

Unit 2: Networks of Exchange, c. 1200–1450

Unit 2 covers the trade networks that connected Afro-Eurasia from 1200 to 1450: the Silk Roads, the Mongol Empire, the Indian Ocean, and the trans-Saharan routes, and what moved along them besides goods. CED topics 2.1 through 2.6.

AP World History

Networks of Exchange

About 12 minutes to read

How to use this guide

Read it in order the first time because the topics build on each other. The first four topics each cover one network. The last two cover what the networks carried besides goods: ideas, technologies, people, crops, and disease. Exam questions usually name a network and ask what changed because of it, so learn each network's signature innovation and signature cargo.

After the first read, use the trap boxes and the tables to review the distinctions that exam questions test most often. Finish with the practice questions, then complete the recall check on the last page out loud and note any items you cannot explain yet.

What holds this unit together. Every topic in Unit 2 answers one question: what happens when distant societies connect? The Silk Roads, the Indian Ocean, and the Sahara each had their own goods and their own innovations, but the consequences rhyme. Trade made cities rich, carried religions and technologies into new regions, and spread crops and disease along the same roads. Learn the pattern once and you can apply it to any network the exam names.

2.1 The Silk Roads

The **Silk Roads** were the overland trade routes linking China with Central Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. After 1200, trade along them grew in two ways at once. **Improved commercial practices** meant new ways of doing business, including **forms of credit**, banking, and **money economies**. These practices increased the volume of trade and stretched the routes across a wider geographical range.

The goods that moved were mostly **luxury goods**, high-value products light enough to carry far: silk, spices, textiles, and porcelain. Rising demand for these goods across Afro-Eurasia is what drove interregional trade to grow. Chinese, Persian, and Indian artisans expanded production of **textiles and porcelains** for export, and the manufacture of **iron and steel** expanded in China as productive capacity and trade networks grew.

WHAT GREW	HOW IT WORKED
Forms of credit	Financial instruments such as bills of exchange let merchants transfer funds without carrying coins, which made long-distance trade safer.
Money economies	Standardized currency, including paper money issued by Song China, replaced barter and informal dealing and encouraged trade in luxury goods.
Caravanserais	Roadside inns where merchants, animals, and goods could rest safely. A transportation innovation that supported Silk Road trade.
Trading cities	Cities such as Samarkand in Central Asia grew wealthy and powerful as hubs where goods, merchants, and cultures from east and west met.

Trap. Forms of credit and money economies are not the same thing. Credit is the *instrument*: a bill of exchange that moves funds without coins. A money economy is the *system*: standardized currency replacing barter. If a question describes a written order redeemable in a distant city, the answer is credit, not money economies.

2.2 The Mongol Empire and the Making of the Modern World

The **Mongol Empire** was the vast 13th- and 14th-century empire built by Chinggis (Genghis) Khan and his successors, stretching from China to Eastern Europe. It was the largest contiguous land empire in history. After the conquests, the empire divided into the **Mongol khanates**, successor states that included the Yuan dynasty in China, the Ilkhanate in Persia, the Chagatai Khanate in Central Asia, and the Golden Horde in Russia.

The Mongols matter for this unit because their expansion drew new peoples into **Afro-Eurasian trade and communication**, the commercial and information networks spanning Africa, Europe, and Asia. Conquered peoples were pulled into Mongol economies and trade networks, which encouraged **technological and cultural transfers** between societies. One named example is the transfer of Greco-Islamic medical knowledge to western Europe.

Trap. The khanates are successor states, not the empire at its height. Yuan means Mongol-ruled China. Golden Horde means Mongol-ruled Russia. If a question asks what governed China after the Mongol conquests, the answer is the Yuan dynasty, which *is* one of the khanates.

2.3 Exchange in the Indian Ocean

The **Indian Ocean trading network** was the maritime trade system linking East Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and China. After 1200, improved transportation technologies and commercial practices increased its volume and range, the same growth pattern as the Silk Roads, but on water.

INNOVATION	WHAT IT DID
Compass	Magnetic navigation instrument adopted from China. Let sailors determine direction at sea.
Astrolabe	Navigational instrument used to determine latitude from the stars.
Larger ship designs	Bigger vessels such as Chinese junks and Arab dhows carried more cargo across the ocean.
Monsoon winds	Seasonal reversing winds. Advanced knowledge of them let sailors time voyages outward and back, and the expansion of trade depended on it.

