And then, finally, in the dead of winter, he left his most northern destination and began to wander toward India, a huge trip in and of itself. He encountered many Arab and other Muslim merchants, some heading toward India, some to China, some back to the Middle East. Finally, after passing through Balkh (which he found ‘completely dilapidated and uninhabited’) and numerous other caravan cites, he crossed through the Hindu Kush into the Indus River valley in the spring of 1333. Three years had passed since he had last left Mecca, and he was eager for more permanent employment in what he had heard was a tolerant and opulent court of the Delhi sultan in India, reputed to be eager to employ talented foreigners. Of course Ibn Battuta had to wander around a bit in northwestern India first, true to his spirit: he met with some Sufi divines, had a brush with a rhinoceros, and later encountered and escaped from a large band of Hindu bandits. He also encountered unusually elaborate bureaucratic procedures. The Delhi government investigated new arrivals carefully, and Ibn Battuta had to pledge to serve the state before he was allowed to pass further.

FROM INDIA TO CHINA

For over six years, Ibn Battuta stayed roughly in one place, an unusual respite. He gained an official position and for a time lived lavishly. But the sultan was beset with political difficulties, and was far too bloodthirsty in his reprisals for Ibn Battuta’s taste. The Moroccan may also have married into the wrong camp, and he associated with the Sufi leader who was on the sultan’s wrong side. At one point, Ibn Battuta was arrested, whereupon he fasted and recited the Quran to solicit divine protection. Released, he maintained a more humble life style and actively sought a way to get out of the sultan’s control. He proposed a pilgrimage to Mecca, which was hard to turn down, but the sultan instead offered him the chance to become his ambassador to the Mongol court in China, knowing his ‘love of travel and sightseeing.’ Here was a chance for more adventure, again beyond the borders of Islam, and there was strong financial and political backing as well. In 1341, Ibn Battuta was on the road again.

Getting out of India was easier said than done. Again, Ibn Battuta’s group had to fight off large numbers of Hindu bandits, in a situation where the authority of the Delhi sultan was deteriorating rapidly. According to the traveler’s later account, his party killed large numbers of their assailants, but in the process Ibn Battuta was separated from his main group and at one point captured. Though he spoke no Hindi, a few of his captors knew Persian and he was able to argue for his release, though at the expense of giving up all his possessions. An Indian Muslim took him in charge, and he was able to rejoin part of his original official

delegation; though some of his colleagues felt the trip was ill-omened, Ibn Battuta insisted in going forward and ultimately made his way to India's western coast, where the sultan had arranged shipping. But his troubles were hardly over. He prepared to board one of the great Chinese ships, impressed with its size and solidity compared to the smaller and flimsier Arab dhows. A storm took the boat away and with it all the gifts with which he had been entrusted to accompany his mission to the Mongols in China. Realizing that this mission was aborted, Ibn Battuta signed on with a local Muslim to lead a local military force against a rival Hindu city-state on the west coast, but this campaign failed, after some initial success.

But while Ibn Battuta was clearly running out of official options, his interest in getting to China burned as bright as ever, so he decided to set out on his own, counting on hospitality from Islamic communities in Southeast Asia. He visited the Maldive islands first, noting that he had heard 'a lot' about them. His initial plan to spend a bit of time as a tourist changed, however, when it became clear that his legal scholarship could put him in a position of power in the islands' fledgling Islamic state, where prestigious outside authority was deeply welcomed. Ibn Battuta cemented his unexpected position by taking a wife from an elite family, clearly enjoying the opportunity to be a major player. He would later claim—and it is impossible to know how much he inflated his career—that he did quite a bit to establish standard Islamic law and punishment on the islands, against what he clearly viewed as sloppy practice. But he was unsuccessful in a campaign to get local women to cover their upper bodies, despite several orders that they wear clothes. 'I would not let a woman enter my court to make a complaint unless her body were covered; beyond this, however, I was unable to do anything.' Local political rivalries soon ended Ibn Battuta's Maldives career, and he set sail for Sri Lanka. He would later plot a bit with officials in Ma'bar (in southeastern India) to organize a force to attack the Maldives, but nothing came of these plans.

Ibn Battuta did some touring on Sri Lanka, including a trip to Adam's Peak, a mountain revered, for different reasons, by several religions. He joined Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu pilgrims in this venture, camping for three days near the summit. He also managed to obtain some valuable gifts from the local ruler. Back to a ship for the next stage of the journey, the traveler was again briefly shipwrecked, trapped overnight amid rising waters because he did not swim well enough to escape on his own. This was followed by a serious bout of malaria and then, en route once more, a pirate attack in which he lost all the jewels he had been given in Sri Lanka. 'They left nothing on my body except my trousers.' Disorder was common in the waters of southern India and Southeast Asia, where many pirates operated, but Ibn Battuta was having more than his share of bad

luck at this point. What's impressive, as always, was his determination to proceed. After a few detours, he finally proceeded to Burma, the Malay peninsula, and to the island of Sumatra, where an Islamic trade network connected directly to China.

Islam was just beginning to be established in what is now Indonesia, but there was enough religious structure for Ibn Battuta to find local officials who would take him in, enjoying the opportunity to discuss Islamic law. One local prince organized the ship that would take him to China, arriving, after a voyage of about four months, in 1346.

Ibn Battuta's later account of China was unusually sketchy, compared to his rich descriptions of India or the Maldives, and some scholars have wondered if he ever really traveled there (a problem we'll encounter with the great traveler discussed in the following chapter, as well). But there is no real reason to doubt the visit, and in fact there is a different explanation for his comparative brevity.

For China engulfed Ibn Battuta in what one historian has properly labeled a kind of culture shock. On the one hand, he was deeply impressed with Chinese prosperity and its stable politics under Mongol rule (which was about to disintegrate, but he had no way of knowing this). 'China is the safest and most agreeable country in the world for the traveler. You can travel all alone across the land for nine months without fear, even if you are carrying much wealth.' The contrast with what he had experienced, particularly in India and vicinity, was clearly vivid. On the other hand, he found China, so far outside the Islamic orbit, profoundly disorienting:

China was beautiful, but it did not please me. On the contrary, I was very worried by the fact that the heathen have the upper hand there. When I left my house, I saw countless dreadful things. That disturbed me so much that I stayed at home and only went out when I was forced to do so. When I saw Muslims in China, I felt as though I was seeing my own kith and kin.

This sense of disapproval of a people so removed from God's law may have produced the sketchiness in his later collections. He claims to have covered more than 3,500 miles in China, visiting several cities. He does seem to have made contact with some of the Mongol emissaries he had met in India, who helped set up accommodations for him. And he met a Muslim Indian merchant he had known before, who had loaned him money back in Delhi—again a sign of the rich network that could surround travelers in different parts of Asia. And, accepting an invitation to visit the Mongol emperor in Beijing, he even met a young Moroccan scholar, on travels of his own. But though Ibn Battuta says that he made it to Beijing, it is likely that this part of his account was entirely fabricated.

What is clear is that after a fairly short stay in China, he returned to the south coast to find the boat the Sumatran ruler had made available to him, and set off again—in fact, for home.

HOMEWARD BOUND

His trip, which took three years, brought him back first to India, where he probably debated trying to resume some kind of career but decided against it, partly because many of his former contacts had dispersed. Another pilgrimage to Mecca helped organize his itinerary, but he did not go directly, but rather returned again to Persia, Baghdad, and Damascus, where among other things he learned that a son he had sired on his first visit, in 1326, had died at the age of ten. He also learned from a Moroccan jurist that his father had died fifteen years before. Traveling on through Syria, in 1348, he first encountered the waves of bubonic plague that were beginning to sweep through the Middle East—what the Europeans would soon call the Black Death. Ibn Battuta would report on the massive death rates he encountered, and the religious supplications that created the disease—from Christians and Jews as well as Muslims. He mentioned no special precautions of his own, and went on to Egypt (where deaths rates were higher still) and thence to Mecca, thus fulfilling his wish to see the Holy House one more time.

Then what? This was probably the question he now faced. With the plague cutting into population and prosperity alike, in regions like Egypt, the idea of going home may have seemed particularly appealing. So far as Ibn Battuta knew, his mother was still alive. He had been away for twenty-four years, and conceivably he wanted a bit of calm. Predictably, the trip home was not uneventful: a brief stop in Sicily—the only time Ibn Battuta entered Catholic territory—brought another threat of piracy, so the Moroccan was glad to get out quickly.

When he did reach Tangier he learned that the plague had claimed his mother's life a few months earlier. There were other relatives and friends to see, and doubtless Ibn Battuta began to establish a reputation as a source of amazing travel stories. But he soon grew restless, and joined a Muslim force seeking to defend Gibraltar, and from there he went on to several Muslim cities in southern Spain, ultimately reaching Granada. There, he met local leaders and Islamic jurists, in his usual pattern. He also made the acquaintance of a young secretary and author, Ibn Juzayy, who was intrigued by Ibn Battuta's stories and began to write down some of the names of the people the traveler had met over the previous quarter century. Relatively soon, Ibn Battuta was back in Morocco, probably considering settling down to a legal career in the bustling city of Fez. He was forty-six years old.

WEST AFRICA: MALI

There was, however, one key part of the Islamic world he had not yet visited, and apparently the pull was irresistible. The kingdom of Mali, 1,500 miles away, across the Sahara, beckoned, and in 1351 Ibn Battuta undertook the last great trip of his career to acquaint himself with West Africa. Here was another opportunity to sell his legal services in a region where, as in south and Southeast Asia, rulers were trying to bring their governments more fully in line with Islamic principles. Possibly more important: here was another set of sights to see, within the confines of the Islamic outreach.

The trip to Mali involved joining up with camel caravans; it depended heavily on reliable guides who knew the location of key oases, essential to cross the hundreds of miles of desert. Ibn Battuta's later account would tell of slaves in desolate salt mines, essential to regional trade, and his disappointment at the meager fare offered by the first sub-Saharan ruler he encountered. Again, despite some urge to get home as quickly as possible, he pressed on to the capital of the Mali kingdom. Here, more disappointment loomed, for he was kept waiting for several months before the sultan paid any serious attention to him. 'I have journeyed to the countries of the world and met their kings. I have been four months in your country without your giving me a reception gift or anything else. What shall I say of you in the presence of other sultans?' And while he ultimately did get a house and an allowance in gold, he continued to think that the ruler was a cheapskate.

Ibn Battuta's accounts of Africa proved to be among the most important historical evidence his travels produced, for we have so little alternative documentation of West Africa in this crucial period in its history. But the accounts were also deeply colored by Ibn Battuta's scorn for practices that did not measure up to what he saw as Arab standards.

Two problems particularly caught his attention. In the first place, many rulers were carefully hierarchical, sometimes even not addressing others directly but using spokespeople. This simply did not meet Ibn Battuta's sense of the kind of interplay that should occur between leaders and their people. The other problem, and one that he had encountered before, involved women. Sub-Saharan African customs allowed far too much friendly familiarity between men and women, in his view; and in some cases women were improperly clothed as well. Ibn Battuta was quick to find behaviors of this sort 'outlandish.'

On the other hand, Ibn Battuta found much to admire as well. Rulers may have forced their subjects into too much humility, but Ibn Battuta praised the 'small amount of injustice' in Mali (by which he meant among other things strict punishments for crime). 'There is also the prevalence of peace in their country, the traveler is not afraid in it nor is he who lives there in fear of the

thief or of the robber by violence’—qualities that obviously hit home to the Moroccan by dint of personal experience. Pious Muslim religious practice also won praise. ‘Another of the good habits among them is the way they meticulously observe the times of the prayers and attendance at them, so it is also with regard to their congregational services and their beating of their children to instill these things in them.’ This piety made it all the harder for Ibn Battuta to understand areas in which local culture seemed to take precedence, as in the treatment of women.

