Unit 7 - The Late Middle Ages, 1000 to 1500 AD

LOCATIONS: Holy Land, Swahili Coast, Timbuktu, Beijing, Mongol Empire, Istanbul, France, England, Andes Mountains, Aztec, Inca, Spain, Portugal

22. Abbasid Empire  (uh-BA-suhd)

The Arab empire came under control of the Abbasid Dynasty in 750 AD. The great wave of Arabic conquest was over, and people of many lands were choosing to adopt Islam as their religion. Muslim traders, sailors, and preachers carried Islam to new territories in Central Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia. People converted to Islam because it promised a close relationship with God and equality among believers, and Muslims enjoyed the benefits of membership in a large and prosperous society.

Abbasid rulers were tolerant of different peoples and open to new ideas. Jews, Christians, Hindus, and Buddhists enjoyed freedom of religion in Muslim lands. Muslims learned from the cultures they encountered. They preserved the works of Aristotle and other classical Greek writers. They adopted the zero-based numbering system of India. They acquired the compass and papermaking from China. And they developed one of the most creative societies of all time. Islamic literature, art, and architecture flowered. Islamic civilization surpassed all others in science and technology and in size.

But the very size of the Abbasid Empire made it difficult to govern. At the same time the Islamic world was reaching new heights of achievement, Abbasid rulers were losing control of their empire to non-Arabs. As the empire weakened, it broke into competing Islamic kingdoms and then fell to nomadic invaders.

23. the Swahili Coast

It was during the Abbasid dynasty that Muslim traders brought sub-Saharan Africa into closer contact with the rest of the world and spread the religion of Islam in the process. As Muslim merchants developed trade links with cities in East and West Africa, African rulers in these trade centers often converted to Islam.

One trade center was on the east coast of Africa where the Swahili language was spoken. A string of prosperous Swahili Coast cities connected East Africa to the southern ocean trading network. These ports traded gold, ivory, and slaves from Africa for cotton from India, silk from Persia, and porcelain from China.

24. Empire of Mali

Islam came to West Africa with camel caravans crossing the Sahara Desert from North Africa. Camels could go no farther south than a band of savanna lying on the southern edge of the desert because camels sickened in wetter climates to the south. Trading cities such as Timbuktu grew and prospered where caravans stopped and exchanged salt and other goods from the north for gold from sub-Saharan Africa.

Several large states developed around these trading cities in the “hump” of West Africa. One was the Empire of Mali that thrived during the 1200s and 1300s. A Mali ruler, Mansa Musa, went on a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324 and distributed so much gold on his journey that the value of gold dropped in Egypt. Although Islam came to African trade centers, much of the interior of Africa was untouched by Muslim culture. People there continued to follow traditional religions, and many lived in stateless societies without formal rulers. In stateless societies, the community or a council of families made decisions.

25. Crusades

While the Abbasid dynasty was struggling to maintain control over its weakening empire, it faced a new threat from Europe. Roman Catholic popes encouraged Christian kings and knights to undertake military expeditions, or Crusades, to capture the Holy Land from the Muslims. The Holy Land is a region at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea where Jesus lived; it is also holy to Jews and Muslims. Christian crusaders conquered much of the Holy Land, taking Jerusalem in 1099, but they were unable to hold it and were driven out by 1291. These Christian invasions are still recalled with bitterness by some Muslims.

Still, the Crusades probably had greater impact on Europe than on the Holy Land. Europeans now had first-hand knowledge of just how backward Europe seemed in comparison to the more advanced Islamic culture. This realization probably pushed Europeans to develop more rapidly to catch up with the rival Muslims. Europeans acquired important technologies from the Muslim world including the “Arabic” numbering system (from India), the compass (from China), and the astrolabe, an Arabic instrument for measuring latitude. These inventions would make it possible for European ships to sail far out to sea.
26. Mongols

The Abbasid Empire fell when Mongol invaders conquered the capital of Baghdad in 1258 and massacred some 800,000 Muslims including the caliph (emperor). The Mongols were nomadic tribesmen and superb mounted warriors from central Asia who swept east toward China and west toward Europe under the brilliant but ruthless leadership of Genghis Khan and his successors. Mongols created the largest land empire in world history. Their conquests stopped just short of Western Europe when a Mongol leader died, and generals returned home to choose a new khan. Genghis Khan’s grandson, Kublai Khan, completed the conquest of China. He made himself emperor of China and established the present day capital of Beijing.

