
Documents

Considering the Evidence: Travelers' Tales and Observations



Historians generally prefer to rely on “insiders” for understanding the societies and cultures they study. Documents, artifacts, and images created by people actually living in those times and places have an authenticity that accounts by foreigners may lack. Nonetheless, scholars often find it helpful—even necessary—to make use of records written by outsiders as well. During the postclassical millennium, as long-distance trade flourished and large trans-regional empires grew, opportunities for individuals to travel far beyond their homelands increased. Their accounts have provided historians with invaluable information about particular regions and cultures, as well as about interactions among disparate peoples. The authors of these accounts, perhaps inadvertently, also reveal much about themselves and about the perceptions and misperceptions generated by cross-cultural encounters. The selections that follow provide three examples of intrepid long-distance travelers and their impressions of the societies they encountered on their arduous journeys.

Document 8.1

A Chinese Buddhist in India

During the seventh century, Xuanzang (600–664 C.E.), a highly educated Buddhist monk from China, made a long and difficult journey to India through some of the world’s most daunting deserts and mountain ranges, returning home in 645 C.E. after sixteen years abroad (see Visual Source 8.2, p. 370). His motives, like those of many other Buddhist travelers to India, were essentially religious. “I regretted that the teachings of [Buddhism] were not complete and the scriptures deficient in my own country,” he wrote. “I have doubts and have puzzled in my mind, but I could find no one to solve them. That was why I decided to travel to the West...”²⁸ In India, the homeland of Buddhism, he hoped to find the teachers and the sacred texts that would answer his questions, enrich Buddhist practice in China, and resolve the many disputes that had created serious divisions within the Buddhist community of his own country.

During a ten-year stay in India, Xuanzang visited many of the holy sites associated with the Buddha's life and studied with leading Buddhist teachers, particularly those at Nalanda University, a huge monastic complex dedicated to Buddhist scholarship (see Map 8.1, p. 335). He traveled widely within India and established a personal relationship with Harsha, the ruler of the state which then encompassed much of northern India. On his return journey to China, he carried hundreds of manuscripts, at least seven statues of the Buddha, and even some relics. Warmly greeted by the Chinese emperor, Xuanzang spent the last two decades of his life translating the texts he had collected into Chinese. He also wrote an account of his travels, known as the *Record of the Western Regions*, and shared his recollections with a fellow monk and translator named Huili, who subsequently wrote a biography of Xuanzang.²⁹ The selections that follow derive from these two accounts and convey something of Xuanzang's impressions of Indian civilization in the seventh century C.E.

- What do you think surprised or impressed Xuanzang on his visit to India? What features of Indian life might seem most strange to a Chinese visitor?
- How might these selections serve to illustrate or to contradict the descriptions of classical Indian civilization in Chapters 4–6?
- What can this document contribute to our understanding of Buddhist practice in India?

HUILI

A Biography of the Tripitaka Master Seventh Century C.E.

[Certainly the emotional highlight of Xuanzang's travels in India was his visit to the site of the Buddha's enlightenment under the famous Bodhi tree. The great traveler's biographer, Huili, recorded his Master's response.]

Upon his arrival there, the Master worshipped the Bodhi tree and the image of the Buddha attaining enlightenment made by 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 at the time

when the Buddha attained enlightenment. I could only come here at this time.... It makes me think that my karmic hindrances must have been very heavy!" While he was saying so, his eyes brimmed with sorrowful tears. As that was the time when the monks dismissed the summer retreat, several thousand people forgathered from far and near. Those who saw the Master were choked by sobs in sympathy with him.

[The great Buddhist monastery/university at Nalanda was likewise a major destination of Xuanzang's journey. It must have been a place of wonder and delight to the Chinese monk, as he described it to Huili.]

Ten thousand monks always lived there, both hosts and guests. They studied Mahayana teachings and the doctrines of the eighteen schools, as well as

Source: Li Rongxi (trans.), *A Biography of the Tripitaka Master of the Great Cien Monastery of the Great Tang Dynasty* (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation, 1995), 89–90, 94–95.

wordly books such as the Vedas. They also learned about works on logic, grammar, medicine, and divination.... Lectures were given at more than a hundred places in the monastery every day, and the students studied diligently without wasting a single moment. As all the monks who lived there were men of virtue, the atmosphere in the monastery was naturally solemn and dignified. For more than seven hundred years since its establishment, none of the monks had committed any offence. Out of

respect for them, the king gave more than a hundred villages for their sustenance. Each village had two hundred families, who daily provided several hundred *shi* of polished nonglutinous rice, butter, and milk. Thus the students could enjoy sufficient supplies of the four requisites without the trouble of going to beg for them. It was because of this effort of their supporters that the scholars could gain achievements in learning.

XUANZANG

Record of the Western Region

Seventh Century C.E.

[Selections from Xuanzang's more general description of Indian civilization follow here drawn from his own account.]

On Towns and Villages

The towns and villages have inner gates; the walls are wide and high; the streets and lanes are tortuous, and the roads winding. The thoroughfares are dirty and the stalls arranged on both sides of the road with appropriate signs. Butchers, fishers, dancers, executioners, and scavengers, and so on [untouchables], have their abodes without [outside] the city. In coming and going these persons are bound to keep on the left side of the road till they arrive at their homes. Their houses are surrounded by low walls and form the suburbs. The earth being soft and muddy, the walls of the towns are mostly built of brick or tiles....

On Buddhist Studies

The different schools are constantly at variance, and their contending utterances rise like the angry waves of the sea. The different sects have their separate masters....

There are eighteen schools, each claiming pre-

eminence. The partisans of the Great and Little Vehicle are content to dwell apart. There are some who give themselves up to quiet contemplation, and devote themselves, whether walking or standing still or sitting down, to the acquirement of wisdom and insight; others, on the contrary, differ from these in raising noisy contentions about their faith. According to their fraternity, they are governed by distinctive rules and regulations....

