13.2 The Mongols

How did Mongol conquest change relations between regional societies?

Explore

The Pax Mongolica

How did trade flourish under the Mongols?

In just 50 years, the Mongols had conquered the largest empire the world had ever known. Now, across their vast realm, warfare all but ceased. A Pax Mongolica—Latin for “Mongolian peace”—was in force. Historians use this term to compare it to the Pax Romana. With most of Eurasia under one law, nations, tribes, and religious communities that had been enemies for centuries were forced to respect one another. With peace came a stability that allowed trade to grow. For the grandsons of Genghis Khan, war gave way to a passion for business.

Transporting Goods

The Mongols were not an urban people. They did not concentrate business and wealth in a single capital. They recognized that parts of their empire produced goods that were scarce and greatly desired in other parts. Moving them efficiently from one place to another would benefit all; taxing the buying and selling of these goods would increase their own wealth. Along the major trade routes, the Mongols established shelters stocked with provisions a day’s travel apart. They issued tablets of gold, silver, or wood for traders to wear around their necks. These passes allowed their bearers to travel freely throughout the empire. They guaranteed the traders transport, guides, protection, places to stay, credit, and freedom from local taxes.

As with goods, so it was with people. The Mongol rulers identified craftspeople, engineers, translators, scientists, and others with special skills, including artists and entertainers. They moved them from one part of the empire to another along the trade routes, wherever their talents might be best used. In this way, Persian doctors learned techniques of Chinese medicine, while Arabs, who were more skilled in surgery, taught the Chinese. Kublai Khan brought together scholars who were experts in Chinese, Arab, and Greek geography. The result was the creation of the most accurate maps and globes of the time period. Mongol traders used this knowledge to move goods by sea more efficiently.

Crops, along with the tools and techniques used in farming and cooking them, also found new uses in new places. The Mongols introduced Chinese goods like tea and rice to other parts of their empire, and lemon trees from the Middle East to China. Civilians experimented with fruits and vegetables to find which varieties would grow best in certain climate zones. They developed new varieties and hybrids.
Mongol Peace

The entire Silk Road now lay under the protection of the Mongol Peace. For more than 150 years, Christians and Muslims had been fighting the wars known as the Crusades. Europeans had been blocked from trade with East Asia by the Muslim states that lay between them. Now the Mongols had split the Muslim world. Peace reigned along the entire length of the great trade route. For the first time, European traders were beginning to venture eastward toward the almost legendary land they knew as Cathay. The first to arrive at Kublai Khan’s court were Europeans in 1266 named the Polos. Their relationship with the Mongols was to reveal the wealth and culture of China to Europeans. The resulting desire for trade with East Asia aroused European imagination and changed the course of world history.