The Mongols left their mark. It took time for many regions to recover from Mongol destruction. The Mongol defeat of the Abbasid Dynasty left the Muslim world fragmented, and Mongol control slowed the development of Russia. But, a Mongol law code established order across the vast Mongol Empire ushering in a period of peace and increased trade between East and West over the old Silk Roads. These trade routes also transported the fleas that carried the Black Death (bubonic plague) from China to the Middle East and to Europe where it killed half the people of some areas. The Mongols were warriors, not administrators, and they did not develop the government institutions necessary to maintain an empire. Mongol unity withered in the late 1300s, and eventually the Mongols were absorbed into the cultures they had conquered.

27. Marco Polo

The Mongol invasions marked nearly the last time in history that nomadic raiders would threaten civilization. Settled societies eventually gained the upper hand against nomads with superior military organization and firearms. Because Western Europe was spared from Mongol attacks, Europe benefited in several ways from the Mongol conquests. The Mongol victories weakened Europe’s Muslim rivals, and when the Mongols reestablished dependable trade along the Silk Road, Europeans acquired new knowledge and technology from the East including gunpowder weapons.

In Europe, Venice, Italy grew wealthy as the main trading crossroads between East and West. In 1271, a teenager from Venice named Marco Polo left on a trading trip to China with his father and uncle. They visited the court of Kublai Khan, who gave bright young Marco a job as ambassador to outlying regions of China. Marco returned to Italy 24 years later and was serving as captain of a Venetian warship when he was captured and sent to prison in Genoa, Italy. There he wrote what is probably the most influential travel book of all time, The Travels of Marco Polo. The book gave Europeans their first real knowledge of China, and about two centuries later it inspired another Italian, Christopher Columbus of Genoa, to set sail for Asia.

28. samurai

Although Kublai Khan ruled China, he failed to conquer Japan. In 1281, he sent a fleet of over 4,000 ships and 150,000 warriors against Japan. Japan appeared to be doomed until two days of typhoon winds destroyed much of the Chinese force. The Japanese called the storm kamikaze, or “divine wind.”

At this time, warlords ruled Japan, and Japan had a feudal system very similar to the system in Europe. Poor farmers were bound to a land-owning lord, and the lord protected his holdings with mounted professional warriors called samurai. Some members of the samurai class became rulers in their own right.

29. the voyages of Zheng He (JUNG HUH, sometimes spelled Cheng Ho)

The Chinese resented being ruled by Mongol outsiders. After the death of Kublai Khan, a revolt drove the Mongols from China and established the Ming Dynasty that lasted nearly 300 years. The Ming are known for their fine blue and white porcelain (or china) that was exported to much of the world. The Ming built the Forbidden City in Beijing as a new home for the emperor with beautiful palaces and gardens.

In the early 1400s, Ming emperors sent Chinese admiral Zheng He -- a Muslim and a eunuch -- on seven great overseas voyages to demonstrate Chinese power and to collect treasure. On his first expedition, Zheng He commanded a fleet of 62 ships and 28,000 men. Some of his treasure ships were over 400 feet long, many times the size of the ships later used by Columbus. These expeditions traveled as far as Arabia and east Africa, extending Chinese influence over much of the civilized world. But Ming court advisers began to argue that China could learn nothing from foreign “barbarians,” and China’s money would be better spent closer to home improving defenses against Mongols and other nomads. The ocean expeditions stopped, and China’s fleet went into decline. China’s withdrawal from ocean exploration opened the door for the less-advanced civilization in Western Europe to explore and eventually dominate the world’s oceans.
30. Ottoman Empire