Ibn Battuta visited several parts of Mali, including the great scholarly city of Timbuktu that was just beginning its ascent to great prominence in the Muslim world. He met several local leaders, liking some of them much better than his initial hosts. But, according to his later account, the Moroccan ruler sent an emissary to call him back to Fez, presumably eager to learn about conditions in Mali that were relevant to economic and diplomatic conditions alike. So, in the dead of winter—Ibn Battuta claimed that the return through the Atlas Mountains was harder than his earlier winter trips in Central Asia—he began the return home. His travels were over.

IBN BATTUTA’S BOOK AND ITS RECEPTION

Ibn Battuta died in 1368 or 1369. He passed the last years of his life as a judge in Morocco, in relative obscurity. Quite possibly he started a new family. His final years, however, contrasted obviously with the wanderlust that had defined so much of his adulthood.

But, in between the travels and the tranquil service, Ibn Battuta also recorded his travels, and this, along with the travels themselves, would serve as the source of his ultimate fame and as his larger contribution to the human experience. After he returned to Fez in 1354, he undoubtedly reported to the Sultan, Abu ’Inan, who then ordered him to stay in Fez and write a narrative of all his travels for the pleasure of the royal court. Because Ibn Battuta was hardly an author, the sultan commissioned Ibn Juzayy, the secretary the traveler had met in Granada, to serve as collaborator, in order to shape the work into the form of a *rihla* or travel account. The two worked together for about two years, with Ibn Battuta dictating notes and the secretary then rounding these out into a more coherent narrative. The result was a highly personalized story, with great emphasis on individual adventures and the force of the traveler’s personality, rather than a carefully documented interregional study. But a good bit of wider information entered the stories, which is why—along with the sheer fascination for Ibn Battuta’s ambitious exploits—they retain such value today.

As with many presentations of this sort—we will encounter another in the following chapter—it is impossible to sort out the degree of self-promotion and resultant exaggeration that the *Rihla* contains. Ibn Battuta obviously

billed himself as a legal scholar, and he had sold that label to many of the local princes he had encountered in South Asia and Africa. But other jurists who had met him found his knowledge only ‘modest,’ or as one put it bluntly, ‘he had not too much of what it takes.’ Here clearly was a motive for his travels, whether he fully recognized it or not: he was not likely to get a good post in the Islamic heartland, so he pushed out farther, where standards were lower and the needs for legitimation greater.

There were also reports that the account itself found critics. The great historian Ibn Khaldun noted the work and its ‘remarkable’ reports, but said that many people doubted some of the stories—for example, Indian princes who showered gold coins on their subjects from the backs of elephants—and thought that Ibn Battuta must be a liar. Interestingly, while modern scholars note some problems with the treatment, particularly concerning China, and some areas where the narrative clearly copied other materials, like Ibn Jubayr’s report, they have largely given the descriptive parts of the *Ribla* a generally positive verdict.

Few people commented on the *Ribla* at the time one way or the other. Ibn Battuta’s stories clearly created a brief local stir in Fez. The written account won some readers in other parts of North Africa. And copies continued to circulate in North Africa and the Sudan, into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But it was not widely cited by Muslim scholars, nor eagerly read the way Marco Polo’s treatise was, as we will see in the following chapter. Only in the nineteenth century did European, not Muslim, scholars revive an interest in Ibn Battuta, seeing correctly what a fantastic traveler he was and how useful at least some sections of his account were as historical evidence.

CONCLUSION: A COMPARISON

Why the modest reception? Although we can see how incredibly far Ibn Battuta traveled, for the most part he was reporting on areas with which the Muslim world was already familiar. His writing was in this sense a mirror, not an eye-opener. He reflected the largest culture zone ever created in world history to that point, but he pushed beyond it only slightly, and when he did he tended more to criticize than to provide useful information. Rarely, by the same token, was he commenting on achievements educated Muslims would wish to emulate: he discovered no areas with superior material or technological levels, or at least he did not highlight them (his praise for the great Chinese ships was a partial exception); he reached no political systems that were better than what could be found back home. At most he could cite some regions that were about as good as the Islamic heartland in piety or in the preservation of public order. His travels set a record, and reveal an unusual time in world history

as well as an unusual person. But he was not adding greatly to the store of available knowledge; he was not firing new ambitions.

In this, he and his account differed considerably from the impact of the other great traveler of the post-classical period, the Italian Marco Polo. Marco Polo, as we will see, relied on many of the same facilities as did Ibn Battuta, even though his journeys occurred a bit earlier: he benefited from the extent of Islamic control and the power of the Mongols. But Marco Polo judged with a different, less critical mindset. And he came from a society that was generating new levels of curiosity but from a less advanced material and political base. The comparison, and particularly the comparison of impact, is revealing. But comparison must not detract from what Ibn Battuta had achieved, and the extent to which, in distances covered, dangers encountered, and variety of societies and regions observed, he set a record unprecedented in world history to that point.

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Marco Polo and the heritage of Christian travel

INTRODUCTION

In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Europeans entered their first phase of heroic travel. Pushing well beyond the confines of Europe and the Mediterranean, pioneer travelers began to venture as far east as China. Their trips were important in themselves, in bringing direct knowledge of Chinese goods and technologies. Their accounts, further, fired ambitions back home, leading subsequent generations to think about how to reach out toward even more ambitious routes and rewarding destinations. European travel, in other words, began to influence later phases of world history, just as Islamic travel had already done.

The new travel built on the several key developments that improved travel conditions, particularly in Central and East Asia, during the six centuries or so that followed the journey of Xuanzang. The spread of Islam itself was one key factor—as we have seen already in the previous chapter. By the thirteenth century, European travelers used some of the same networks in Central Asia that Ibn Battuta would utilize in his wanderings from Persia to India. The second trend was the wide economic upswing, affecting much of Afro-Eurasia, beginning around 1000 CE and lasting for several centuries thereafter. The third crucial change that benefited land-based travelers during the late post-classical period was the century or so of political unity that the Mongols brought to many parts of Asia from 1250 to 1350. This was even more helpful to Europeans in the thirteenth century than it was to Ibn Battuta a century later.

As with Islam, however, a fourth component must be sketched, for it preceded the great trips of the thirteenth century. We have seen that Muslim motivations to travel, along with expanding commerce, kicked in well before the later post-classical centuries. The same holds true for Christian incentives, with the qualification that these incentives initially applied to a smaller geographical area and much less ambitious commercial contacts. But well before 1000, it had become clear that Christianity, like Buddhism and Islam, provided a major spur to adventurous travel.

Like the other world religions, Christianity encouraged people to travel for religious purposes—seeking conversions or making pilgrimages to cherished sites including the Holy Land. As we have seen in Chapter 3, early missionaries, including some of the apostles, had traveled widely during the Roman Empire, seeking conversions and setting up early church organizations from Armenia and the Middle East to Spain, from North Africa to Britain. Already a pattern of pious pilgrimage to Jerusalem was established, though in what numbers we do not know. Patterns resumed, in more challenging circumstances, during the chaos that followed Rome's fall.

Ultimately, the focus of this chapter shifts back to overland travel through Central Asia—rather different from the routes Ibn Battuta would pursue, reviving suggestions of the Silk-Road contacts of the classical period. Now, however, land-based travel became geographically more ambitious—ultimately of course reaching from Europe to China. Sea routes also supplemented the travel patterns, another sign of geographical expansion as well as the newer maritime technology. Travel expanded quantitatively as well as geographically—there was more of it. And it had consequences beyond trade and diplomatic representation alone. First, however, as a crucial backdrop, the precedents of Christian travel need brief attention.

THE POST-CLASSICAL PERIOD

The collapse of the Roman empire in Western Europe, in the fifth century, ushered in several centuries of unusual challenge to travelers. There was no political unity and scant protection of any sort on the roads. A variety of invasions added to instability, but the greater problem for ordinary travelers was simply local robbery and violence. Most travelers carried virtually nothing with them, partly because the roads were so difficult that luggage was an impossible burden, partly because anything of value would simply attract thieves. A traveler would normally have a cloak, to shield against rain and, if necessary, to sleep in (for a tent was far too cumbersome to carry); a staff, to help on hills or across streams and to use as a weapon if necessary; a knife, for cutting meat; some stones to spark a fire; possibly a leather container for liquids. A purse might carry letters of introduction. Some travelers carried money, but others deliberately did not, believing that if they could honestly tell thieves they had nothing with them they might be freer from attack.

Early Christian Europe lacked the organization to set up regularly spaced hotels or places of refuge. Church institutions, however, regularly provided hospitality—many pilgrims simply slept in churches or monasteries. Many churchmen reserved a sizeable percentage of their budget for supporting travelers, for there was simply no other means of sustaining

people on the move. Gradually, public inns were set up, particularly as commercial travel increased, for example aiming at periodic regional market fairs. But European journeys remained difficult for a long time—sharing difficulties with other parts of the world but compounding them with poor facilities and limited organization.

Significant travel occurred even so, and religion unquestionably provided a key spur. Belief in God, in the first place, provided some hope for protection. Travelers routinely placed their trips in the hands of God, Mary, or one of the saints. Columbus, for example, placed his ships under the special protection of the Virgin Mary, and every time he used a new pen he would christen it, 'Jesus and Mary be with us on our journey.' But religion also provided a reason for travel. By the sixth century, the Roman pope was sending missionaries from Italy to Britain and northern Germany (trips of over 700 miles), to try to convert heathen peoples and to establish church organization. The success of these missions provided ongoing reasons for travel, as church officials needed to go back and forth from Rome to maintain organizational coherence and spiritual inspiration, and ordinary pilgrims began to see Rome as a destination to fulfill their own spiritual aims.

An example: Boniface—ultimately St. Boniface—was born in England around 675, and became a church official. Between 716 and his death in 754, he was almost continually on the road. He went to Rome three times, the last trip when he was over sixty. He worked as a missionary in northern Germany, repaired church organization in Bavaria, and worked in other parts of Western Europe as well. While he never wrote a formal travel account, his letters and report on his holy life helped promote a wider sense of travel in the eighth century.

When Boniface moved about, he was careful to obtain letters from local rulers and leading churchmen, urging protection and hospitality. Pope Gregory II at one point urged people to provide Boniface and those who accompanied him with 'food and drink and anything else he might need.' Anyone who bothered him was threatened by the Pope, in the same letters, with eternal damnation. The hope was not only that food would be provided, but also escorts through dangerous territory, free ferrying across rivers, and exemption from any tolls along roads.

Nearly eighty years of age, Boniface decided to go back to northern Germany, to resume basic missionary work. He sailed down the Rhine River with several other missionaries. Reaching his destination, he was preparing to baptize several new converts when he and his party were slain by robbers. Legend has it that a fresh-water spring immediately burst forth at the spot where he died; his own body was taken back to Holland for burial.

Religion prompted travel by European women as well, though the dangers were even greater to them. A British nun in 720 wrote that she desperately wanted to visit Rome, 'the one-time mistress of the world, and to ask for forgiveness for our sins there, as many others have done

and do, and myself most of all, who am already older and have sinned and failed far more in my life.' Boniface and other male authorities worried about the risks for women on the road, but they could not bring themselves to try to forbid travel, because they respected the spiritual needs the women were expressing. But Boniface himself believed that most women who ventured a long pilgrimage not only risked danger but also temptation, such that only a few would remain pure. As he delicately put it, 'For there are only very few towns [in northern Italy or France] in which there is not a woman who has broken her vows or a whore from among the English race. And this is a nuisance and a shame for your whole Church.' Travel had many dimensions.

Patterns of religious travel in Western Europe were paralleled by significant missionary work emanating from the Byzantine empire. In the ninth century, for example, two brothers from northern Greece, Cyril and Methodius, traveled widely in the Balkans and northward, into what is now the Czech Republic.

Increasingly also, religious travel was supplemented by commercial activity. Merchants went from Scandinavia through western Russia to Constantinople. Other merchants regularly moved from the Low Countries and Britain to Italy, usually overland but sometimes using the Atlantic coast as well. Networks of Jewish merchants emerged as well, some of them venturing from France into the eastern Mediterranean and even beyond.

