

Topic 1.7 Comparison in the Period from c. 1200 to c. 1450 (Student)

Standards Alignment

Framework Component	Description
Theme	Governance (GOV), Cultural Developments and Interactions (CDI)
Learning Objective (Unit 1.N)	Explain the similarities and differences in the processes of state formation from c. 1200 to c. 1450.
Key Concepts (KC 3.2)	State formation and development demonstrated continuity, innovation, and diversity in various regions.
Supporting Concepts	KC-3.2.I.A – Song Dynasty of China; KC-3.2.I.B.i – Hindu and Buddhist states in South and Southeast Asia; KC-3.2.I.D.i–ii – State systems in the Americas and Africa showed continuity, innovation, and diversity.

Lesson Overview

Between 1200 and 1450, states across the world developed new methods to organize power and maintain control. Although these societies differed in culture and belief systems, they all faced similar challenges—defending borders, collecting taxes, and managing resources.

The **Song Dynasty in East Asia**, **Delhi Sultanate in South Asia**, **Great Zimbabwe and Hausa city-states in Africa**, and **Aztec and Inca states in the Americas** each showed both **continuity** (building on existing traditions) and **innovation** (developing new systems suited to their environment and culture).

This lesson helps students compare **how** and **why** different states developed similar or different political systems, emphasizing that diversity did not mean isolation.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

1. Identify major examples of state formation across Afro-Eurasia and the Americas.
2. Compare how different states maintained authority and organized power.
3. Explain how geography, religion, and trade shaped political systems.
4. Analyze similarities and differences in continuity and innovation among states between 1200–1450.

Essential Vocabulary

Term	Definition
Bureaucracy	A system of government in which officials carry out the administration according to set rules or ranks.
Caliphate	An Islamic state led by a religious and political leader, the caliph, seen as a successor to the Prophet Muhammad.
Mandate of Heaven	A Chinese belief that rulers were chosen by divine will; if they failed to govern well, the mandate could be lost.
City-state	A self-governing urban center and the surrounding lands it controls, common in Africa and Mesoamerica.

Syncretism	The blending of different beliefs or cultural traditions into a new system, often seen in religion or governance.
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Background Reading

From 1200 to 1450, major civilizations across the Eastern Hemisphere built on existing traditions while adapting to new realities. The **Song Dynasty** (960–1279) refined the Confucian bureaucratic system developed during earlier dynasties. Its use of the **civil service exam** ensured that government officials were chosen by merit, not family background, although the emperor still held ultimate authority.

In **South Asia**, the **Delhi Sultanate** introduced Islamic rule to a largely Hindu region. While the sultans borrowed administrative methods from earlier Indian kingdoms, they also introduced Islamic law and taxation systems that changed local governance.

In **Africa**, powerful kingdoms like **Mali** and **Great Zimbabwe** rose due to control over trade networks. Leaders relied on tribute, trade wealth, and kinship ties rather than centralized bureaucracies.

In the **Americas**, civilizations like the **Aztec Empire** and **Inca Empire** demonstrated sophisticated state organization. The Aztecs demanded tribute and military service from conquered peoples, while the Incas created an imperial network connected by roads and forced labor systems such as *mit'a*.

Across regions, states sought to legitimize power through **religion**, **tradition**, and **public works**, yet their methods reflected the unique cultural and environmental contexts of their societies.

Primary Sources

Source 1: Emperor Taizong on Government (Tang–Song Tradition, c. 7th century CE)

Source: “Emperor Taizong on Effective Government,” from the *Internet History Sourcebooks Project, Fordham University*.

<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/eastasia/taizongq-govt.asp>

The ruler is a boat, the people are the water. The water can carry the boat, but it can also overturn it. The people are the foundation of the state; if the foundation is firm, the state is stable. Therefore, a wise ruler loves and nourishes the people as one would protect the roots of a tree. If the roots are strong, the branches will flourish.