Following the Mongol disruptions, three new Islamic empires emerged to replace the fallen Abbasid Dynasty. They were the Ottoman Empire in the eastern Mediterranean, the Safavid Empire in Persia, and the Mughal Empire of India. (A Mughal ruler built the famed Taj Mahal.) Of these three empires, the Ottoman Empire was the largest, and it lasted longest. The Ottomans were a branch of Turkish nomads from central Asia who fled west to escape the Mongols. They settled in Asia Minor and eventually extended their rule to Christian lands in southern Europe and to Muslim lands in the Middle East. The Ottoman Turks conquered the last remaining piece of the old Byzantine Empire in 1453 when they used early canons to destroy the walls of Constantinople. They made the city their capital and renamed it Istanbul.

The Ottoman Turks were Sunni Muslims. Their neighbors in the Safavid Empire were Shi’a Muslims. The two empires battled for dominance, a struggle intensified by their religious differences. Today Shi’a Muslims remain concentrated in the vicinity of Persia, now Iran and Iraq, while Sunnis are a majority elsewhere. Distracted by conflicts with their rivals and by internal problems, the three Islamic empires paid little attention to the growing commercial and technological strength of the kingdoms in Europe.

31. Guilds

In Europe of the late middle ages, improvements in agricultural technology led to bigger populations and the growth of cities. Townspeople gradually won the right from their local lords to run their own city governments. Trade grew, and cities became important centers of manufacturing and commerce.

Many of the goods traded in Europe were produced by self-employed craftspeople who formed organizations called guilds to regulate the price and quality of their products such as shoes or metalwork. Guilds were the forerunners of today’s labor unions. Guilds also served as civic organizations that helped to run the towns. Some women began taking up trades like hat making or weaving that gave them greater financial independence. Merchants and craftspeople were becoming a new class in European society, a middle class between the peasants and the nobility (lords and kings).

32. Hundred Years’ War

It might be said that two wars between France and England marked the beginning and the end of the age of knights and castles in Europe. The first of these wars was the Norman Conquest of England. In 1066, a duke from the Normandy region of northern France invaded and conquered England becoming the new English king, William the Conqueror. William used knights to help win his victory, and the Normans built castles in England for protection from hostile locals. As a result, knights and castles became more popular.

Several centuries later, William’s descendants claimed the legal right to the French throne. This and other causes led to the Hundred Years’ War fought on French soil from 1337 to 1453. In battle after battle, French knights were defeated by English forces that included foot soldiers firing powerful longbows that filled the skies with deadly arrows. Most of France had fallen under English control when an illiterate, teenage peasant girl appeared at the French court claiming that voices told her how to save France. That girl, Joan of Arc, led a French army to victory over the English in a battle at Orleans, France in 1429. It was the turning point of the war. The French continued winning and finally drove the English from France in 1453. This is why Joan is loved by the French as their greatest patriot and why the English burned her at the stake.

During the Hundred Years’ War, knights were made obsolete by English longbows and guns. Kings replaced knights with paid armies. Castles became obsolete because cannons could destroy stone walls. The entire feudal system was breaking down as people in England and France developed loyalties to their countries rather than to local lords. In the process, the modern nations of France and England were born.

33. Gothic Architecture

The Roman Catholic Church reached the height of its power and influence during the late middle ages. The most visible symbol of the church’s power were magnificent Gothic cathedrals built in the 1100s and 1200s including Notre Dame, Chartres, and Reims, all in France. The most prominent feature of Gothic architecture is the pointed arch, but the Gothic style is also known for soaring ceilings, walls filled with glass windows, and flying buttresses. A flying buttress is an external, arched support for the wall of a building that allowed builders to construct tall, thin, stone walls filled with colored-glass windows. Glass was extremely important to Gothic cathedrals: it lighted the interior, its beauty seemed inspired by God, and the Bible stories portrayed on the windows taught about religion at a time when most people were illiterate.
34. Renaissance
Renaissance means reawakening or rebirth, and it refers to a rebirth of learning from classical Greece and Rome. In the late middle ages, Italians became interested in learning about the glories of their ancestors in the Roman Empire. They searched for classical literature forgotten in monasteries, and they acquired classical works from Muslim and Byzantine scholars. Archeologists uncovered classical art and architecture.