Trade also moved people. **Diasporic communities** were communities of merchants who settled in key places along the routes. They introduced their own cultural traditions into local cultures, and local cultures influenced them in return. **Swahili Coast city-states** such as Kilwa grew wealthy as intermediaries between the African interior and the Indian Ocean network, and the **Sultanate of Malacca** controlled the strategic strait between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea in the 15th century. **Zheng He**, the Ming admiral, led massive Chinese treasure fleets across the Indian Ocean in the early 1400s, an example of state-sponsored maritime activity that encouraged technological and cultural transfers.

Trap. The compass and the astrolabe solve different problems. The compass tells a sailor which *direction* to go. The astrolabe tells *latitude* from the stars. If a question is about timing a voyage with the seasons, neither instrument is the answer. That is monsoon wind knowledge.

2.4 Trans-Saharan Trade Routes

The **trans-Saharan trade network** was the overland system crossing the Sahara Desert, linking West Africa with North Africa and the Mediterranean. Like the other networks, improved transportation technologies and commercial practices expanded its volume and range after 1200. The signature transportation innovation here was the redesigned **camel saddle**, which let camels carry heavier loads comfortably and made large-scale caravan trade possible.

The **Mali Empire**, the powerful West African empire of the 13th through 16th centuries famed for Mansa Musa, expanded across this period. Its expansion facilitated Afro-Eurasian trade and communication by drawing new peoples into its economies and trade networks, the same role the Mongols played farther east.

Trap. Match the innovation to the network. Camel saddle goes with the Sahara. Compass and astrolabe go with the Indian Ocean. Caravanserais go with the Silk Roads. Questions that mix these are testing whether you keep each network's signature innovation straight.

2.5 Cultural Consequences of Connectivity

When societies connect, more than goods move. The **diffusion of cultural traditions** spread literary, artistic, and cultural traditions across societies, including Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam into new regions. The **diffusion of scientific and technological innovations** moved knowledge and technologies between societies: **gunpowder** and **paper**, both invented in China, diffused westward along exchange networks.

Trade also reshaped where people lived. **Urbanization** is the growth of cities, and their fate varied greatly in this period. Some cities declined, while others expanded, buoyed by rising productivity and expanding trade networks. And the travelers themselves left records. **Travel literature** means accounts written by the increasing number of travelers within Afro-Eurasia describing the societies they visited. The two names to know are **Ibn Battuta**, the 14th-century Moroccan Muslim scholar who traveled across Africa, the Middle East, and India, and **Marco Polo**, the 13th-century Venetian merchant whose travels to Mongol-ruled China spread knowledge of Asia in Europe.

Trap. Ibn Battuta and Marco Polo are different centuries, different home regions, and different routes. Battuta: 14th century, Moroccan, traveled the Muslim world. Polo: 13th century, Venetian, traveled to Mongol China. If a question names a 14th-century Moroccan in Mali, it cannot be Polo.

2.6 Environmental Consequences of Connectivity

Connectivity changed biology as well as culture. The **diffusion of crops** kept moving cultivated plants along trade routes: bananas, originally from Southeast Asia, spread into Africa along Indian Ocean networks, and new rice varieties moved into East Asia. The same routes that carried crops carried **epidemic diseases**, contagious illnesses whose spread was a major environmental consequence of connectivity.

The defining example is the **bubonic plague**, the Black Death. It spread along Afro-Eurasian trade routes in the 14th century and killed a huge share of the population wherever it reached.

Trap. Crops and disease moved along the same roads as silk and spices. When a question asks for an *environmental* consequence of connectivity, the answer is biological: crops, disease, plague. Commercial practices and trading cities are economic answers to a different question.