At the end of the eleventh century, a new chapter in Christian and European travel was opened when Pope Urban II called for a crusade to recapture the Holy Land for Christianity. His appeal reflected the extent to which Europe, now better organized, was prepared for ventures outside its own boundaries; and the crusades, while ultimately a religious failure, certainly sparked a new range of European outreach.

West European crusaders, most of them feudal lords but sometimes joined by ordinary people as well, expected to travel a considerable distance. A pious knight from Britain, for example, would cover well over 1,500 miles. A few crusaders made it clear that it was hard to leave home—doubtless a common sentiment among travelers, but not always given voice. A thirteenth-century French lord, setting out, not only prayed for protection at the grave of a local saint, but later wrote: 'When I left I did not let myself turn back ... for fear my heart would break at the sight of my castle, which I was leaving with my two dear children.'

The crusades of course had many consequences. They established a brief period of Christian rule in the Holy Land. They probably both reflected and caused increasing animosity of Christians against Muslims—Christian attacks on Muslim territories in Spain were mounting at the same time. They also encouraged Italian and other merchants to take advantage of religious ventures to advance their own commercial aspirations—as in the crusade that diverted to attack Constantinople in order to weaken

Byzantine commerce in favor of west-European. Crusaders learned a taste for new kinds of goods and more sophisticated urban life, and thus spurred new consumer tastes back home, which in turn encouraged more regular trade for spices and other Asian products that moved through the Middle East. All of this had significant implications for European travel, and for broadening it beyond purely religious motivation. Most basically, however, the crusades and ensuing commerce began to make movement from Europe to the Middle East routine, greatly expanding the range of potential travel by the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The Mediterranean again became a regular waterway for Europeans, as it had been for Greeks and Romans and still was for Islamic merchants.

Not surprisingly, this new range inspired mixtures of commercial and religious travel. An English merchant, operating in the twelfth century, initially peddled wares in England and Scotland, later branching out to Scandinavia. His commercial activity was never entirely satisfying, and he began to add religious travel as well, going to Rome as well as visiting saints' shrines closer to home. After sixteen years of commercial success, he went on a formal pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and later took his parents on a religious trip to Rome, often walking barefoot to demonstrate his humility or carrying his mother on his back. Jacques Coeur, a far more successful French merchant, made his fortune through commercial trips to Egypt and the eastern Mediterranean, bringing goods back and forth from Europe; he visited Damascus (Syria) regularly to buy spices, but also traded in rugs, Chinese silk, and Indonesian spices. But turning more religious in later life, he died on a Greek island during a latter-day crusade, serving in a papal fleet directed against the Muslims.

The key points are clear. Christianity, like the other missionary religions, could inspire and sustain travelers in difficult journeys. The religious impulse could easily link with commerce and create denser networks of travel activity. Rising European power and additional religious and trading efforts extended European contact with the Middle East, and by the thirteenth century visits to the Middle East were almost commonplace, despite the official tension between Christianity and Islam. Ambitious popes were even commissioning larger diplomatic and missionary missions to Ethiopia and Persia, though they had little effect. This was the context in which a still-more ambitious series of ventures developed, linking Europe directly with East Asia for the first time.

But for this dramatic new chapter, which involved the famous journeys of Marco Polo and others, European motives and precedents were only part of the story. The larger context now came into play, involving the wider ramifications of Arab and Islamic expansion, the general surge in prosperity, and above all the impact, and to Europeans also the threat, posed by the Mongols. Combining with established European paths and precedents, this new framework helped extend European travel beyond the Middle East and forged the first known direct links with China.

THE FIRST STEPS

The earliest known contemplation of a trip to China by a European actually predated the Mongols, though it certainly utilized the connections possible under Islam and reflected the growing prosperity of China. Benjamin of Tudela, a Spanish Jew, went from Spain to Italy, Greece, Palestine, Damascus, and Baghdad, and then into the Persian Gulf, between 1166 and 1171. In Bahrain he learned about how one could travel from the Indian Ocean to 'Zin' (China)—a trip that, he was told, would take sixty-three days (breaking at Sri Lanka). He wrote a travel book that reflected the far-flung patterns of trade by some European Jews, and helped stimulate further interest on the part of Jewish travelers—but it was not a book encountered by European Christians.

Fast forward to the 1240s, with Mongol power clearly in the ascendant. Pope Innocent IV, nervous about Mongol invasions of Russia and Hungary, dispatched a series of emissaries to the Great Khan, hoping to preempt any attack on Western Europe. The Pope may also have harbored some hope of converting the Mongols and/or of using them as allies against the growing Turkish threat in the eastern Mediterranean. In 1245 the Franciscan monk John of Plano Carpini set out with a companion, Friar Benedict the Pole, on a mission, but the khan refused the invitation to convert and insisted instead that the pope submit to Mongol supremacy. John was disappointed, but he learned a great deal about the Mongol realms and his account interested a European audience. Four other missions, by Dominican monks, reached the Mongols between 1245 and 1251, though they all failed because both pope and khan insisted on dominance. The ventures stimulated further interest in Asia, however, as the emissaries met all sorts of peoples in the Mongol capital—and also a smattering of Europeans including some Slavs, some Greeks, Germans, and Hungarians and at least one Englishman and several Frenchmen including an artist, Guillaume Boucher, who had created a splendid silver drinking fountain for the khan. Clearly, European travel had broadened even before the most famous trips occurred.

Between 1253 and 1255, William of Rubruck undertook a slightly different kind of religious trip to the Mongols, hoping for broader missionary activity rather than official representation of the papacy. William had a letter from the King of France, translated into Turkish and Arabic, but he would later note that he should have had 'a good interpreter or rather several, and plenty of money.' He went with another monk, one translator, two men to look after the pack animals, a bearer, and a young slave. His party crossed the Black Sea from Constantinople to the Crimea, where he met the regional khan who gave him letters to his superior who in turn endorsed him for the Great Khan. Traveling overland, with Mongol patronage, he finally reached the capital, Karakorum

(not too far from the present capital of Mongolia, Ulan-Bator). He ultimately traveled over 9,000 miles and suffered from all sorts of hardships, from untrustworthy local guides and interpreters to outright hunger and thirst. He did finally get back to Crusader holdings in the Holy Land, though his hopes to meet the French king there were disappointed. Assurances that the Mongols would provide full supplies for the trip home were also disappointed. And there was no progress at all in the missionary effort—the Mongols asked about a Christian prayer that they could add to their religious mix when they went on their own travels, but the interpreter frustrated all attempts to teach them the Lord's Prayer. Rubruck's statement to one of the Mongol rulers that those who were not saved by becoming Christians would be damned was greeted with taunts and insults, such that the interpreter became truly frightened; clearly, Rubruck brought a fairly stiff version of his religion that did not go over too well.

But for all his complaints about travel hardships, and his lack of success, Rubruck was also impressed by much that he saw. The strangeness was obvious; the opulence of the Mongol palace inspired awe; but a host of different goods and customs also drew comment. At one point, reporting to the French king, Rubruck even regretted that he had only words to describe the wonder of what he had experienced. 'The women construct beautiful wagons for themselves, which I could only describe to you by visual means. And I would have painted everything for you, if I could have done so.'

William of Rubruck went back to his religious order after his trip, and his report was only a small part of the growing array of contacts with China by the middle of the thirteenth century. His account provides both context and counterpoint for the far more famous venture of the same period, where religion took a back seat to sheer adventurism and where humble reporting yielded to an orgy of personal pride and exaggeration. Marco Polo and his uncles come on the scene.

MARCO POLO AND HIS BOOK

Marco Polo was born around 1254 in Venice, then one of Europe's largest, wealthiest, and most beautiful cities. Marco's father and two uncles were prosperous merchants who specialized in the maritime commerce between Venice, Constantinople, and the Crimean port of Sudak.

Although we know little about Marco's early years, we may assume that his thinking was shaped by the prominence of the Catholic Church in Venice. It is likely that he was named after St. Mark, the city's beloved patron saint. According to a long and plausible tradition, Marco grew up near the domed Basilica of St. Mark, one of the most famous churches in all of Christendom and the reputed burial place of the apostle's remains.

In addition to receiving instruction in the teachings of the Church, Marco's education almost certainly included attention to developing the practical skills necessary for success in the world of commerce. We may also speculate about the extent to which daily life in one of Europe's most interesting cities stirred young Marco's imagination. Was he moved by the minstrels in the squares who sang about the legendary adventures of Alexander the Great in India, by the aroma of Asian spices in the markets, by the sight of the many galleys and sailing ships anchored in the harbor? It seems likely.

Whatever the nature of his early experiences, Marco's life changed forever at age seventeen when he left home with his father and uncle Maffeo for a trip to China and back that lasted twenty-four years. Or so we read in our only substantial source for his travels, the book he wrote after returning to Venice in the 1290s. But how truthful is Marco Polo's book? This basic question has intrigued Polo scholars and members of the wider reading public for the past 700 years. Let's see why.

A major obstacle standing in the way of firm conclusions about the reliability of Marco Polo's book is that the original manuscript, presumably handwritten on sheets of parchment (sheepskin) or vellum (cowhide), disappeared long ago and no exact copies are known to survive. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries when numerous scribes made copies of Polo's book, some of the copyists omitted, altered, or added material, according to their own preferences or those of their patrons. These changes seem to have been carried forward in the printed editions, which began to appear in the 1470s. The process of translating Polo's book, which was probably written in medieval French, created more complexities. One of the editions of the book that scholars regard as most valuable is a Latin version dating from the 1470s. How close is it to the original? We cannot be certain.

The absence of the original text and the changes made in later editions mean that all modern, scholarly editions of Marco Polo's book are, in reality, assembled from numerous early versions. Although much lengthy and painstaking research has gone into the production of the most authoritative modern editions, we must use them with caution. Our conclusions about where Marco Polo went, what he saw, what he was told, what he remembered, and what he wrote must remain somewhat tentative.

There is a second reason why certainty regarding Marco Polo's travels remains elusive for scholars: Polo wrote his book in collaboration with a ghostwriter named Rustichello of Pisa, about whom very little is known. Prior to meeting Polo in the late 1290s, Rustichello seems to have been a writer of semi-popular adventure stories based on the legends of King Arthur. Most scholars think that he and Polo met in Genoa where they were being held as prisoners of war, both men somehow having become caught up in the many wars between the various Italian city-states.

Because Polo's background may not have provided him with the literary skills needed to turn his travels into a book, his chance meeting in Genoa with an experienced writer was important. We know nothing about the details of their collaboration, but most experts think that Polo, perhaps aided by notes, dictated the substance of what became his book to Rustichello. Rustichello then put Polo's testimony into readable form, adding some literary flourishes of his own. Fortunately, which parts of the manuscript were based on Polo's travels, as opposed to Rustichello's imaginative powers, is generally clear.

We certainly can pinpoint some passages in the book where Polo and Rustichello allowed literary license, and perhaps a desire to attract large numbers of readers, to trump accurate reporting. The book contains some romanticized versions of battles that Polo could not have witnessed but which resemble military engagements that Rustichello had described in an earlier work of fiction. It also includes stories of Christian miracles, legends about Alexander the Great, fables about imaginary animals, and exaggerations about the wealth of the East. While these passages suggest much about the beliefs of Polo's European contemporaries, they are of no value as sources of what he observed on his travels.

The many legitimate questions raised by the careful scrutiny of Polo's book have led some scholars (a minority, to be sure) to doubt that he ever went to China. According to the Polo skeptics, Polo probably obtained his information about China from travelers he met in Persia or the Black Sea region. This explains why, in the view of the skeptics, the book omits mention of many important features of thirteenth-century Chinese life. How could an observant European spend seventeen years in China, so this argument goes, and not mention the Great Wall, the technology of woodblock printing, the practice of female footbinding, the custom of drinking tea, the use of chopsticks, the distinctive Chinese system of writing, or the importance of Confucianism?