Italians became interested in humanism, the concern with human values in this life as opposed to religious beliefs and the afterlife. Renaissance architecture abandoned the church’s Gothic style and adopted the simplicity and balance of more classical forms. Artists including Michelangelo and Da Vinci shaped Western art, Shakespeare wrote plays that explored human nature, and Gutenberg’s printing press spread Renaissance knowledge through cheaper books that encouraged people to learn how to read and write. The Renaissance began in Florence, Italy about 1350 and spread to Rome and finally to much of Europe before it ended in the early 1600s. The Renaissance was a bridge between the middle ages and the modern world.

35. Aztecs
During the late middle ages, people of the Western Hemisphere continued to develop in isolation from the rest of the world. Agriculture had spread across much of the Americas, and Native American societies ranged from small bands of hunter-gathers to empires with millions of people. The two greatest empires of the time were the Aztec and the Inca. Both collected heavy taxes from groups they conquered.

The Aztecs were a fierce and warlike people of central and southern Mexico who controlled their subjects through fear and military force. Their polytheistic religion practiced human sacrifice on a scale unknown elsewhere in history. The Aztec’s believed their sun god required blood from beating human hearts each night in order to rise again in the morning. Often the purpose of war was to obtain victims for sacrifice. The Aztecs built their capital on swampy marshland in what is now Mexico City. Floating gardens provided the city’s food. When Europeans first saw the capital, they were amazed to find an island city of 200,000 people -- as big as any city in Europe -- with tall temples, a huge marketplace, ball courts, and even a zoo.

36. Incas
The Inca civilization was centered in present day Peru, but it grew to include most of the Pacific coast of South America between the Andes Mountains and the ocean. It was a high-altitude civilization; farmers developed irrigation systems and stepped terraces for growing crops on steep hillsides. The 3,000 mile-long Inca Empire was linked by the most extensive road system since the Roman Empire. Way stations built on main roads provided travelers with places to stay at the end of each day’s journey. The Incas did not have writing as we know it, but they kept accurate numerical records on knotted strings called quipu (KEE-pu).

People living in the Americas, including the Aztecs and Incas, had no way of knowing their long separation from Eurasia was about to end with consequences they could hardly imagine.

37. the great voyages of discovery
As the year 1500 approached, the world faced a turning point in history, but none were yet aware of it. Sailing ships and navigation technology had improved to a point that ships could sail anywhere in the world. The Eastern and Western Hemispheres still did not know each other existed, but the time had come for them to meet. Who would make the introduction? Three civilizations had the necessary wealth and knowledge. The Islamic world was one of them, but it was weakened by the Mongol conquests, and it was preoccupied with local and regional matters. The Chinese civilization was another, but it had withdrawn from ocean exploration to deal with internal concerns. Only Christian Europe seemed eager to reach outward.

Europeans were hungry to explore. The Vikings had taught them how to sail the stormy Atlantic. The Crusades whetted their appetite for travel and adventure, and Marco Polo got them thinking about Asia. Europe also had the means to explore. The Renaissance brought European culture to a level of other advanced civilizations, and it gave Europeans a new sense of confidence. The competing kings of Europe were busy adopting new technologies and trade links to give them advantages over rival monarchs.

In August of 1492, Spain sent Christopher Columbus into the Atlantic Ocean with three small ships to search for a western trade route to the spice islands of Asia, a voyage that finally connected the Eastern and Western Hemispheres. Sailing for Portugal, Vasco de Gama rounded Africa and connected Europe to the Indian Ocean and Asia in 1498. In 1522, Magellan’s Spanish expedition circled the earth and connected the world. The world would never be the same. The middle ages were over, and modern times had begun.