The *Vinaya* discourses [rules governing monastic life] are equally Buddhist books. He who can entirely explain one class of these books is exempted from the control of the *karmadāna*^o. If he can explain two classes, he receives in addition the equipments of an upper seat (*room*); he who can explain three classes has allotted to him different servants to attend to and obey him; he who can explain four classes has "pure men" allotted to him as attendants; he who can explain five classes of books is then allowed an elephant carriage; he who can explain six classes of books is allowed a surrounding escort. When a man's renown has reached to a high distinction, then at different times he convokes an assembly for discussion. He judges of the superior or inferior talent of those who take part in it; he distinguishes their good or bad points; he praises the clever and reproves the faulty; if one of the assembly distinguishes himself by refined language, subtle

Source: Samuel Beal (trans.), *Su-Yu-Ki: Buddhist Records of the Western World* (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1906), vol. I, book 2, 73–74, 77, 79–84.

^o*karmadāna*: a high monastic official.

investigation, deep penetration, and severe logic, then he is mounted on an elephant covered with precious ornaments, and conducted by a numerous suite to the gates of the convent.

If, on the contrary, one of the members breaks down in his argument, or uses poor and inelegant phrases, or if he violates a rule in logic and adapts his words accordingly, they proceed to disfigure his face with red and white, and cover his body with dirt and dust, and then carry him off to some deserted spot or leave him in a ditch. Thus they distinguish between the meritorious and the worthless, between the wise and the foolish.

On Caste and Marriage

With respect to the division of families, there are four classifications. The first is called the Brâhman, men of pure conduct. They guard themselves in religion, live purely, and observe the most correct principles. The second is called Kshatriya, the royal caste. For ages they have been the governing class: they apply themselves to virtue and kindness. The third is called Vaiśyas, the merchant class: they engage in commercial exchange, and they follow profit at home and abroad. The fourth is called Sûdra, the agricultural class: they labor in plowing and tillage. In these four classes purity or impurity of caste assigns to every one his place. When they marry they rise or fall in position according to their new relationship. They do not allow promiscuous marriages between relations. A woman

once married can never take another husband. Besides these there are other classes of many kinds that intermarry according to their several callings.

On Manners and Justice

With respect to the ordinary people, although they are naturally light-minded, yet they are upright and honorable. In money matters they are without craft, and in administering justice they are considerate. They dread the retribution of another state of existence, and make light of the things of the present world. They are not deceitful or treacherous in their conduct, and are faithful to their oaths and promises. In their rules of government there is remarkable rectitude, whilst in their behavior there is much gentleness and sweetness. With respect to criminals or rebels, these are few in number, and only occasionally troublesome. When the laws are broken or the power of the ruler violated, then the matter is clearly sifted and the offenders imprisoned. There is no infliction of corporal punishment; they are simply left to live or die, and are not counted among men. When the rules of propriety or justice are violated, or when a man fails in fidelity or filial piety, then they cut his nose or his ears off, or his hands and feet, or expel him from the country or drive him out into the desert wilds. For other faults, except these, a small payment of money will redeem the punishment. In the investigation of criminal cases there is no use of rod or staff to obtain proofs (*of guilt*).

Document 8.2

A European Christian in China

Of all the travelers along the Silk Road network, the most well-known and celebrated, at least in the West, was Marco Polo (1254–1324). Born and raised in the prosperous commercial city-state of Venice in what is now northern Italy, Marco Polo was a member of a family prominent in the long-distance trade of the Mediterranean and Black sea regions. At the age of seventeen, Marco accompanied his father and an uncle on an immense journey across Eurasia which by 1275 brought the Polos to China, recently conquered by the Mongols. It was, in fact, the relative peace which the Mongols had created in

their huge transcontinental empire that facilitated the Polos' journey (see Map 12.1, p. 530). For the next seventeen years, they lived in China, where they were employed in minor administrative positions by Khublai Khan, the country's Mongol ruler. During these years, Marco Polo apparently traveled widely within China where he gathered material for the book about his travels, which he dictated to a friend after returning home in 1295.

Marco Polo's journey and the book that described it, generally known as *The Travels of Marco Polo*, were important elements of the larger process by which an emerging West European civilization reached out to and became aware of the older civilizations of the East. Christopher Columbus carried a marked-up copy of the book on his transatlantic journeys, believing that he was seeking by sea the places Marco Polo had visited by land. Some modern scholars are skeptical about parts of Marco Polo's report, and a few even question whether he ever got to China at all, largely because he omitted any mention of certain prominent features of Chinese life, for example, foot binding, the Great Wall, and tea drinking. Most historians, however, accept the basic outlines of Marco Polo's account, even as they notice exaggerations as well as an inflated perception of his own role within China. The selection that follows conveys Marco Polo's description of the city of Hangzhou, which he referred to as Kinsay. At the time of Marco Polo's visit, it was among the largest cities in the world.

- How would you describe Marco Polo's impressions of the city? What did he notice? What surprised him?
- Why did Marco Polo describe the city as "the finest and the noblest in the world"?
- What marks his account of the city as that of a foreigner and a Christian?
- What evidence of China's engagement with a wider world does this account offer?

MARCO POLO

The Travels of Marco Polo

1299

The city is beyond dispute the finest and the noblest in the world. In this we shall speak

Source: *The Book of Sir Marco Polo the Venetian Concerning the Kingdoms and Marvels of the East*, 3rd ed., translated and edited by Henry Yule, revised by Henri Cordier (London: John Murray, 1903), vol. 2:185–206.

according to the written statement which the Queen of this Realm sent to Bayan, the [Mongol] conqueror of the country for transmission to the Great Kaan, in order that he might be aware of the surpassing grandeur of the city and might be moved to save it from destruction or injury. I will tell you all the truth as it was set down in that doc-

ument. For truth it was, as the said Messer Marco Polo at a later date was able to witness with his own eyes....