The skeptics advance other reasons for doubting that Polo went to China. Although his book has him governing a major city in south China for three years, this is not confirmed in Chinese records. Indeed, there is no Chinese evidence of any kind about a visitor named Marco Polo. Polo's book also claims that Marco and the elder Polos provided important assistance to Khubilai Khan in the capture of the south Chinese city of Xiangyang. But the battle of Xiangyang was fought in 1273, just prior to the Polos' arrival in China.

Despite the arguments put forth by the Polo skeptics, most scholars, including the authors of this book, think that Polo probably traveled to China and, more importantly, that his book contains a basic core of valuable first-hand information about the Mongol era. It is true that the book includes some legends and travelers' fantasies and that it may also overplay Polo's importance in China to the point of falsehood, but the

few pages devoted to such matters do not, in the thinking of most scholars, invalidate the remainder of the text. With regard to the frequently noted omissions in Polo's coverage of China, it is possible that some of them are a consequence of the disappearance of the original manuscript, or of alterations made in later editions. But it is also quite likely, as we shall see later in this chapter, that some of the gaps are a result of the particular circumstances that Polo actually encountered during his years in China.

Mindful of the complexities connected with the study of Polo's book, let us now look more closely at where he probably went, what he seems to have observed, and how his book contributes to our understanding of thirteenth-century Eurasian travel. To do so, we will draw on the excellent and widely available edition of Polo's book translated by Ronald Latham together with the findings of numerous other scholars. (For full citations of these books and articles, see Further Reading at the end of this chapter.)

THE JOURNEY OF THE ELDER POLOS

The first section of Polo's book, labeled the Prologue in many editions, provides us with a plausible account of the immediate background of Marco's travels. We read in the Prologue that during the 1260s Niccolo and Maffeo Polo, Marco's father and uncle, traveled from Venice to Central Asia, and perhaps as far as China, by ship and caravan. Their journey seems to have begun as a rather typical Italian trade mission to Mongol-ruled south Russia via Constantinople and the Black Sea. But when the Polo brothers reached the encampment of the Golden Horde on the Volga River, probably at Sarai, they discovered their way back to the Black Sea was blocked, perhaps because of the restoration of Byzantine authority in Constantinople in 1261, a change which benefited the Genoese and injured Venetian interests (according to one report the Greeks had executed fifty Venetians trying to escape via the Black Sea), as well as hostilities between their hosts and the Mongol rulers (the *il-khans*) in Persia. Altering their plans, the Polo brothers journeyed southeast to the Central Asian caravan city of Bukhara, then controlled by a branch of the Mongols, where they probably planned to turn west and return home by crossing through Persia. Instead, for reasons that are unclear, the brothers remained in Bukhara for about three years, during which time they seem to have learned the Mongol language.

The next leg of the elder Polos' journey may have been unprecedented (for Europeans). When the Polo brothers departed Bukhara, they headed east rather than west. They did so, we read, at the invitation of a Mongol official from Persia who was passing through Bukhara en route to the court

of the Great Khan in China. In accepting this invitation and traveling to the headquarters of Khubilai Khan, the Polos may have become two of the first Europeans to reach China. (We cannot be sure of this because Khubilai's court was somewhat mobile; he could have greeted the Polos at his summer capital at Shangdu in Mongolia, or at some other location in Central Asia.)

We read further in the Prologue that Khubilai was most intrigued by his visitors from the Latin West. He questioned the Polos extensively about political and religious circumstances in Europe and they were able to respond in Mongolian. At the conclusion of their meeting, he asked the Polos to act as envoys to the pope in Rome. Khubilai had letters written asking that the pope send him a hundred learned Christians, perhaps to serve as administrators in China. The letters also requested some oil from the lamp that burns at the tomb of Christ in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, apparently an indication of Khubilai's well-known openness to all religions. To insure the Polos' safety on their mission, Khubilai gave them a Mongol escort and, more significantly, a 'golden tablet of authority,' i.e. a passport, that instructed his subjects to provide the Polos with lodging, horses, and additional escorts.

Leaving Khubilai's court, the brothers made their way back across Central Asia and Persia, a journey of nearly 5,000 miles, arriving at the Armenian port of Ayas on the Mediterranean coast around 1269. From Ayas, they sailed south to Acre (today's Akko), the crusader stronghold on the coast of Palestine in what is today's Israel. During their stay in this port, where Venetian merchants had been active since the beginnings of the crusades, the Polos learned that they would be unable to deliver Khubilai's letters to the pope because the reigning pontiff had recently died and the cardinals of the Church had not yet chosen a successor. Advised by a Church official that they should wait until a new pope had been selected before attempting to deliver Khubilai's messages, they sailed for home.

When the Polo brothers arrived in Venice, following an absence of nearly a decade, they found that Niccolo's wife (whose name we do not know) had died. Reunited with Niccolo's son Marco, then about fifteen, the brothers spent the following two years in Venice awaiting news from the Vatican regarding the election of a new pope. Hearing none, and eager to return to the court of Khubilai, they decided to depart Venice again, this time accompanied by Marco. Their plan was to return to Acre, obtain letters to Khubilai from Church authorities, and stop in Jerusalem for some oil from the Holy Sepulchre. Having partially fulfilled Khubilai's requests, they would then make their way back to his court, beginning their overland journey at Ayas. (Ayas became even more important, as the key port for Christians, following the fall of Acre and the other crusader ports of Tyre and Tripoli in 1291.)

MARCO POLO BEGINS HIS TRAVELS: THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

As the ship on which the Polos had booked passage churned out of Venice's harbor and began to plough through the Adriatic Sea en route to Acre, we may wonder about the thoughts that passed through young Marco's mind. What had his father and uncle told him about their experiences in the East? Had they told him of their meeting with Khubilai Khan? As he drew the sea air into his lungs, did Marco have any inkling that he had embarked on a journey that would excite the imagination of people for centuries to come? We can only guess at the answers to such questions because Polo provides us with very little information about himself. In general, he seems to have believed, like most premodern travel writers, that his readers would be more interested in the lands and peoples he observed—and learned about in other ways—than in his own inner life (how different from the angst-filled travel writing of today!).

Thus the Prologue tells us nothing about the details of the Polos' voyage across the Mediterranean. However, because of the acceleration of commerce in the Mediterranean from the time of the early crusades, we have much evidence that can be of help in this regard. We know that Italian merchants and shippers, particularly those from Venice and Genoa, made frequent sailings to Acre and Ayas. From 1104 to 1291, the period when Acre was under crusader rule, Venetian merchants had special trading rights in the city. They profited handsomely by carrying large numbers of crusaders, pilgrims, merchants, and commodities to and from the crusader port each year. Ayas emerged as a major center of international trade around 1200, in connection with the establishment of the small Anatolian kingdom of Cilician Armenia. Over the next century and a half, the Anatolian port flourished as a critical link between the Silk Road and numerous harbors in the Mediterranean and Black Sea.

We may assume that when Marco and the elder Polos departed Venice in 1271 they did so between the months of April and August. As in the classical period, Mediterranean voyages in the thirteenth century usually took place between April and September, when the winds and other conditions were favorable. The outward voyage from Venice to Acre, which had the benefit of following winds, usually took about three to four weeks; the return trip, against the prevailing winds, took much longer.

The Polos' voyage to Acre occurred during the early stages of a major breakthrough in Mediterranean nautical technology that was based in the shipyards of Venice and Genoa. Italian hulls were now longer (up to 130 feet), sturdier (capable of carrying 600 tons of cargo), and carried more serviceable sails than had been true in earlier centuries. Some of the most significant innovations of the time (the fixed rudder, the maritime compass, and charts of the coastlines) probably came from China via the

Indian Ocean. Other novelties, such as the addition of ‘castles’ fore and aft (front and rear), seem to have grown out of the distinctive traditions of ship construction in the Mediterranean. Regardless of the provenance of these improvements in maritime technique, their impact spread quickly throughout the Mediterranean region. The number of voyages in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea surged. Early in the fourteenth century, the route through the Strait of Gibraltar to the Atlantic reopened for the first time since the Roman era.

According to the Prologue, the three Polos stopped, as planned, in Acre and Jerusalem en route to Ayas. While in Jerusalem, the Prologue has it that they obtained oil from the Holy Sepulchre. Although Mamluk Egyptians, who were Muslims, then controlled Jerusalem, this claim is plausible. Other Christians visited the Holy City at about the same time without incident.

However, when we read further in the Prologue that in Acre the Polos met the newly elected Pope Gregory X, we are entitled to some skepticism. The Prologue states that the pope gave the Polos letters and gifts for Khubilai Khan. Although we know from other evidence that the new pope was indeed in Acre in 1271, the absence of any papal record regarding the Polos—or letters from Khubilai Khan—is troubling. Did Marco and Rustichello invent the story of the meeting with Gregory X to pump up the interest of their readers in the pages to follow? We cannot exclude this possibility.

OVERLAND THROUGH PERSIA

There is much uncertainty regarding the route the Polos followed from Ayas, the leg of their journey that took them through Mongol-ruled Persia to the port of Hormuz on the Persian (Arab) Gulf. They may have begun with a 600-mile trek through the highlands of eastern Anatolia and Armenia—where caravan traffic was well-established—to Tabriz, the Mongol capital in Persia and a major center of long-distance trade. From Tabriz, they would have turned south, continuing overland for about 1,000 miles to Hormuz. (An alternative scenario has the Polos heading east from Ayas to the Euphrates River and then moving downstream to the Gulf port; this latter route is illustrated on the map on p. 111.)

Polo was impressed with Hormuz, which he also visited on his return trip from China:

Here on the coast stands a city called Hormuz, which has an excellent harbor. Merchants come here by ship from India, bringing all sorts of spices and precious stones and pearls and cloths of silk and of gold and elephants’ tusks and many other wares. In this city they sell them

to others, who distribute them to others through the length and breadth of the world. It is a great center of commerce, with many cities and towns subordinate to it. Its king [and presumably Mongol vassal] is named Ruemedan Ahmad. The climate is torrid, owing to the heat of the sun, and unhealthy.

Latham, p. 66

From Hormuz, the Polos probably intended to continue eastward by ship. However, when they departed the Persian port, they did so by land. Polo explains why:

Their ships are very bad, and many of them founder, because they are not fastened with iron nails but stitched together with thread made from coconut husks. They soak the husk until it assumes the texture of horsehair; then they make it into threads and stitch their ships. It is not spoilt by the salt water, but lasts remarkably well. The ships have one mast, one sail, and one rudder and are not decked; when they have loaded them, they cover the cargo with skins, and on top of these they put the horses [from Persia and Arabia] which they ship to India for sale. They have no iron for nails; so they employ wooden pegs and stitch with thread. This makes it a risky undertaking to sail in these ships. And you can take my word that many of them sink, because the Indian Ocean is often very stormy.

Latham, pp. 66–67

Fearful of embarking in a vessel with a sewn hull (a technique that is still widely used today on fishing boats in southern India and Sri Lanka), the Polos mounted up once again and headed northeast across the arid Persian plateau for another 900 miles to Balkh, perhaps for part of the way on a section of the Khorasan road that had been used by countless travelers from the classical period onward (see Chapter 4).

We are probably safe in assuming that the Polos traveled across Mongol-ruled Persia by joining some of the many donkey caravans that moved through the region during the Mongol era. Although travel by caravan was common, it cannot have been easy. The donkey trains included as many as a thousand smelly and braying pack animals that moved slowly over roads that were hardly more than dusty trails.

Polo was not a complainer. He admired the hardy animals and makes this clear in a revealing passage:

There are [in Persia] ... the finest asses in the world, worth fully 30 [Venetian] marks of silver apiece. This is because they eat little, carry heavy loads, and travel long distances in a single day, enduring toil beyond the power of horses or mules. For the merchants of these

parts, when they travel from one country to another, traverse vast deserts, that is to say, barren sandy regions, producing no grass or fodder suitable for horses; and the wells and sources of fresh water lie so far apart that they must travel by long stages if their animals are to have anything to drink. Since horses cannot endure this, the merchants use only these asses, because they are swift coursers and steady amblers, besides being less costly to keep. So they fetch a better price than horses. They also use camels, which likewise carry heavy loads and are cheap to maintain.