Confusions That Cost Points

PAIR	KEEP THEM STRAIGHT
Silk Roads vs Indian Ocean vs trans-Saharan	Overland routes through Central Asia. Maritime routes sailed on monsoon winds. Desert caravans crossing the Sahara. Each has its own signature innovation.
Caravanserai vs diasporic communities	A caravanserai is a <i>place</i> : a roadside inn on the Silk Roads. A diasporic community is <i>people</i> : merchants settled along a route, influencing and influenced by local culture.
Forms of credit vs money economies	Credit is the instrument, such as a bill of exchange. A money economy is the system, such as standardized paper currency replacing barter.
Compass vs astrolabe	Compass gives direction at sea. Astrolabe gives latitude from the stars.
Zheng He vs Marco Polo vs Ibn Battuta	Zheng He: Ming admiral, early 1400s, state treasure fleets in the Indian Ocean. Polo: 13th-century Venetian merchant in Mongol China. Battuta: 14th-century Moroccan scholar across Africa, the Middle East, and India.
Yuan dynasty vs Golden Horde	Both are Mongol khanates. Yuan ruled China. Golden Horde ruled Russia.
Gunpowder vs paper	Both invented in China and diffused westward. Gunpowder is a military technology. Paper is a writing material.
Bananas in Africa vs new rice varieties	Bananas moved from Southeast Asia into Africa. New rice varieties moved into East Asia. Same process, opposite directions.
Urbanization vs trading cities	Urbanization is the <i>process</i> of city growth, and some cities declined. Trading cities are the wealthy <i>hubs</i> themselves, such as Samarkand and Kilwa.

Practice Questions

Original questions written for this guide in the style of the AP exam. Answers and explanations are on the next page, so complete the questions before checking them.

- 1.** A merchant in fourteenth-century Central Asia pays for a shipment of silk in Kashgar with a written order redeemable in Tabriz, carrying no coins on the road. This transaction best illustrates
 - A. money economies
 - B. forms of credit
 - C. luxury goods
 - D. a caravanseraï

- 2.** After the Mongol conquests, China was governed as the Yuan dynasty while Russia was ruled by the Golden Horde. This arrangement best illustrates
 - A. the division of the Mongol Empire into khanates
 - B. the end of Afro-Eurasian trade and communication
 - C. the adoption of Islam by all Mongol rulers
 - D. the collapse of the Silk Roads

- 3.** An Indian Ocean sailor in the 1300s plans to leave the Malabar Coast so that seasonal winds carry his dhow toward East Africa, then return months later when the winds reverse. His planning depends most directly on
 - A. the astrolabe
 - B. knowledge of monsoon winds
 - C. the compass
 - D. larger ship designs

- 4.** Which innovation most directly made large-scale trans-Saharan caravan trade possible?
 - A. The astrolabe
 - B. The camel saddle
 - C. The caravanseraï
 - D. Bills of exchange

- 5.** Gunpowder technology moved from China westward along exchange networks during this period. This movement is an example of
 - A. diffusion of cultural traditions
 - B. diffusion of scientific and technological innovations
 - C. urbanization
 - D. diasporic communities

6. A fourteenth-century Moroccan scholar writes a detailed account of the Mali Empire's wealth and the court he visited there. The author is most likely

- A. Marco Polo
- B. Zheng He
- C. Ibn Battuta
- D. Mansa Musa

7. In the fourteenth century, a deadly disease spreads from Central Asia to the Middle East and Europe along established trade routes, killing a huge share of the population in each region. This best illustrates

- A. diffusion of crops
- B. an environmental consequence of connectivity
- C. improved commercial practices
- D. the growth of trading cities

8. Kilwa grows wealthy by connecting the gold and ivory of the African interior with merchants sailing the Indian Ocean. Kilwa's role best illustrates

- A. a diasporic community
- B. a Swahili Coast city-state acting as intermediary
- C. a Mongol khanate
- D. a caravanseraï