First and foremost, then, the document stated the city of Kinsay to be so great that it hath an hundred miles of compass. And there are in it 12,000 bridges of stone.... [Most scholars consider these figures a considerable exaggeration.] And though the bridges be so high, the approaches are so well contrived that carts and horses do cross them.

The document aforesaid also went on to state that there were in this city twelve guilds of the different crafts, and that each guild had 12,000 houses in the occupation of its workmen. Each of these houses contains at least twelve men, whilst some contain twenty and some forty.... And yet all these craftsmen had full occupation, for many other cities of the kingdom are supplied from this city with what they require.

The document aforesaid also stated that the number and wealth of the merchants, and the amount of goods that passed through their hands, were so enormous that no man could form a just estimate thereof. And I should have told you with regard to those masters of the different crafts who are at the head of such houses as I have mentioned, that neither they nor their wives ever touch a piece of work with their own hands, but live as nicely and delicately as if they were kings and queens. The wives indeed are most dainty and angelical creatures! Moreover it was an ordinance laid down by the King that every man should follow his father's business and no other, no matter if he possessed 100,000 bezants.^o

Inside the city there is a Lake... and all round it are erected beautiful palaces and mansions, of the richest and most exquisite structure that you can imagine, belonging to the nobles of the city. There are also on its shores many abbeys and churches of the Idolaters [Buddhists]. In the middle of the Lake are two Islands, on each of which stands a rich, beautiful, and spacious edifice, furnished in such style as to seem fit for the palace of an Emperor. And when any one of the citizens desired to hold a marriage feast, or to give any other entertainment, it used to

be done at one of these palaces. And everything would be found there ready to order, such as silver plate, trenchers, and dishes, napkins and table-cloths, and whatever else was needful.... Sometimes there would be at these palaces an hundred different parties; some holding a banquet, others celebrating a wedding... in so well-ordered a manner that one party was never in the way of another....

Both men and women are fair and comely, and for the most part clothe themselves in silk, so vast is the supply of that material, both from the whole district of Kinsay, and from the imports by traders from other provinces. And you must know they eat every kind of flesh, even that of dogs and other unclean beasts, which nothing would induce a Christian to eat....

You must know also that the city of Kinsay has some 3,000 baths, the water of which is supplied by springs. They are hot baths, and the people take great delight in them, frequenting them several times a month, for they are very cleanly in their persons. They are the finest and largest baths in the world....

And the Ocean Sea comes within twenty-five miles of the city at a place called Ganfu, where there is a town and an excellent haven, with a vast amount of shipping which is engaged in the traffic to and from India and other foreign parts, exporting and importing many kinds of wares, by which the city benefits....

I repeat that everything appertaining to this city is on so vast a scale, and the Great Kaan's yearly revenues therefrom are so immense, that it is not easy even to put it in writing....

In this part are the ten principal markets, though besides these there are a vast number of others in the different parts of the town.... [T]oward the [market] squares are built great houses of stone, in which the merchants from India and other foreign parts store their wares, to be handy for the markets. In each of the squares is held a market three days in the week, frequented by 40,000 or 50,000 persons, who bring thither for sale every possible necessary of life, so that there is always an ample supply of every kind of meat and game....

Those markets make a daily display of every kind of vegetables and fruits.... [V]ery good raisins are

^obezant: a Byzantine gold coin.

brought from abroad, and wine likewise.... From the Ocean Sea also come daily supplies of fish in great quantity, brought twenty-five miles up the river.... All the ten market places are encompassed by lofty houses, and below these are shops where all sorts of crafts are carried on, and all sorts of wares are on sale, including spices and jewels and pearls. Some of these shops are entirely devoted to the sale of wine made from rice and spices, which is constantly made fresh, and is sold very cheap. Certain of the streets are occupied by the women of the town, who are in such a number that I dare not say what it is. They are found not only in the vicinity of the market places, where usually a quarter is assigned to them, but all over the city. They exhibit themselves splendidly attired and abundantly perfumed, in finely garnished houses, with trains of waiting-women. These women are extremely accomplished in all the arts of allurements, and readily adapt their conversation to all sorts of persons, insomuch that strangers who have once tasted their attractions seem to get bewitched, and are so taken with their blandishments and their fascinating ways that they never can get these out of their heads....

Other streets are occupied by the Physicians, and by the Astrologers, who are also teachers of reading and writing; and an infinity of other professions have their places round about those squares. In each of the squares there are two great palaces facing one another, in which are established the officers appointed by the King to decide differences arising between merchants, or other inhabitants of the quarter....

The crowd of people that you meet here at all hours... is so vast that no one would believe it possible that victuals enough could be provided for their consumption, unless they should see how, on every market-day, all those squares are thronged and crammed with purchasers, and with the traders who have brought in stores of provisions by land or water; and everything they bring in is disposed of....

The natives of the city are men of peaceful character, both from education and from the example of their kings, whose disposition was the same. They know nothing of handling arms, and keep none in their houses. You hear of no feuds or noisy quarrels or dissensions of any kind among them. Both in their commercial dealings and in their manufactures they are thoroughly honest and truthful, and there is such a degree of good will and neighborly attachment among both men and women that you would take the people who live in the same street to be all one family.

And this familiar intimacy is free from all jealousy or suspicion of the conduct of their women. These they treat with the greatest respect, and a man who should presume to make loose proposals to a married woman would be regarded as an infamous rascal. They also treat the foreigners who visit them for the sake of trade with great cordiality and entertain them in the most winning manner, affording them every help and advice on their business. But on the other hand they hate to see soldiers, and not least those of the Great Kaan's garrisons, regarding them as the cause of their having lost their native kings and lords.