Latham, pp. 60–61

Despite the Mongol Peace, personal safety remained a major concern for the Polos and other highway travelers. The large size of the caravans helped to secure the merchandise and passengers from attacks by thieves. The Polos also possessed a second source of security in the passport that Khubilai Khan had given to Niccolo and Maffeo on their earlier trip. Robber bands that disregarded the guarantees of safe passage made available to selected travelers by the Mongol authorities did so at their peril.

But the Mongols were not entirely successful in securing the safety of travelers in their lands. In another revealing passage, Polo tells us about the problem of highway robbery in Mongol Persia.

Among the people of these kingdoms [the districts of Persia] there are many who are brutal and bloodthirsty. They are forever slaughtering one another; and were it not for fear of the government, that is, the [il-khans], they would do great mischief to traveling merchants. The government imposes severe penalties upon them and has ordered that along all dangerous routes the inhabitants at the request of the merchants shall supply good and efficient escorts from district to district for their safe conduct on payment of two or three groats [Venetian silver coins] for each loaded beast according to the length of the journey. Yet, for all that the government can do, these brigands are not to be deterred from frequent depredations. Unless the merchants are well armed and equipped with bows, they slay and harry them unsparingly.

Latham, p. 61

The bandits in Persia seem to have been strongest in the southwest where the authority of the il-khans was somewhat tenuous. Polo tells us that while traveling in this region he and his companions were set upon by a band of robbers. The thieves took many captives, selling some of them into slavery and murdering the others. The Polos narrowly escaped.

Their journey through Persia was helped by the survival of the network of caravansaries that had been established on the main routes

and in most cities during the Abbasid period. Polo does not mention these inns, but he must have stayed in many of them. Spaced about twenty-five miles apart (a day's travel) and built like fortresses, the caravansaries were places for travelers and their animals to rest after a hard day on the road. In these establishments travelers could find food, water, a place to sleep, fodder, stables, and storage space for cargo. Some of the caravansaries, especially those in cities, included space for buying and selling. The caravansaries were also places where travelers could exchange information about road conditions, catch up on local gossip, and trade tall tales with one another. Although the Mongols destroyed many Central Asian (and Russian) cities as they moved west, they seem to have left much of the network of caravansaries intact. Perhaps their aim was to initially terrorize the urban populations and then promote a revival of trade that could be taxed.

The Polos' stop in Balkh (two generations before Ibn Battuta), on the eastern edge of the il-khan lands, provides us with somewhat ambiguous evidence about the impact of the Mongols on the caravan cities in this region:

Balkh is a splendid city of great size. It used to be much greater and more splendid; but the [Mongols] and other invaders have sacked and ravaged it. For I can tell you that there used to be many fine palaces and mansions of marble[?], which are still to be seen, but shattered now and in ruins. It was in this city, according to local report, that Alexander married the daughter of Darius [the Persian emperor]. The inhabitants worship Muhammad.

Latham, p. 74

Three points seem worthy of note in connection with Polo's visit to Balkh. First, we learn, amazingly, that Balkhis had preserved the memory of Alexander's marriage in their city, although the passage of many centuries had caused them to confuse the background of Roxanne; in fact, she was the daughter of a regional ruler, not the progeny of the Persian emperor. Second, Polo allows us to infer that the vibrant Buddhist culture Xuanzang had encountered in the city was no more; Balkhis were now Muslims, Islam having spread widely through Central Asia during the past several centuries.

The third aspect of Polo's comments on Balkh brings us back to the issue of the Mongol impact. Fifty years had passed since Chingis Khan and his soldiers had, in the words of one Persian historian, 'wiped out all traces of culture' from the city and its surroundings. But, as Polo's somewhat murky comments suggest, in the intervening decades some of Balkh seems to have been rebuilt, perhaps owing to the Mongol policy of support for long-distance commerce.

IN THE REALM OF THE CHAGHATAI KHANS

From the eastern border of Persia the Polos rode through Central Asia for nearly 2,000 miles, a journey that brought them to the border of China. Their route took them across the plains of northern Afghanistan, over the Pamir Mountains, and through the oasis communities that dotted the southern rim of the Taklamakan Desert. These lands were under the loose authority of the Chaghatai khans and were inhabited by a mixture of Turkic-speaking farmers and herders, most of whom were Muslims. The cities of the region, many of which had long been important in east–west commerce, included numerous Nestorian Christians and Jewish merchants whose languages were either Syriac or Persian.

* * *

The Polos spent about a year in the high country of Badakhshan (today's northeastern Afghanistan), where the cool temperatures and salubrious air enabled Marco to recover from an illness that he probably contracted in Hormuz. He reports that the kings of Badakhshan (who must have been vassals of the Chaghatai khans) claimed descent from Alexander the Great. Polo's description of the region highlights the importance of rarities mined there (rubies and lapis lazuli) and the presence of excellent horses, fine falcons, and large herds of wild sheep. One species of sheep native to this region (*Ovis ammon polii*), known for its long horns, bears the name of the Venetian traveler.

The Polos spent several weeks crossing the snowcapped Pamir range, some of the earth's highest mountains. In the lower elevations Polo saw lush pasturelands and abundant wildlife, but in the higher regions he reports that the thin air and the cold temperatures made it impossible for animals to survive and difficult to build a fire that was hot enough for cooking. During one twelve-day stretch in upper reaches of the Pamirs, the Polos found no inns and were forced to carry all of their provisions.

Like Xuanzang, the Polos descended the Pamirs in the vicinity of Kashgar and then followed the southern route around the Taklamakan Desert to the border of China (present-day Gansu province). They seem to have passed through the oases of the Taklamakan quickly, perhaps because they were in the region during the superheated summer months. Polo's descriptions of conditions in the various oases are rather brief and not particularly informative. But his account of the challenges facing travelers in the Taklamakan is telling and evokes memories of Xuanzang's trials in the same region six centuries earlier.

When a man is riding by night [so as to avoid the heat] through the desert and something happens to make him loiter and lose touch with

his companions, by dropping asleep or for some other reason, and afterwards he wants to rejoin them, then he hears spirits talking in such a way that they seem to be his companions. Sometimes, indeed, they even hail him by name. Often these voices make him stray from the path, so that he never finds it again. ... Yes, and even by daylight men hear these spirit voices, and often you imagine you are hearing the strains of many instruments, especially drums, and the clash of arms. For this reason, bands of travelers make it a point of keeping very close together. Before they go to sleep they set up a sign pointing in the direction in which they have to travel. And round the necks of all their beasts they fasten little bells.

Latham, pp. 84–85

IN THE REALM OF KHUBILAI KHAN

Having been on the road for about two years and logged more than 8,000 miles (from the time they boarded ship in Venice), the Polos crossed into western China in 1273 and moved through the Gansu corridor toward the great bend in the upper reaches of the Yellow River. Among the most interesting sights for present-day travelers in this part of China are remnants of the Great Wall, about which Polo says nothing. As we have seen, Polo's silence about the Great Wall has led some scholars to doubt that he ever reached China. However, recent research has established that while the Chinese had long built defensive walls along their northern and western frontiers, the Great Wall was not constructed until the fifteenth century, long after Polo's time. Polo's 'omission' of the Great Wall in his book, therefore, does not undercut his claim to have visited China.

For reasons that are unclear, the Polos seem to have taken more than a year to cover the final 1,000 miles from western Gansu to Khubilai Khan's summer capital at Shangdu in Mongolia. Perhaps they lingered in the Gansu regional capital. In any case, after following the main caravan route through Gansu to the bend in the Yellow River, the Polos turned north for the plains of Mongolia.

The Polos arrived in Shangdu in 1274 or 1275, an important moment for Khubilai Khan, the Mongols, and the Chinese. Although the Mongols had ruled northern China for a generation, it was only in the 1270s that they were able to defeat the military forces of the Southern Song dynasty and take control of south China, the home of the most dynamic and productive economy in the world. The Mongol conquest of the lands south of the Yellow River meant that China was now unified for the first time in more than two centuries and that Khubilai Khan was the ruler of the wealthiest and most populous country in the world.

The Polos spent the next seventeen years in China, probably in the employ of Khubilai, who hired many foreigners as officials because the pool of Mongols available to serve as administrators was small and because he did not trust the loyalty of his Chinese subjects (and did not speak Chinese). As we have seen, Polo seems to have exaggerated the importance of his activities during his years in China. However, the wealth of accurate information in the book about the Mongols and about conditions in China lends credibility to Polo's claim that he traveled widely in China on behalf of Khubilai in some sort of information-gathering capacity.

It is worth emphasizing that although he spent seventeen years in China, Polo remained very much a foreigner in the employ of an alien regime. Khubilai gave the dynasty he founded a Chinese name (Yuan: 'the origin') and built two Chinese-style capitals for his court, but in general the Mongols held themselves apart from their Chinese subjects. Thus Khubilai did not make use of the Confucian examination system that Chinese emperors had long used to select their personnel. There was little, if any, intermarriage between Mongols and Chinese. Mongol women did not adopt the practice of female footbinding that was being increasingly adopted by the Chinese. All told, the gap between the Mongols and the Chinese was wide and may have been comparable to that between European officials and their colonial subjects in Asia and Africa, ca. 1850–1960.

The chasm between the Mongols and the Chinese helps us to understand why Polo never learned to speak or write Chinese. In order to carry out his duties for Khubilai, he must certainly have, like his father and uncle, commanded Mongolian. But there was no real need for the Polos and the many other foreigners who served the Mongols as officials to know Chinese; they could rely on native subordinates to act as translators. This does not mean that Polo's book is uninformative about China and the Chinese. As we shall soon see, it is immensely valuable in this regard. However, Polo's writing on the Mongols is more immediate and is, in general, more vivid.

Polo introduces the Mongols with a brief and insightful account of their 'usages and customs' on the steppe that includes attention to their practice of transhumance, their circular and mobile dwellings made of wood and felt, their wagons and felt-covered carts, and their basic diet of meat and milk. His description of Mongol religion highlights the importance of shamanism to the nomads:

They say there is a High God, exalted and heavenly, to whom they offer daily prayer with thurible [incense burner] and incense. ... They also have a god of their own whom they call Natigai. They say he is an earthly god and watches over their children, their beasts, and their

crops. They pay him great reverence and honor; for each man has one in his own house. They make this god of felt and cloth and keep him in their house; and they also make the god's wife and children. They set his wife at his left hand and his children in front. And they treat them with great reverence. When they are about to have a meal, they take a lump of fat and smear the god's mouth with it, and the mouths of his wife and children. Then they take some broth and pour it outside the door of the house. When they have done this, they say that the god and his household have had their share. After this, they eat and drink.

Latham, pp. 98–99

Knowing that his European readers would be much interested in Mongol military matters, Polo devoted several substantial paragraphs to this subject. He was impressed by the hardiness of the Mongol soldiers, their skill on horseback, their use of feigned retreat in battles, and the care with which the Mongol leaders organized their armies.

Polo's most famous passages about the Mongols center on Khubilai Khan and his palace complex at Shangdu. Polo calls Khubilai 'the greatest lord the world has ever known' and describes the Great Khan's vast household as including four wives and many concubines. Each of the wives presided over a court consisting of hundreds of ladies in waiting and thousands of additional servants. According to Polo, Khubilai had twenty-two male children by his lawful wives and another twenty-five sons by his concubines (the number of his daughters goes unmentioned).

Polo's description of Khubilai's personal appearance seems a bit generic to some modern readers and has reinforced the view of the Polo skeptics that the Venetian traveler and the Mongol khan never met.

[Khubilai Khan] is a man of good stature, neither short nor tall but of moderate height. His limbs are well-fleshed out and modeled in due proportions. His complexion is fair and ruddy like a rose, the eyes black and handsome, the nose shapely and set squarely in place.