Answer Key

- 1. B.** A written order redeemable far away without carrying coins is a form of credit, a financial instrument for moving funds. A describes the broader system of standardized currency replacing barter. C names the goods being traded, not the payment method. D is a roadside inn, a transportation innovation, not a financial one.
- 2. A.** Yuan in China and the Golden Horde in Russia are two of the four Mongol khanates, the successor states the empire divided into. B reverses the history: the Mongols facilitated Afro-Eurasian trade. C invents a claim the unit does not make about all Mongol rulers. D contradicts the unit: the Mongol era expanded the networks.
- 3. B.** Timing a voyage to seasonal reversing winds is knowledge of monsoon winds. A gives latitude from the stars and C gives direction at sea; neither schedules a departure. D lets a ship carry more cargo but does not tell the sailor when to leave.
- 4. B.** The redesigned camel saddle let camels carry heavier loads and made large-scale caravan trade across the Sahara possible. A belongs to the Indian Ocean network. C belongs to the Silk Roads. D is a commercial practice, not a transportation technology.
- 5. B.** Gunpowder moving westward from China is the diffusion of a scientific and technological innovation. A covers literary, artistic, and cultural traditions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam. C is the growth of cities. D is communities of settled merchants, not the movement of a technology.
- 6. C.** Ibn Battuta was the 14th-century Moroccan Muslim scholar who traveled Africa, the Middle East, and India and wrote about what he saw. A was a 13th-century Venetian who traveled to Mongol China, a century earlier and a different route. B was the Ming admiral of the early-1400s treasure fleets, not a scholar writing about Mali. D is the ruler being described, not the author.
- 7. B.** Disease spreading along trade routes is an environmental consequence of connectivity, the same category as crop diffusion. A is the wrong biological category: crops are bananas and rice, not plague. C and D are economic developments, and the question asks for the environmental frame.
- 8. B.** Kilwa is given in the unit as a Swahili Coast city-state that grew wealthy as an intermediary between the African interior and the Indian Ocean network. A names the merchant settlers, not the city itself. C places Kilwa in Central Asia or Russia, which is the wrong empire entirely. D is a Silk Road roadside inn.

When you check your answers, note which distinction each miss came from. Make a flashcard for that distinction and drill it spaced out over the next few days instead of rereading the whole section. If you missed one of these questions, the same distinction is worth practicing again in Rycal, where the Networks of Exchange deck has flashcards for it and more practice questions use the same kinds of traps.

One-Page Recall Check

Say each answer out loud before you look back, and mark the ones you cannot finish. Anything you cannot say out loud yet belongs in your flashcard deck. In Rycal, add those items to the Networks of Exchange deck and let spaced review bring them back over the next few days.

- Name the three long-distance trade networks of this unit and one signature innovation for each.
- Explain how forms of credit differ from money economies, with one example of each.
- Describe what a caravanserai did and why it mattered for Silk Road trade volume.
- List the four Mongol khanates and the region each ruled.
- Explain how the Mongols encouraged Afro-Eurasian trade and communication.
- Distinguish the compass from the astrolabe by what each told a sailor.
- Explain how monsoon winds shaped Indian Ocean sailing schedules.
- Describe what diasporic communities were and give one example of two-way cultural influence.
- Explain the camel saddle's role in making trans-Saharan trade possible at scale.
- Describe the Mali Empire's role in Afro-Eurasian trade, including its centuries and its famous ruler.
- Give one example each of a diffused religion, a diffused technology, and a diffused writing material.
- Distinguish Ibn Battuta from Marco Polo by century, home region, and route.
- Explain why the plague's spread counts as an environmental consequence of connectivity.
- Name two crops that diffused in this period and the direction each one moved.

Where to go next. Turn every missed item above into flashcards and drill them spaced out over several days rather than in one sitting. In Rycal, open the Networks of Exchange deck under AP World History. The deck covers the terms in this guide, and its practice questions target the same traps named here. If you have a test date, add it in the Test Planner. You can also start your next review with a Brain Dump, then check what you missed against this guide.

Key terms for this unit

Silk Roads, Trading cities, Improved commercial practices, Luxury goods, Caravanserai, Forms of credit, Money economies, Textiles and porcelains, Iron and steel, Paper money, Bills of exchange, Samarkand, Mongol Empire, Mongol khanates, Afro-Eurasian trade and communication, Technological and cultural transfers, Transfer of Greco-Islamic medical knowledge to western Europe, Indian Ocean trading network, Compass, Astrolabe, Larger ship designs, Diasporic communities, Monsoon winds, Swahili Coast city-states, Sultanate of Malacca, Zheng He, Trans-Saharan trade network, Mali Empire, Innovations in transportation technologies, Camel saddle, Diffusion of cultural traditions, Diffusion of scientific and technological innovations, Urbanization, Travel literature, Gunpowder, Paper, Ibn Battuta, Marco Polo, Diffusion of crops, Epidemic diseases, Bubonic plague, Bananas in Africa.

About this guide. Written for Rycal and aligned to the College Board AP World History course framework, Unit 2, topics 2.1-2.6. All questions and explanations are original Rycal writing. Rycal is independent and is not affiliated with or endorsed by the College Board.

Prepared for AP World History students working from the College Board course framework. This guide is a study aid, not an official College Board publication.