Document 8.3

An Arab Muslim in West Africa

For most of the postclassical millennium, the world of Islam was far more extensive than that of Christendom. Nothing more effectively conveys both the extent and the cultural unity of the Islamic world than the travels of Ibn Battuta (1304–1368). Born in Morocco, this learned Arab scholar traversed nearly 75,000 miles during his extraordinary journeys, which took him to Spain, Anatolia, West and East Africa, Arabia, Iraq, Persia, Central and Southeast Asia, India, and China. He traveled at various times as a pilgrim, as a religious seeker, as a legal scholar, and frequently in the company of Muslim

merchants. Remarkably, almost all of his extensive travels occurred within the realm of Islam, where he moved among people who shared his faith and often his Arabic language. Marco Polo, by contrast, had felt himself constantly an outsider, "a stranger in a strange land," for he was traveling almost everywhere beyond the borders of Christendom. But as a visitor from a more-established Islamic society, Ibn Battuta was often highly critical of the quality of Islamic observance in the frontier regions of the faith.

One such frontier region was West Africa, where a new civilization was taking shape, characterized by large empires such as Mali, a deep involvement in trans-Saharan commerce, and the gradual assimilation of Islam (see Map 8.3, p. 350, and pp. 348–51 and 492–94). The new faith had been introduced by North African Muslim traders and had found a growing acceptance, particularly in the urban centers, merchant communities, and ruling classes of West African kingdoms. On the last of his many journeys, Ibn Battuta crossed the Sahara Desert with a traders' caravan to visit Mali in 1352. Upon returning home the following year, he dictated his recollections and experiences to a scribe, producing a valuable account of this West African civilization in the fourteenth century.

- How would you describe Ibn Battuta's impression of Mali? What surprised or shocked him? What did he appreciate?
- What does Ibn Battuta's description of his visit to Mali reveal about his own attitudes and his image of himself?
- What might historians learn from this document about the nature and extent of Islam's penetration in this West African empire? What elements of older and continuing West African cultural traditions are evident in the document?
- What specifically does Ibn Battuta find shocking about the women he encounters on his travels in West Africa?
- What indications of Mali's economic involvement with a wider world are evident in the document?

IBN BATTUTA

Travels in Asia and Africa

1354

Thus we reached the town of Iwalatan^o after a journey from Sijilmasa of two months to a day. Iwalatan is the northernmost province of the blacks.... The garments of its inhabitants, most of

whom belong to the Massufa tribe, are of fine Egyptian fabrics.

Source: Ibn Battuta, *Travels in Asia and Africa 1325–1354*, translated and edited by H.A.R. Gibb (London: Broadway House, 1929), 319–34.

^oIwalatan: Walata.

Their women are of surpassing beauty, and are shown more respect than the men. The state of affairs amongst these people is indeed extraordinary. Their men show no signs of jealousy whatever; no one claims descent from his father, but on the contrary from his mother's brother. A person's heirs are his sister's sons, not his own sons. This is a thing which I have seen nowhere in the world except among the Indians of Malabar. But those are heathens; these people are Muslims, punctilious in observing the hours of prayer, studying books of law, and memorizing the Koran. Yet their women show no bashfulness before men and do not veil themselves, though they are assiduous in attending the prayers.

The women there have "friends" and "companions" amongst the men outside their own families, and the men in the same way have "companions" amongst the women of other families. A man may go into his house and find his wife entertaining her "companion," but he takes no objection to it. One day at Iwalatan I went into the qadi's^o house, after asking his permission to enter, and found with him a young woman of remarkable beauty. When I saw her I was shocked and turned to go out, but she laughed at me, instead of being overcome by shame, and the qadi said to me "Why are you going out? She is my companion." I was amazed at their conduct, for he was a theologian and a pilgrim [to Mecca] to boot....

When I decided to make the journey to Malli,^o which is reached in twenty-four days from Iwalatan if the traveler pushes on rapidly, I hired a guide from the Massufa—for there is no necessity to travel in a company on account of the safety of that road—and set out with three of my companions....

A traveler in this country carries no provisions, whether plain food or seasonings, and neither gold nor silver. He takes nothing but pieces of salt and glass ornaments, which the people call beads, and some aromatic goods. When he comes to a village the womenfolk of the blacks bring out millet, milk, chickens, pulped lotus fruit, rice,

"funi" (a grain resembling mustard seed, from which "kuskusu"^o and gruel are made), and pounded haricot beans....

Thus I reached the city of Malli, the capital of the king of the blacks. I stopped at the cemetery and went to the quarter occupied by the whites, where I asked for Muhammad ibn al-Faqih. I found that he had hired a house for me and went there.... I met the qadi of Malli, 'Abd ar-Rahman, who came to see me; he is a black, a pilgrim [to Mecca], and a man of fine character. I met also the interpreter Dugha, who is one of the principal men among the blacks. All these persons sent me hospitality gifts of food and treated me with the utmost generosity....

The sultan^o of Malli is Mansa Sulayman.... He is a miserly king, not a man from whom one might hope for a rich present. It happened that I spent these two months without seeing him, on account of my illness. Later on he held a banquet... to which the commanders, doctors, qadi, and preacher were invited, and I went along with them. Reading-desks were brought in, and the Koran was read through, then they prayed for our master Abu'l-Hasan^o and also for Mansa Sulayman.

When the ceremony was over I went forward and saluted Mansa Sulayman.... When I withdrew, the [sultan's] hospitality gift was sent to me.... I stood up thinking... that it consisted of robes of honor and money, and lo!, it was three cakes of bread, and a piece of beef fried in native oil, and a calabash of sour curds. When I saw this I burst out laughing, and thought it a most amazing thing that they could be so foolish and make so much of such a paltry matter.

On certain days the sultan holds audiences in the palace yard, where there is a platform under a tree, with three steps; this they call the "pempi." It is carpeted with silk and has cushions placed on it. [Over it] is raised the umbrella, which is a sort of pavilion made of silk, surmounted by a bird in gold, about the size of a falcon. The sultan comes out of a door in a corner of the palace, carrying a bow in his hand and a quiver on his back. On his head he has a golden

^oqadi: judge.