Adapted from Latham, pp. 121–22

In defense of Polo's recollection of Khubilai, it is useful to recall that it was written at a time when Europeans did not 'see' what they do today. The great age of European portraiture and sculpture of the human form, both of which flourished during the Renaissance (1300–1600), was only just beginning. In providing his readers with little in the way of specifics about the physical appearance of Khubilai and the other people he encountered in his travels, Polo was typical of the European writers of his day.

THE SENSE OF CHINA

While Marco Polo observed China from the exterior, he was clearly excited by what he saw and his enthusiasm, conveyed in his book, had wide potential impact. His sense of China's unparalleled wealth and what we today would call consumer prosperity came through strongly.

Thus the great trading city of Hangzhou, which he is careful to say he visited frequently, has, he claims, over 12,000 bridges and a hundred-mile circumference. It teems with goods from various parts of Asia, including India, and the shops provide customers with 'every article that could be desired.' Meats, fish, vegetables, and fruit abound. The sheer size of the population makes one wonder about provisioning—'providing enough food for them might be thought impossible'—but in fact the boats daily bring in quantities of goods. Most people wear silks, and crafts are well developed. Of course the inhabitants are 'idolators' (Buddhists, Confucianists, Daoists) but this Christian comment is a throw-away amid the admiration for material abundance. Mansions, pleasure boats, and stone-paved streets add to the appreciation of urban amenities. Government also inspires praise: census counts record each death, so that authorities know the exact number of inhabitants at all times. Hotels are also required to report the names of each guest to the authorities. Careful police procedures are also detailed.

Polo's delight in hyperbole led him occasionally to outright fabrication, as with travelers before him. Thus he argues that Tibetans pressed young women on travelers, who might do with them what they wished so long as they did not try to take them away. Polo did not in fact visit Tibet, though he implies he had his own sexual adventures as a traveler; but his representation of Tibet was clearly designed to titillate—as he adds, 'and it would not be out of place for a lad of sixteen to twenty to visit the region.' More disparagingly he writes of another city he learned about only through hearsay, that the inhabitants are not only heathen but wicked through and through: 'To steal and do wrong is not regarded as a sin, and these people are the worst scoundrels and robbers on earth.'

On balance, however, Polo used his accounts of China, beyond celebrating his own importance, to impress his readers with a country far more advanced than Europe in every respect save the religious. His descriptions sometimes almost casually introduced an awareness of products at this point unknown farther west, such as paper money or the uses of coal in metallurgy. There was a lot to ponder.

The comparison with Ibn Battuta is revealing as well. Both shared a keen sense of adventure, and no small amount of braggadocio. Battuta traveled even more widely. But he had the advantage, or the constraint, of the huge Islamic network. We have seen that he was willing to venture outside it, but tended to become critical or (as when he visited China)

simply negative when he was pulled out of orbit. Marco Polo, operating from a far more geographically limited European and Christian base, became perhaps of necessity more comfortable with differences, and more willing to tout the achievements of 'nonbelievers' for the audience back home. Ibn Battuta had no need to inform a Middle Eastern/North African audience of attainments they should emulate; despite recent advances, the case was different for Western Europe. There was a chance here, in Marco Polo's case, for distinctive impact as a result.

GETTING HOME

Marco Polo claimed that he and his uncles tried several times to win the approval of Khubilai Khan to return to Europe, but were frequently turned down. Whatever the case, they finally did gain consent, when the Great Khan decided to send a Mongol princess as a bride to the ruler of Persia. Three Mongol nobles, appointed to escort the princess, reportedly asked that the Polos accompany them. According to one account, they first tried to travel by land but were blocked by internal warfare among the khanates, so they decided to go by sea; another account suggests they opted for the sea route from the outset, for it would be less tiring to the bride. The Khan gave them two tablets assuring them of free passage and provisions throughout his lands and (Polo claimed) letters for the rulers of Europe. Thirteen ships set out, intending a journey that might take two years. After stopping at Sumatra (Indonesia) they sailed through the Indian Ocean for Persia. Polo's account claims that the trip was a disaster, with 600 people in the party perishing, thanks to shipwrecks and disease, and only eight surviving. Chinese and Persian records make it clear that the trip occurred along with the marriage, but they are silent on the calamities—though travel was still dangerous enough that the claim of serious setbacks is plausible.

The passage back home did allow Marco Polo to comment on some other parts of Asia, where again he described attractive products as well as strange and wondrous ways. Of the city of Quilon in southwest India he exulted: 'It is all simply different from us; it is more beautiful and better.' High praise from a proud Venetian.

The Polos stayed for several months in the Persian court, among other things to help with marriage arrangements. They then went to a Black Sea port where (the account claims) a local Byzantine ruler, in dispute with Venice, robbed them of a small fortune in gold pieces. They made it to Constantinople, and thence back home, in 1295. They had been gone for twenty-four years, and Marco Polo was now in his early forties. It was not long after this that Polo was jailed (in circumstances that are not entirely clear) and the book emerged.

AFTERMATH AND CONSEQUENCES

Marco Polo got out of jail fairly soon, married, and lived the rest of his life in modest patrician style. His will reveals that he retained a few items from the Mongols, including a gift from the Great Khan. Rumors swirled of his great wealth, but they were almost surely wrong. The book, though, did extraordinarily well. Within twenty-five years it was translated into French, various Italian dialects, Latin, and probably German, an unprecedented record within the lifetime of an author by that point. Various scholars consulted him, one geographer terming him ‘the most extensive traveler and the most diligent inquirer whom I have ever known.’ Marco died in 1324. A final story has him urged by friends to remove all the exaggerations from his book, to which he replied that he had not told half of what he had actually seen. Consistent, at least, to the very end.

Travel to and from the Mongol lands continued after the Polo trip. In 1287 the Persian il-khan sent an ambassador to Europe, which revived the pope’s interest in Asia. Several new missions were sent to China, the last in 1345, some of them managing to establish small but fleeting communities of converts. Many of the churches primarily serviced European merchant families who were in China for commercial reasons. A Catholic tombstone of 1342 (discovered in 1951) recorded the death of a daughter of an Italian merchant, whose family was part of a local Catholic community and who had supported the city’s church.

European travel literature also expanded, though with some complexities. Around 1357 a book entitled *Travels* by someone calling himself Sir John Mandeville appeared, initially in French though soon translated more widely. The book was fanciful, though it purported to describe real travels. It talked about Africa and Asia, with accounts of people with heads growing below their shoulders in China, fifty-foot giants, and men who naturally grew only one leg (which they used as an umbrella when seated) in Ethiopia. Lots of attention was given to a mythical Christian king, Prester John, located somewhere in Asia (Marco Polo had believed in Prester John as well). Despite the flights of fancy—not new to real travel literature, as we have seen—many readers believed this was an actual travel account and that Mandeville was the most venturesome European ever to visit Asia. The first part of the book, largely drawn from other travel accounts, focused realistically enough on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, with excursions to Egypt and the Middle East thrown in (including abundant speculations about sexuality in the rulers’ harems, long a fascination for Europeans). The second part talks of travel to India and the China of the great khans; this is the section filled with fascinating misinformation. But the book stimulated wide interest; hundreds of copies survive even today, and Columbus carried one along with his Polo manuscript. Clearly, while fiction and fact were still confused, even fiction reflected a growing interest in distant places, and

Mandeville's *Travels* undoubtedly helped inspire real voyages, which would sustain and build connections with Africa and Asia. Clearly also, even fiction reflected the importance of the linkages that the Mongols had facilitated.

By the fourteenth century, indeed, a supporter of the Mongols from Western China, Wang Li, could claim that under the khans 'civilization had spread everywhere, and no more barriers existed. ... Brotherhood among peoples has certainly reached a new plane.'

CONCLUSION

In fact, however, the mid-fourteenth century saw the beginnings of the end of the Mongol era and, with it, a new setback for travel. Mongol rule in Persia ended in the 1330s, they were chased out of China by 1368, and soon their counterparts in Russia were under attack as well. Furthermore, bubonic plague, spreading from China to the Middle East and Europe, had calamitous effects on regional populations and economic activity, further setting back the nascent inter-regional network. Travel over land, particularly, became far more difficult in the absence of the protection that the khans had been able to provide. We have seen, in the previous chapter, that Ibn Battuta faced growing instability not only in India but in parts of the Middle East as he came home from China, and this would get even worse later in the fourteenth century. The plague, as well, affected Ibn Battuta and may have encouraged him to head south for his final expedition. Again, the land connections from North Africa and Western Europe through Central Asia to China were disrupted for several reasons, and the experiences of the Polos and Ibn Battuta soon seemed part of a more distant past.

This result, however, ended a chapter but not the book. The legacy of travelers like Ibn Battuta and the Polos had won several durable consequences. Europe, particularly, had been made aware, through travel and trade, of a host of new products, like printing and explosive powder, but also humbler items like playing cards, disseminated in part through the discoveries of people like Marco Polo. The technology transfer that this post-classical round of travel encouraged was massively important.

Commercial appetites and the thirst for adventure remained vibrant as well, and these would not fade merely because the structure of travel had to change. China and other parts of Asia had been so positively experienced, and so attractively painted, that Europeans and others would not abandon their desire for contact. The practical discoveries of travelers, and particularly the improved mapping that their journeys facilitated, would contribute as well. Marco Polo's book itself played an ongoing role. The book, as far as can be determined, was never out of print, once printing became available. It was widely read and recurrently discussed long after it first appeared. It shaped ideas about the wealth and abundance of

China, it simulated a broader sense of the profit and excitement of foreign commerce and the wonders of travel itself. It directly inspired generations of travelers to come. Subsequent adventurers would reach further still.

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An explosion of travel: the fifteenth century and beyond

INTRODUCTION

The huge surge of travel in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, from North Africa and the Middle East and from Europe, directly reflected the stability created by the Mongol empires. With this stability now shattered—overland travel through Central Asia became noticeably more dangerous and never recovered its prior importance—one might have expected a lull in the more venturesome types of travel. The disruption caused by the plague—not only population loss, but a measurable downturn in economic prosperity in many regions—added a further complication.

In fact, however, adventurers and venturesome governments and merchant companies responded to this challenge with yet another expansion of the range and significance of long distance travel. The sources and the principal routes for this travel explosion shifted somewhat, reflecting the new circumstances, but the basic appetite remained vigorous. Earlier travel had, after all, helped demonstrate both the feasibility and the benefits of widespread contacts: these precedents helped inspire the new burst. New technologies contributed as well, particularly new shipbuilding techniques and navigational devices that facilitated greater use of the seas. Several governments—and state sponsorship of travel had already played a significant role—became more interested in organizing expeditions. A number of factors contributed to the expansion of ambitious travel.

Increasingly, travelers began to forge distinctive routes; or they emanated from new sources altogether. The combination was impressive. In many cases also, the willingness to write travel accounts, and the apparent interest in these accounts, expanded as well, reflecting potential new impacts for travel and helping to shape future ambitions at the same time.

FOUR PATTERNS

Four patterns warrant particular attention, some beginning in the fourteenth century but then expanding in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Russian travel began to become more ambitious, and with it some Russian travel literature as well. African travel also became more venturesome, particularly in relation to Europe. For a time, Chinese travelers displayed unprecedented ambition, going well beyond the boundaries of their venturesome predecessors. Finally, European travel pushed out in new directions, and this soon involved travel—some voluntary, some forced—by people in other regions as well.

At the same time, most of the societies already experienced in travel maintained a lively interest. Muslim travel literature continued to develop, focused often around trips to Mecca, from North Africa or elsewhere, but now—particularly after 1453 and the Ottoman conquest of the Byzantine capital—heading to Istanbul as well. In the early sixteenth century al-Hasan al-Wazzan, born in Muslim Spain to a family expelled to North Africa in 1492, began developing his travel record. He would claim that as a young man he traveled widely in Africa, and of course to Egypt on the way to Mecca and then to Istanbul; but also beyond, in the best tradition, to Persia and Central Asia. Then, involuntarily, his travel took a different turn: he was captured by Europeans attacking North Africa and brought back to Italy, where he spent many years before returning to Morocco. He would actually write a travel account about Africa in Italian, an interesting contribution to travel literature more generally. Al-Hassan continued to travel to various parts of the Sudan after returning home.