A ruler should not rely on his own desires. He must appoint upright ministers, listen to criticism, and reward those who serve the people well. When the ruler forgets the people, disasters will follow. When he listens to honest advice, his virtue will shine.

Source 2: Ibn Battuta Describes the Mali Empire (c. 1352 CE)

Source: “Ibn Battuta: Travels in Asia and Africa, 1325–1354,” trans. H.A.R. Gibb, from the *Internet Medieval Sourcebook, Fordham University*.

<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/1354-ibnbattuta.asp>

The people of Mali have a deep hatred of injustice. Their sultan does not forgive anyone guilty of the least act of it. Their government is well ordered, and no one

among them is afraid of being wronged. In the kingdom, there is complete safety; a man may travel alone without fear of thieves or robbers.

The inhabitants are Muslims who constantly attend prayers and study the Qur'an. The women are respected and enjoy freedom, and the king honors scholars and clerics. Yet their customs differ from those of other Muslim peoples: they eat certain foods forbidden in our lands, and their ceremonies include dancing and music.

Guided Source Analysis

Questions for Source 1 (Song China):

1. According to Emperor Taizong, what makes a ruler successful?
2. How does this passage reflect Confucian values of governance?
3. How might such ideals strengthen state power in China?

Questions for Source 2 (Mali Empire):

1. What aspects of the Mali Empire impressed Ibn Battuta?
2. How does this description show a blend of Islamic and local traditions?
3. In what ways does Mali's system differ from the Chinese imperial model?

Comparison Chart: State Formation, c. 1200–1450

Region	Example State	Basis of Power	Method of Governance	Source of Legitimacy	Notable Innovation
East Asia	Song Dynasty	Bureaucracy, taxation	Merit-based civil service exams	Mandate of Heaven	Gunpowder, paper currency
South Asia	Delhi Sultanate	Military conquest	Islamic administration over Hindu subjects	Religious law and taxation	Indo-Islamic cultural fusion
Africa	Mali Empire	Control of trade routes	Tributary system, Islamic advisors	Wealth and justice	Expansion of Islam via trade
Europe	Holy Roman Empire	Feudal relationships	Decentralized monarchy	Christian Church	Blend of feudal and religious authority
Americas	Aztec / Inca	Tribute and labor	Militarized tribute states	Religious rituals and divine kingship	Road networks, record-keeping (quipu)

Change, Continuity, and Comparison

Continuities (1200–1450):

- Religion used to justify authority (Mandate of Heaven, Caliphate, divine kingship).
- Reliance on agriculture and tribute for state revenue.
- Patriarchal structures and limited social mobility.

Changes (1200–1450):

- Rise of new ruling groups (Turkic states, Delhi Sultanate, Mali Empire).
- Increased trade networks connected regions politically and economically.

- Technological and cultural diffusion reshaped state structures (e.g., paper, gunpowder, Islam).

Comparisons:

- **China vs. Mali:** Bureaucratic merit vs. kinship and religious leadership.
- **Delhi Sultanate vs. Song:** Both centralized, but religious foundations differed.
- **Inca vs. Mali:** Tribute and labor control systems shaped empire expansion differently.

Reflection Activity

Task:

Using information from the chart and sources, write a short comparative paragraph (5–6 sentences):

Compare one Afro-Eurasian state (Song, Delhi Sultanate, or Mali) with one American state (Aztec or Inca) in terms of how each established and maintained authority between 1200–1450.

Guiding prompt:

- What role did religion play?
- How was power organized?
- How did geography influence their systems?

Key Takeaways

- Between 1200–1450, most major states sought to balance **tradition and innovation**.
- Rulers legitimized authority through **religion, law, and social hierarchy**.
- While some, like the Song, used **bureaucratic merit**, others, like Mali, used **trade wealth and kinship**.
- Despite different systems, all faced similar challenges: maintaining loyalty, managing resources, and defending territory.
- These patterns of state formation shaped later empires in the Early Modern Era.

Primary Source Citations

- “Emperor Taizong on Effective Government,” *Internet History Sourcebooks Project*, Fordham University.
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