^oMalli: the city of Mali.

^okuskusu: couscous.

^osultan: ruler.

^oAbu'l-Hasan: the sultan of Morocco.

skullcap, bound with a gold band which has narrow ends shaped like knives, more than a span in length. His usual dress is a velvety red tunic, made of the European fabrics called "mutanfas." The sultan is preceded by his musicians, who carry gold and silver guimbris^o, and behind him come three hundred armed slaves. He walks in a leisurely fashion, affecting a very slow movement, and even stops from time to time. On reaching the pempi he stops and looks round the assembly, then ascends it in the sedate manner of a preacher ascending a mosque-pulpit. As he takes his seat the drums, trumpets, and bugles are sounded. Three slaves go out at a run to summon the sovereign's deputy and the military commanders, who enter and sit down. Two saddled and bridled horses are brought, along with two goats, which they hold to serve as a protection against the evil eye. . . .

The blacks are of all people the most submissive to their king and the most abject in their behavior before him. . . . If he summons any of them while he is holding an audience in his pavilion, the person summoned takes off his clothes and puts on worn garments, removes his turban and dons a dirty skullcap, and enters with his garments and trousers raised knee-high. He goes forward in an attitude of humility and dejection and knocks the ground hard with his elbows, then stands with bowed head and bent back listening to what he says. If anyone addresses the king and receives a reply from him, he uncovers his back and throws dust over his head and back, for all the world like a bather splashing himself with water. . . .

On feast-days . . . , the poets come in. Each of them is inside a figure resembling a thrush, made of feathers, and provided with a wooden head with a red beak, to look like a thrush's head. They stand in front of the sultan in this ridiculous makeup and recite their poems. I was told that their poetry is a kind of sermonizing in which they say to the sultan: "This pempi which you occupy was that whereon sat this king and that king, and such and such were this one's noble actions and such and such the other's. So do you too do good deeds whose memory will

outlive you." . . . I was told that this practice is a very old custom amongst them, prior to the introduction of Islam, and that they have kept it up.

The blacks possess some admirable qualities. They are seldom unjust, and have a greater abhorrence of injustice than any other people. Their sultan shows no mercy to anyone who is guilty of the least act of it. There is complete security in their country. Neither traveler nor inhabitant in it has anything to fear from robbers or men of violence. They do not confiscate the property of any white man who dies in their country, even if it be uncounted wealth. On the contrary, they give it into the charge of some trustworthy person among the whites, until the rightful heir takes possession of it. They are careful to observe the hours of prayer, and assiduous in attending them in congregations, and in bringing up their children to them.

On Fridays, if a man does not go early to the mosque, he cannot find a corner to pray in, on account of the crowd. It is a custom of theirs to send each man his boy [to the mosque] with his prayer-mat; the boy spreads it out for his master in a place befitting him [and remains on it] until he comes to the mosque. . . .

Another of their good qualities is their habit of wearing clean white garments on Fridays. Even if a man has nothing but an old worn shirt, he washes it and cleans it, and wears it to the Friday service. Yet another is their zeal for learning the Koran by heart. . . . I visited the qadi in his house on the day of the festival. His children were chained up, so I said to him, "Will you not let them loose?" He replied, "I shall not do so until they learn the Koran by heart."

Among their bad qualities are the following. The women servants, slave-girls, and young girls go about in front of everyone naked, without a stitch of clothing on them. Women go into the sultan's presence naked and without coverings, and his daughters also go about naked. Then there is their custom of putting dust and ashes on their heads, as a mark of respect, and the grotesque ceremonies we have described when the poets recite their verses. Another reprehensible practice among many of them is the eating of carrion, dogs, and asses.

^o **guimbris**: two-stringed guitars.

I went on...to Gawgaw°, which is a large city on the Nile°, and one of the finest towns in the

°**Gawgaw:** Gogo.

°**Nile:** Niger. The Niger River was long regarded by outsiders as a tributary of The Nile.

land of the blacks. It is also one of their biggest and best-provisioned towns, with rice in plenty, milk, and fish....The buying and selling of its inhabitants is done with cowry shells, and the same is the case at Malli. I stayed there about a month.

Using the Evidence: Travelers' Tales and Observations

1. **Describing a foreign culture:** Each of these documents was written by an outsider to the people or society he is describing. What different postures toward these foreign cultures are evident in the sources? How did the travelers' various religions shape their perception of places they visited? How did they view the women of their host societies? Were these travelers more impressed by the similarities or by the differences between their home cultures and the ones they visited?
2. **Defining the self-perception of authors:** What can we learn from these documents about the men who wrote them? What motivated them? How did they define themselves in relationship to the societies they observed?
3. **Assessing the credibility of sources:** What information in these sources would be most valuable for historians seeking to understand India, China, and West Africa in the postclassical era? What statements in these sources might be viewed with the most skepticism? You will want to consider the authors' purposes and their intended audiences in evaluating their writings.
4. **Considering outsiders' accounts:** What are the advantages and limitations for historians in drawing on the writings of foreign observers?

Visual Sources

Considering the Evidence: Art, Religion, and Cultural Exchange in Central Asia



The huge region between the Caspian Sea and western China is known to scholars as Central Asia, or sometimes as Inner Asia (see Map 8.1, p. 335). Its geography features rugged mountains, vast deserts, extensive grasslands, and a generally arid climate, all of which made settled farming difficult or impossible, except in scattered oases. As a result, most of Central Asia's peoples pursued a pastoral and nomadic way of life, dependent on their horses, camels, sheep, goats, or cattle. Linguistically and culturally, the majority were of Turkic or Mongol background. These features have long given Central Asia a distinctive character, despite the diversity of its many disparate peoples.