Another partially familiar pattern involved Europeans continuing to fan out through the Mediterranean and then beyond. In the middle of the fifteenth century Nicolo Conti, from an Italian merchant family with long experience in Middle Eastern trade, went to Syria and then to Persia, visiting Arabia en route; he then sailed to India (both western and eastern coasts), Sri Lanka, and Indonesia—retracing Marco Polo's route home, though without actually reaching China. Conti would later collaborate with a Renaissance intellectual to produce an elegant discussion of India and, in part, an account of his travels as well. In the 1490s a German knight, Arnold von Harff (Germans were novel entrants in the venturesome travel game) visited Egypt and other parts of the Middle East and then India, apparently just because he was curious about distant places. Early in the sixteenth century another Italian, Ludovico de Varthema, visited India, disguised as a Muslim and speaking Arabic which he had picked up in Damascus. His resultant travel book about India was for a time almost as popular as Marco Polo's volume. By this time, however, European travel to India was being further embellished by regular Portuguese

merchant voyages—which brings us back to the newer elements of the travel explosion. Europeans were also showing up in sub-Saharan Africa, just as Arab emissaries did more routinely: Italian merchants were writing letters from the Sudan by the fifteenth century, though there were as yet no elaborate travel accounts.

RUSSIANS AND AFRICANS

Russian travel to the Middle East was not new: merchants and pilgrims had visited Constantinople during the post-classical period. But journeys resumed after 1400, as Mongol control over Russia eased. And travelers were increasingly likely to write about their journeys, spreading contact knowledge to other literate Russians. Right at the end of the fourteenth century, in fact, Ignatius of Smolensk reported on his trip down the Don River to Constantinople and the Mediterranean. Ignatius was part of a religious delegation, and he later traveled widely in the Balkans. Other Russian pilgrims went on to the Holy Land, establishing a Russian Christian connection there that would continue to be important in the history of the region. In the 1420s, for example, the monk Zosima spent two years in Palestine before heading back to Russia. Not surprisingly, with this growing interest a few Russians ventured even further. One Russian merchant in the late fifteenth century journeyed through Arabia, Persia, and on to India, spending years away from home. The network of travel encounters was widening.

The same applied to new directions of African travel, beyond the pilgrimages to Mecca. Religion again played a big role in spurring new outreach. Ethiopian Christians, most notably, had long maintained a presence in the Holy Land. This gave them increasing contact with European Christians during and after the crusades and as European pilgrimages increased. These contacts, plus growing concern about encirclement of Ethiopia by Islamic Africans, prompted a series of new missions to the Papacy, beginning in the thirteenth century. The Ethiopian king sent a thirty-person delegation as early as 1306, visiting Spain as well as southern France (where the Pope was briefly located). They also visited holy sites in Rome before going to Genoa for ship passage back home via the Red Sea. Other exchanges followed both from Ethiopia and from Europe.

Contacts accelerated in the fifteenth century. In 1402 Ethiopian ambassadors present gifts of leopards and spices to the ruler of Venice. Another delegation visited the king of Spain in 1450, among other things hoping to hire European artisans for religious purposes, from sacred music to illuminated manuscripts to church building. Other visits involved Portugal and other parts of Italy. One emissary told the pope that the Ethiopian emperor was eager 'to be united with the Roman Church and to cast

himself at your most holy feet’—though this was undoubtedly an exaggeration for a proud monarch jealous of his independence. On the strength of these visits, African figures began to appear in Christian art work in Europe. Toward the end of the fifteenth century the papacy actually established a study house for Ethiopians in Rome, and some serious scholarship occurred there including biblical translations into Ethiopian.

By the late fifteenth century African visitors were also arriving in Europe via Portuguese and Spanish ships—many of them captives, used as domestic slaves. But several official delegations were sent by rulers such as the King of the Kongo and also the ruler of Benin. They were aiming at



Map 5 The travels of Zheng He

religious contact to an extent, but worked more for military aid against local enemies, including supplies of guns. Delegations brought rich gifts, often including slaves, and were given careful treatment—in one case in Portugal, they were provided with ‘silver and attendants and every other civility’ (including clothing). Several bull fights and dances were sponsored in the visitors’ honor. Ironically, a return visit from Portugal to Senegal was aborted when the Portuguese captain became fearful of tropical disease and came straight back rather than going inland. An exchange with the Kongo fared better, and a Portuguese delegation, including several missionaries bringing religious gifts, effected numerous conversions in the 1490s. Regular visits ensued, and they continued into the early sixteenth century. Voluntary visits from West Africa only dried up after 1550, when resentment against Portuguese military strength and concerns about the slave trade soured relations. For a time, African outreach had provided an interesting new range to the story of travel in world history, though formal written travel accounts did not yet emerge from the African side.

NEW CHINESE INITIATIVES

By far the greatest travel surges in the fifteenth century, however, stemmed from China and Europe. Both related in part to the collapse of Central Asian overland routes, as the regions at either end of Eurasia sought new contact routes to compensate.

China had long since gained awareness not simply of India, but also of Africa, Persia, and the Middle East, via foreign visitors and merchants if nothing else. Some African slaves had been sold to China, and knowledge of African geography was extensive. There was ample context, in other words, for new levels of direct travel. There was also technology. We have seen, through the experiences of travelers like Ibn Battuta and Marco Polo, that China’s seagoing technology had improved greatly, even by the thirteenth century. Huge ships could be constructed, capable of going up to 300 miles a day, carrying massive supplies through the Indian Ocean. One Chinese observer noted:

The ships which sail the southern sea and south of it are like houses. When their sails are spread they are like great clouds in the sky. Their rudders are several tens of feet long. A single ship carries several hundred men, and has in the stores, a year’s supply of grain. Pigs are fed and wine fermented on board. ... When the gong sounds at daybreak aboard ship, the animals can drink their fill. And crew and passengers alike forget all dangers. To those on board, everything is hidden and lost in space—mountains, landmarks, and foreign countries.

Levathes, p. 44

Armed with these junks, once the Mongols were expelled and a new, Ming dynasty established, the Chinese launched a massive series of expeditions early in the fifteenth century, under a Muslim admiral, Zheng He. The initial expedition was directly ordered by the emperor. Historians have speculated about his motives: he clearly did not want to conquer Indian Ocean territory, though the expeditions did lead to some military clashes. Obviously, as we will see, there was a desire to advertise China's strength and the diversity of its manufacturing. Probably some interest focused on increasing trade with other parts of the Indian Ocean basin. But the dominant motive featured the extension of the Chinese tributary system, long used with the nomads and neighboring countries like Korea, by which foreign governments, impressed with Chinese might and sophistication, offered expensive gifts to the government in return for good relations. Tributes of this sort could provide welcome relief to a Chinese treasury that was not in the best of shape after some costly internal strife.

The first fleet assembled, in 1404–5, numbered over 300 ships, some of them the huge junks described above. Equally impressive was the collection of personnel. About 300 military commanders of various ranks were on board, and each captain had the authority to put any troublemaker to death. Approximately 28,000 troops were available. An astrologer was sent to help forecast the weather. Ten foreign-language experts were on board, probably including people who knew Arabic and Central Asian tongues. And there were 180 medical officers and pharmacologists, to collect herbs in foreign countries as well as to deal with health issues among the crews. The sailors themselves were mostly banished criminals.

The ships were packed with Chinese goods, including silks and porcelain but also various iron tools and implements. Never before had a ruler anywhere assembled such a testimony to his glory.

* * *

The expeditions visited every major port in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean; each fleet would often subdivide, to cover more territory. Overall, this comprehensive strategy meant that the voyages involved Southeast Asia including Indonesia, India and Sri Lanka, the Arabian Peninsula, and the east coast of Africa, where many Chinese artifacts have been found. Zheng He negotiated peacefully for commercial arrangements and tribute wherever he could, but armed clashes occurred in Sri Lanka (where the king was captured and taken to China, until he could bargain for release) and in Somalia, as well as one spot in Arabia. There were also several skirmishes with pirates, who infested the waters around present-day Malaysia and Indonesia.

Seven trips occurred in all, between 1405 and 1433. The expedition of 1409 set up a monument in Sri Lanka, in Chinese, Tamil, and Persian, expressing respect for Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam; Zheng He is recorded as giving lavish gifts to honor each religion, including silver, silk, perfumed oils, and religious ornaments.

While offering gifts, Zheng He picked up gifts in return, and also traded directly. The Chinese would bring home copper, various spices from south and southeast Asia, pearls, and exotic animals including two giraffes (later displayed in Chinese zoos). Many ambassadors came back to China as well, later returning home on a subsequent expedition.

Historians have speculated on whether, on one of the expeditions, the Chinese might have peeked around the Cape of Good Hope and glimpsed the Atlantic. One fanciful account has an expedition heading in a totally different direction, actually crossing the Pacific to the Americas, but there is simply no evidence for this; the account mainly serves to remind history-readers to treat travel stories, even retrospective ones, with appropriate care.

There is no question, however, that this was an amazing series of expeditions, involving tens of thousands of Chinese in unprecedented travel. Zheng He recognized the ambition involved. He later wrote,

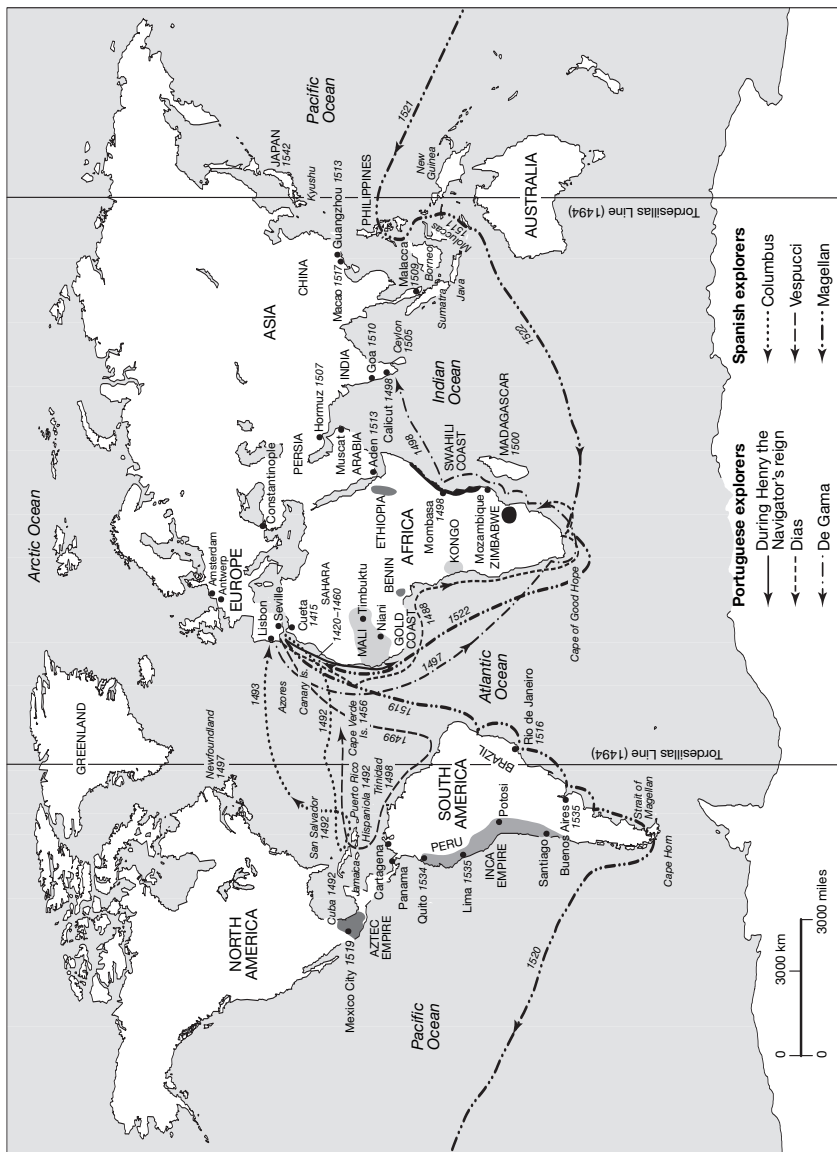
Our one fear is not to be able to succeed. [But] if men are able to serve their ruler with the exertion of all their loyalty, then all things will be successful. If they are able to serve the gods with utmost sincerity, then all their prayers will be answered.