In recent centuries, Central Asia gained a reputation as a remote and backward region, far removed from the major centers of global trade and development. During the postclassical millennium, however, that region functioned as a vital Eurasian crossroad. Perhaps most obviously, it was a commercial crossroads, as the Silk Roads traversed its territory, while many of its peoples participated actively in that network of exchange. Central Asia was also a cultural and religious crossroads: Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Manichaeism, elements of Greek and Chinese culture—all of these traditions, born in the outer rim of Eurasian civilizations, found a place among the peoples of Central Asia, frequently carried there by merchants. Finally, Central Asia was an imperial crossroads, for there the empires or military federations periodically established by pastoral societies clashed with the established civilizations and states of China, India, the Middle East, and Europe to the south and west. Thus Central Asia was for many centuries a vast arena of intense cross-cultural interaction. The images that follow provide a brief introduction to a few of its many peoples and to the mingling of their cultures with those of a wider world.

The Kushans were a pastoral nomadic people from the area around Dunhuang at the far western edge of China. In the early centuries B.C.E., they had migrated to the region that now makes up northwestern India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan, where they established a sizable and prosperous empire linked to the Silk Road trading network. It was a remarkably cosmopolitan

place, and it flourished until the third or fourth century C.E. That empire, according to one recent account, “created stable conditions at the heart of Central Asia, allowing for the great flowering of trans-Eurasian mercantile and cultural exchange that occurred along the Silk Roads.”³⁰

Since parts of this empire had earlier been ruled by Alexander the Great and his Greek successors (see pp. 152–54), classical Mediterranean culture was a prominent element of Kushan culture. The Kushans used the Greek alphabet to write their official language, which was derived from India. The greatest of the Kushan rulers, Kanishka (ruled ca. 127–153 C.E.), styled himself “Great King, King of Kings, Son of God,” a title that had both Persian and Chinese precedents. Hindu devotional cults as well as Buddhism flourished, and the Kushan Empire became a launching pad for the spread of Buddhism into Central Asia and ultimately into China and Japan (see pp. 338–40). It was here that the earliest human representations of the Buddha were sculpted, and often with distinctly Greek features. Despite multiple Eurasian influences, Kushan artists depicted their rulers in typical steppe nomadic style: on horseback, wearing loose trousers, heavy boots, and knee-length robes.³¹

In Visual Source 8.1, a Kushan pendant dating to the fourth century C.E. provides an illustration of the cultural blending so characteristic of the region. The medallion features Hariti, originally a fearsome Hindu goddess who abducted and killed children, feeding their flesh to her own offspring. But in an encounter with the Buddha, Hariti repented and was transformed into a compassionate protector of children. Here she is depicted holding in her right hand a lotus blossom, a prominent Buddhist symbol; her left hand holds another lotus flower supporting a flask or cornucopia overflowing with pomegranates (symbolizing food and abundance). According to local mythology, the Buddha had offered Hariti pomegranates (often said to resemble human flesh) as a substitute for the children she was devouring.

While the content of this pendant is thoroughly Indian and Buddhist, scholars believe that this representation of Hariti was probably modeled after the Greek goddess Tyche, also portrayed holding a cornucopia. Furthermore, her short tunic worn with a belt was likewise of Greek or Hellenistic origin. A further cultural influence is found in the decorations that surround the image, for the border of pearls and stylized flowers derives from Persia.

- Why do you think the Kushan artist who created this image chose to weave together so many distinct cultural strands?
- What does the story of Hariti’s transformation tell us about the impact of Buddhism in the region?
- Why might the Greek goddess Tyche been used as a model for Hariti? (Hint: you might want to do a little research on Tyche before answering this question.)

Visual Source 8.1 Greek Culture, Buddhism, and the Kushans (© Victoria and Albert Museum, London)



If the Kushan state was a major point of departure for the spread of Buddhism beyond India, that faith soon took hold in many of the Central Asian oasis cities along the Silk Road network, reaching China in the early centuries C.E. (see pp. 335–41).

In addition to merchants, Buddhist monks traversed the Silk Roads, some of them headed for India in search of holy texts and sacred relics (see Document 8.1),

while others traveled from town to town teaching the message of the Buddha. Thus at least until the rise of Islam (see Chapter 11), Buddhism was a common feature in the experience of many Central Asian peoples and a point of contact with the civilizations of India and China. Visual Source 8.2, a tenth-century Chinese painting, shows a traveling monk on the Silk Road. It derives from the Magao Caves, located near Dunhuang, a major center of Buddhist art and an important stop on the Silk Roads. (See Map 8.1, p. 335, and the photo on p. 339.) Notice that the monk is leading a tiger, long a symbol of protection and courage and a messenger between heaven and the human world (see the photo on p. 91). It also recalls a much-told story of the Buddha, in an earlier life, compassionately offering his blood and body to feed some starving tiger cubs and their mother.

- What function does the small Buddha sitting on a cloud at the upper left play in this painting?
- On his back the monk is carrying a heavy load of Buddhist texts, or *sutras*. Why do you think Buddhist monks were so eager to acquire and to disseminate such texts? (See also Document 8.1, pp. 356–59.)
- At the end of the monk's staff hangs what is probably a container for relics, perhaps a bone or a tuft of hair from the Buddha himself. Why might such relics have had such an appeal for the faithful? Can you identify a similar veneration of relics in other religious traditions?



Visual Source 8.2 Buddhist Monks on the Silk Road (British Museum/The Bridgeman Art Library)

Another central Asian people with extensive involvement in trans-Eurasian commerce were the Uighurs, Turkic-speaking nomads living north of the Gobi Desert (see Map 8.1, p. 335). By the eighth century C.E., they had established a powerful state that endured for about a century (744–840). Controlling a critical passage of the Silk Road network, Uighurs traded extensively with China, exchanging horses, camels, yaks, and hides for enormous quantities of Chinese silk. In fact, Uighur military forces saved the Chinese Tang dynasty from an internal rebellion between 755 and 763 and gained even greater access to Chinese wealth as they looted Chinese cities. A Chinese dynastic history bemoaned the unequal relationship that followed for a time: “The barbarians acquired silk insatiably and we were given useless horses.”³² The Uighur court likewise gained a series of Chinese princesses and considerable Chinese cultural influence.

They also acquired a new religion in China—Manichaeism. This was a faith of Persian origin, whose prophet, Mani (216–274 C.E.), saw himself in a long line of prophets including Zoroaster, the Buddha, and Jesus. Drawing on all of these traditions, Mani fashioned a religion that understood the world as an arena of intense conflict between the forces of Light (the soul) and the Dark (the material world). It spread widely within the Roman Empire and along the Silk Road network into China, where it was soon subject to intense persecution at the hands of Buddhists. From there the invading Uighurs picked it up and made it the official faith of their empire. No one knows precisely why Uighur rulers chose to convert to this Persian-based religion. Perhaps it linked the Uighurs to the larger world of agrarian civilizations, while reducing their cultural dependence on China. In any event, it represents another remarkable example of cultural interchange along the crossroads of Central Asia.

Visual Source 8.3 comes from a page in a Manichaean book dated variously between the eighth and eleventh centuries and found in the Uighur region of Khocho. It shows a number of Manichaean priests, wearing their characteristic tall white hats and writing at their desks. The fragmentary text in the middle, written in a Uighur script, warns against those who “believe in a wrong and contrary law” and “pray false prayers.” As if to symbolize the corrupt and inverted world of Darkness, the image presents the priests writing left-handed and the script running from bottom to top instead of the normal top-down fashion.³³

- How would you read the overall religious message of the painting? What might suggest the ultimate triumph of the Light? Consider the role of the trees, bearing the flowers and fruits of good deeds.
- What does the presence of this Persian-based religion among a distant Central Asian people suggest about the postclassical Eurasian world?



Visual Source 8.3 Manichaean Scribes (Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz/Art Resource, NY)

Clearly the most well-known of Central Asian peoples were the Mongols, described more fully in Chapter 12. Under the leadership of Chinggis Khan, a number of quite distinct and rival pastoral tribes in what is now Mongolia had been brought together in a powerful military confederation by the early thirteenth century. That newly created Mongol state then embarked on an enormous effort of conquest that gave rise to the world's largest empire. That empire encompassed the civilizations of China, Persia, and Russia as well as many of the other nomadic peoples of Central Asia, and it threatened Japan, Southeast Asia, central Europe, and Egypt (see Map 12.1, p. 530.). Its presence loomed all across Eurasia in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, generating numerous cross-cultural encounters and interactions.

None of these was of greater significance than the Mongol conquest of China fully accomplished by 1279. While the Mongols ruled China in a largely Chinese fashion, they also sought to preserve much of their own culture. Thus they undertook an annual ritual of scattering mare's milk, employed Mongol shamans at the ruler's court, continued to wear native costumes of leather and fur, and rode to the hunt in traditional Mongol fashion. Mongol women living in China generally gave birth in a traditional felt-covered dwelling rather than in a Chinese-style home.

Visual Source 8.4 illustrates the Mongol effort to maintain their own identity even as they were immersed in the sophisticated culture of China, which had proved so attractive to many neighboring peoples. The painting (ca. 1280) is by the Chinese court artist Liu Guandao and was commissioned by Khubilai Khan, grandson of Chinggis Khan and the Mongol ruler of China from 1264 to 1294. Titled *Khubilai Khan on a Hunt*, it shows the Mongol ruler on a dark horse, wearing a distinctive fur-rimmed white robe that covers his Chinese royal garments, and accompanied by a female consort and a number of servants and officials. The figure in blue in the lower group of hunters carries a hawk, often used by Central Asian peoples during a hunt, while a trained wildcat sits on the horse below.

- Why do you think Khubilai Khan commissioned such a painting? What impression of himself did he seek to convey?
- What features of the landscape and depictions of people and animals illustrate the world of pastoral peoples from which the Mongols had come?
- What elements of Central Asian history are suggested by the camel train in the upper right?
- How might traditional Chinese officials respond to this painting? How might they react to the inclusion of women in a royal hunt?