More than will power spurred the voyages: the Chinese also employed still relatively new navigational devices like the compass to keep their course steady.

The last expedition left in 1431, when Zheng He was in his sixties; in fact, he would die on the trip back from India to China.

The admiral (and the many people who accompanied him) clearly deserves a place among world history's great travelers. Obviously, their activities were somewhat different from the wanderings of people like Ibn Battuta or Marco Polo. Zheng He was indeed a traveler, but he was even more an organizer, and the collective effort represented by the trading expeditions distracts from too much attention to the individuals involved. As long-distance travel turned increasingly to the seas, group effort, rather than individual pilgrimage, begins to attract greater attention, though of course the Chinese emphasis on massive organization was unusually extensive.

Zheng He's situation is distinctive in a few other respects. Soon after the last expedition returned, a new emperor decided to end the sequence, and in fact Chinese officialdom turned decisively against the



Map 6 The fifteenth century explosion

whole experience. Several factors were involved: the new ruler wanted to demonstrate his independence from his father's policies. New problems with the Mongols required funding and attention that obviously competed with the expeditions; ultimately, response would among other things involve massive investments in redoing the Great Wall. Other competition for funds emerged from the decision to build an expensive new Ming capital in Beijing, where construction of lavish palaces began at about the same time authorization for preparation of a new fleet was rescinded. Possibly, some bureaucratic and Confucian aversion to too much trade played a role as well. Advisors to the emperor issued statements along lines of 'giving to the people of the Middle Kingdom a respite so they can devote themselves to husbandry and to schooling.'

A further result of this policy shift, in turn, was that almost no one was encouraged to write about the expeditions, and Zheng He's records were lost, probably deliberately. So while this was great travel, it did not—again in contrast to Ibn Battuta or the Polos—produce a great literature, or much lasting impression on China itself.

Emissaries from Southeast Asia and beyond continued to come to China for several decades in the middle of the fifteenth century. In this sense, echoes of the travel experience lingered. But even these began to fade, as the memory of China's great outreach became more distant.

A powerful government official in 1477 made one last attempt to revive Chinese seafaring. Wang Zhi, head of the imperial secret police, called for Zheng He's records, to stimulate interest in new expeditions. But a rival minister of war hid the records and may have burned them. He claimed that the ship's logs were 'deceitful exaggerations of bizarre things far removed from the testimony of people's eye and ears'—a direct slap at the idea of adventurous travel. And he belittled the results of the expeditions, arguing that they cost huge amounts of money and many lives in return for 'bamboo staves, grape-wine, pomegranates and ostrich eggs and such like odd things.'

China had maintained a recurrent record of ambitious travel, from the merchants and officials along the Silk Road to the Buddhist pilgrims to Zheng He and his colleagues. But this record was now interrupted, and it would be several centuries before China would again try to send people out to distant places.

NEW EUROPEAN ROUTES

Even before China's decision to halt its expeditions, Europeans had been experimenting with dramatic new travel routes, into the Atlantic and down the African coast. Individuals continued, as we have seen, to move through the Middle East and beyond. But the end of the Mongol Peace,

new ambitiousness on the part of people like the rulers of Portugal, and a desire to seek connections with Asia that did not involve going through Arab territory all helped motivate more basic innovations in European travel. Crusading spirit entered in as well: the literal crusades were over, but some of the religious fervor and sheer taste for adventure they had encouraged helped motivate new types of outreach; the same applies to the aftermath of the wars of conquest against Muslims in Spain and Portugal.

None of this, of course, was linked to the decision to end the Chinese expeditions, and indeed many of the initial forays into the Atlantic were not clearly aimed at Asia at all (though some were). But the Chinese decision did eliminate a potential travel competitor in the Indian Ocean, the goal that began to attract European ventures increasingly by the fifteenth century.

Like the Chinese expeditions, but even more potently, Europe's quest for new uses of the oceans was stimulated by new technologies. Most of them—the use of the compass and other navigational devices, the adaptation of sails that had originated in the Indian Ocean, the reliance on explosive powder—had been earlier borrowed from Asia. But Europeans refined the devices—introducing guns to utilize the explosive powder for example—and combined them with unprecedented effect. The results went beyond travel, but showed once again how, by the fifteenth century, the nature and range of travel were being transformed.

Europeans had traveled into the Atlantic before. Most notably, Scandinavians had crossed to Iceland, Greenland, and, more briefly, North America. But they generated no written records, and knowledge of their voyages did not penetrate European centers farther south. Merchants had long crawled up the Atlantic coast of Europe itself, from the Mediterranean to Britain; in 1319 the Venetians had begun sending what they called the Flanders galleys regularly between their city and the North Sea. While important, however, these were limited trips, usually clinging fairly close to the Atlantic shoreline. Thus the decisions, by a mixture of adventurers and government agents, to probe this great ocean more extensively during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries constituted in effect a new European effort to establish travel routes of their own, rather than depending on movement through other, and often intimidating, societies in North Africa and Asia.

A first known trip, by the brothers Vivaldi, left Genoa in 1291, 'for the regions of India by way of the Ocean'—thus anticipating Columbus by two centuries. But they did not have appropriate boats for the rough Atlantic waters, and they were never heard from again.

At some point a few decades later, expeditions reached the Canary Islands. A major excursion, though not the first, occurred in 1341, combining Genoese, Portuguese, and Spanish personnel and exploring many of the islands in the group. By the 1350s regular travel began to

connect Europe and Africa to these islands—Europeans as missionaries but also as traders and organizers of sugar plantations, Africans seized as slave labor for the same plantations. These initiatives, and the improved maps that resulted from them, led to similar contacts and travel to the Azores.

By the fifteenth century, stimulated by these explorations but also by the realization that initial hopes of finding gold in the Canaries had been disappointed, Portuguese adventurers began to sail down the Atlantic coast of Africa, steadily covering greater and greater distances. By the 1470s, expeditions had moved around the northern African bulge into the Atlantic, and were entering into full contact with African coastal peoples and leaders below the Sahara. This was the source of interactions with the Kongo and Benin that, as we have seen, led to new African travel to Europe as well.

During the 1470s and 1480s, on the strength of success in the Canaries and elsewhere, all sorts of groups were venturing into the Atlantic, looking for additional islands or other gains. Atlantic travel from England and France increased within this framework. Trips from the English city of Bristol and Iceland expanded, along with trade; but the Bristolians were explicitly exploring as well, hoping to find what they called 'Brasil.' The voyages were labeled 'serch and fynde.' The Portuguese sent other expeditions as well, with ambitiously vague goals to take over 'whatever islands [they] might find.' Venturesome Europeans were traveling in new directions and looking for more.

In the 1490s, of course, travel expanded still further, based on these precedents. Columbus, looking for India, used the Canaries as his pushing-off point, and was really just moving a bit farther out into the ocean, believing that the Atlantic was a narrow water gap between this point and Asia. He miscalculated in all sorts of ways, and had to travel for thirty-two days, far longer than he expected, to find a place that was not the India he thought it was. The other pioneering trip, by Vasco da Gama in 1497–99, built instead on the African coastal explorations, this time reaching the Cape of Good Hope and rounding it to reach India. He returned in 1502, using his guns and considerable brutality to demonstrate European power. Regular trips were immediately established between Portugal and India—five trips a year as early as 1504—allowing massive imports of spices at relatively low cost.

Both Columbus and da Gama obviously encouraged further travel. Spanish trips to America multiplied in the early sixteenth century, and they were soon followed by Spanish routes across the Pacific to the Philippines and other parts of Asia. Amazingly quickly after da Gama—by 1509, to be exact, for reference to a true travel explosion is no exaggeration—the Portuguese had sailed beyond India to Malaysia and thence both to Indonesia (the Spice Islands) and to China. Thus the Europeans were now replicating the routes of the great Chinese expeditions, but from the other direction and with greater permanence.

In 1520, as if to cap this century-plus of expanding activity, the Spanish explorer Magellan, with his crew, launched the first expedition to travel literally around the world. They rounded the tip of South America from Atlantic to Pacific and proceeded to the Philippines (where Magellan was killed by Filipinos). The crew, now under a new captain, resumed the voyage, sailing through the Indian Ocean back to Spain. Travelers had finally found the longest trip of all, at least on this planet.

CONCLUSION: NEW HORIZONS

Travel would amplify further throughout the sixteenth century, with the increasing regularity of trips across the Atlantic and Pacific, with major Russian excursions into not only Central but northeastern Asia, with regular shipping between Britain and Russia, and with new levels of European-sponsored interchange between Africa and the Americas and within the Americas.

New contacts and soaring imaginations remained possible, even after the sixteenth century. Early in the seventeenth century, in fact, and specifically around the year 1638, English scientists and religious leaders, soon joined by a wider public, began debating the possibility of life on the moon. The speculation was not entirely new, but it now involved discussion of how lunar inhabitants might fit into Christianity. More to the point, however, the same discussion now generated the idea of space travel, bringing humans and lunar creatures into regular contact. Several fictional accounts described trips to the moon, by sailors swept up by a whirlwind or by a lofty traveler, one Menippus, who equipped himself with wings and leapt 'directly towards heaven,' finally viewing earth from the lunar surface. An age of expanding travel, not surprisingly, also displayed expanding flights of fancy: there might be voyages that could still stretch human capacity.

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Conclusion

The importance of travel in world history is obvious. Early travelers—some of whom we know about, more of whom we can only dimly fathom—helped make connections among regions in ways that had obvious cultural, commercial, and technological implications. They could help societies copy each other. They could encourage societies to forge regular interactions, establishing organized trade networks or regular student exchanges or the expansion of empires or tribute systems. While it is rarely easy to pinpoint the exact consequences of an individual voyage, the cumulative effect is clear enough.

And when the trips were enhanced by a formal travel account, as we have seen, results could be magnified. Travelers were fueled by ambition, or piety, or curiosity, or greed, or complex combinations of several of these motives. Their accounts could help stimulate and channel similar motives in others.

Not surprisingly, particularly from the classical period onward, we have seen that travel moved forward in surges, but that on the whole one set of travel experiences tended to provide the basis for others that would become still more ambitious. In this sense the explosion of travel in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, though innovative in many ways, built on prior achievements. The innovation resulted in large part from a quest for new ways to get around novel barriers—for example, the results of the Mongol collapse in turning attention from overland travel back to the seas—in order to extend results earlier travelers had already registered.

The history of travel hardly ended with the early sixteenth century. There were many heroic trips to come, to different parts of the Americas, to additional places in Africa, to Pacific Oceania. More regular commitment to global travel and new navigational devices and transportation technologies, hardly took the danger out of travel. Accidents, disorder, and piracy could still bedevil travel into the twenty-first century.

But there is no question that with more modern times much travel became, if more important because of greater regularity and volume, also a bit more routine. The travel that had played such a major role in forging

new connections from early human societies to the fifteenth century also contained a heroic adventurism that gradually became hard to replicate—simply because so much pioneering travel had already been accomplished. Only a few more modern travelers evoke the awe of names like Ibn Battuta or Marco Polo or Xuanzang.

And so it is fair to ask, along with the more precise assessments of changes and continuities in travel and its results: where is that kind of questing spirit now directed? Where do latter-day Ibn Jubayrs or Yijings direct their energies? How much adventurism still accompanies the hassles and speed that describe contemporary travel?

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