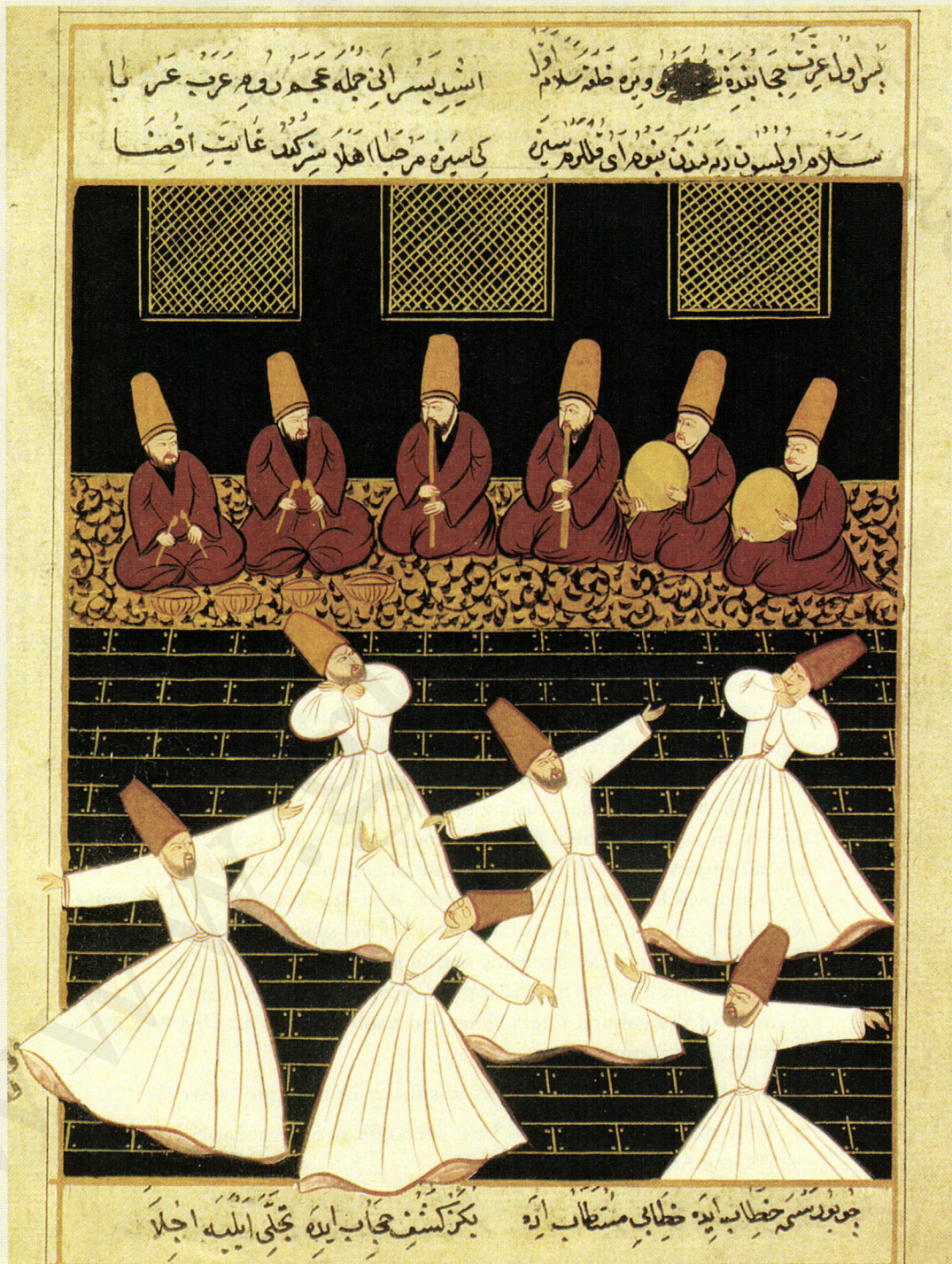
Visual Source 8.4 The Mongols in China (National Palace Museum, Taipei, Taiwan)

Among the peoples of Central Asia, none had a longer-lasting impact on world history than the Turks, a term that refers to a variety of groups speaking related Turkic languages. Originating as pastoral nomads in what is now Mongolia, Turkic peoples gradually migrated westward, occupying much of Central Asia, sometimes creating sizeable empires and settling down as farmers. But the greatest transformation of Turkic culture occurred with the Turkic peoples' conversion to Islam. That process took place between the tenth and fourteenth centuries, as Muslim armies penetrated Central Asia and Muslim merchants became prominent traders on the Silk Road.

Also very important in the Turks' conversion to Islam were Muslim holy men known as dervishes. Operating within the Sufi tradition of Islam, dervishes were spiritual seekers who sought a direct personal experience of the Divine Reality and developed reputations for good works, personal kindness, and sometimes magic or religious powers. A Turkic tale from the fourteenth century tells the story of one such holy man, Baba Tukles, sent by God to convert a ruler named Ozbek Khan. To overcome the opposition of the khan's traditional shamans, Baba Tukles invited one of the shamans to enter a fiery-hot oven pit with him. The shaman was instantly incinerated, while the Muslim holy man emerged unscathed from that test of religious power.³⁴ Such tales of the supernatural and the conversion of rulers contributed to the attractiveness of Islam among Turkic peoples and have been a common feature in the spread of all of the major world religions.

Visual Source 8.5, a painting dating from the sixteenth century, shows a number of Turkish dervishes performing the turning or whirling dance associated with the Sufi religious order established in the thirteenth century by the great mystical poet Rumi. Intended to bring participants into direct contact with the Divine, the whirling dance itself drew upon the ideas and practices of an ancient Central Asian religious life in which practitioners, known as shamans, entered into an ecstatic state of consciousness and connection to the spirit world. "Especially in Central Asia, the Caucasus and Anatolia," writes one scholar, "the mystical ecstasy [of the whirling dance] was understood in the spirit of the shamanic tradition."³⁵ This blending of two religious traditions—mystical or Sufi Islam and shamanism—represents yet another example of the cultural interactions that washed across Central Asia in the postclassical millennium.

- What image of these dervishes was the artist trying to convey?
- Why might such holy men have been effective missionaries of Islam in Central Asia?
- Notice the musical instruments that accompany the turning dance—sticks on the left, a flutelike instrument known as a *ney* in the center, and drums on the right. What do you think this music and dance contributed to the religious experience of the participants?



Visual Source 8.5 Islam, Shamanism, and the Turks (Topkapi Library Istanbul/Gianni Dagli Orti/The Art Archive)

Using the Evidence: Art, Religion, and Cultural Exchange in Central Asia

1. **Considering cross-cultural interactions:** The pastoral peoples of Central Asia and the settled agricultural civilizations adjacent to them did not live in closed or separate worlds. What evidence contained in these visual sources supports or challenges this assertion?
2. **Defining change and continuity:** In what ways do these visual sources indicate that the peoples of Central Asia were changed by their interactions with surrounding civilizations? In what respects did they retain elements of their earlier cultures?
3. **Explaining cultural change:** What aspects of these visual sources indicate that the various peoples of Central Asia were receptive to the religious and cultural traditions of neighboring civilizations?

智多星吳用

東溪村の人

あて字ハ吳學究道

号ヲ加瀧先生といふ

陣法ハ孔明太公望ノ

不劣陰謀ハ死靈

ふも勝多し

梁山泊ノ

軍師あり

