

Topic 2.2 Part 2 — Mongol Expansion, Trade, and Communication (Student)

Standards Table

| Framework | Standard |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| AP World History: Modern | Theme ECN (Economic Systems): How societies produce, exchange, and consume goods. Learning Objective Unit 2.C: Explain how expansion of empires influenced trade and communication over time. Key Concept KC-3.1.I.E.i: The expansion of empires—including the Mongols—facilitated Afro-Eurasian trade and communication as new peoples joined imperial trade networks. |
| National Social Studies Standards | NSS-WH.4 & WH.5: Development of interregional networks of communication and exchange; interactions among world cultures; economic systems and trade. |
| Florida BEST (Social Studies) | Aligns with Historical Inquiry & Analysis (evaluating sources, continuity, and change) and Economics (trade, production, and exchange in historical contexts). |

Lesson Overview

The Mongol Empire did more than conquer territory—it reshaped economic life across Afro-Eurasia. Through military expansion and the creation of stable trade corridors, the Mongols linked diverse regions into one of the largest integrated economic systems in history. Their rule created conditions often called the **Pax Mongolica**, a period in which merchants, travelers, diplomats, and goods could cross long distances with relative safety. As a result, the Silk Roads experienced a revival that connected China, Central Asia, the Middle East, and even parts of Europe.

Trade increased not only in quantity but also in variety. Luxury goods such as silk, porcelain, and spices moved alongside new technologies, crops, and scientific knowledge. The Mongols also improved **communication**, developing relay stations, courier networks, and standardized passports (paizi) to support rapid movement across the empire. These systems helped bring more people—including conquered communities—into vast economic networks that transformed life across Afro-Eurasia.

By studying how Mongol expansion impacted trade and communication, students will learn how empires historically shape economic systems, create new connections, and influence long-term global developments. The Mongol period helps explain the increasing interconnectedness that characterized the 13th and 14th centuries.

Learning Objectives

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

- Explain how the Mongols expanded and protected long-distance trade networks.
- Describe how Mongol communication systems strengthened Afro-Eurasian connections.

- Analyze primary sources that describe trade and travel under Mongol rule.
- Evaluate how empire expansion drew new groups into trade systems.
- Connect Mongol economic policies to larger patterns of global interconnection.

Essential Vocabulary

1. **Pax Mongolica** – The period of stability and safety across Eurasia during Mongol rule.
2. **Caravanserai** – Roadside inns where travelers and merchants could rest and resupply.
3. **Paizi** – Mongol passport tablets granting safe travel and access across the empire.
4. **Relay system (yam)** – A network of stations providing fresh horses and messengers for rapid communication.
5. **Commercial integration** – Linking different regions into a shared economic system for trade and communication.

Background Reading

The Mongol Empire's expansion created unprecedented economic integration. Once conquered territories were secure, Mongol leaders focused on building the infrastructure that would support trade. Roads were repaired, bridges were built, and caravanserai were established at regular intervals to protect and supply merchant caravans. These improvements encouraged long-distance traders to return to the Silk Roads, which had become dangerous after the decline of earlier empires like the Abbasids and Tang.

Communication networks were equally important. The Mongols created the **yam**, a relay-station system that allowed messages to be carried across the empire at remarkable speed. Travelers could obtain fresh horses, lodging, and supplies at each station. The paizi passport system ensured official recognition and safety for traders and envoys, reducing the risks of theft or local interference. As a result, merchants from the Islamic world, China, Persia, and even Europe traveled more frequently than before.

Because the empire unified so many regions, more people and goods were drawn into shared economic networks. Crops, innovations, and knowledge traveled across Afro-Eurasia, including gunpowder technologies, papermaking, medical ideas, and navigational skills. This increased exchange contributed to economic growth—but also the spread of disease, most famously the Black Death. The Mongol era shows how expanding empires can reshape global economic patterns.

Primary Sources

Primary Source 1 — William of Rubruck, *Journey to the Land of the Mongols* (1253–1255) Link: <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/rubruck2.asp>

When one enters the land of the Mongols, the first thing to observe is the great number of merchants traveling from distant lands. I found men from Cathay, from Persia, and from Russia all exchanging goods in the encampments of the Mongols, each finding profit in the journey. The Mongols themselves do not busy themselves with trade, but they grant safe conduct to those who pass through their territories,

and so great a multitude of merchants come among them that one may travel securely from one end of their land to the other so long as he has leave from the Khan.

I myself passed through regions where no man would dare travel before the Mongols conquered them, for they were wild and full of robbers. Now the roads were open and safe, and the merchants moved freely with their goods. The Mongols have established order throughout the lands subject to them, so that trade flourishes more than before and the peoples of many nations come together who once had no dealings with each other.

Why this matters:

William of Rubruck provides a rare Western eyewitness account of the Mongol Empire's internal trade conditions. His observations reveal how Mongol control stabilized Central Asian routes, making long-distance commerce safer and more profitable, which contributed to the economic integration of Eurasia.

Analysis Questions:

1. How does Rubruck describe the impact of Mongol rule on long-distance trade?
2. What does this source suggest about the priorities of Mongol governance in conquered regions?
3. How might Rubruck's background as a European traveler shape his interpretation of Mongol economic practices?

Primary Source 2 — Ibn Battuta, *Travels, on the Golden Horde and Silk Road (1330s)* Link: <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/1354-ibnbattuta.asp>

I traveled with the caravan under the protection of the soldiers of the Sultan of the Golden Horde, and we crossed the lands that lie between the Volga and the great cities of Central Asia. Throughout this journey we passed through markets where merchants from many lands displayed their goods, and I was astonished at the abundance of fine cloth, furs, and other merchandise brought from distant countries. The roads were well protected, for the soldiers of the Khan watched over the caravans and guarded against bandits.

In the towns we visited, the bazaars were filled with travelers from China, India, and the lands of Islam, each trading according to his custom. The people enjoyed security and the merchants prospered, for the authority of the Khan extended over vast regions and ensured justice among those who entered his realm. Because of this order, many nations were joined together, and goods that once were rare could now be found in the markets with ease.

Why this matters:

Ibn Battuta's observations illustrate the economic prosperity and commercial integration achieved under Mongol rule in the western regions of the empire. His testimony highlights how the Mongols fostered safe travel, diverse merchant activity, and expanded transregional markets—key developments in Afro-Eurasian trade after 1200.

Analysis Questions:

1. How does Ibn Battuta describe security and order under Mongol rule, and why was this important for trade?
2. What can we infer about the economic diversity of Mongol-controlled regions based on the merchants and goods he describes?
3. How does Ibn Battuta's portrayal of Mongol governance compare with that of William of Rubruck?

AP Skill-Aligned Activity (ECN / Communication Focus)

Economic Systems Comparison Table

Fill in the chart:

| Mongol Policy / Feature | Why It Developed (Cause) | Impact on Trade & Communication (Effect) |
|---|--------------------------|--|
| Relay station system (yam) | | |
| Paizi passport tablets | | |
| Caravanserai networks | | |
| Protection of merchants | | |
| Unified law codes and standardized taxation | | |

Write a 5–7 sentence paragraph answering:

Which Mongol economic or communication policy had the greatest impact on Afro-Eurasian trade, and why?

Key Table

Economic Changes and Continuities Under Mongol Rule

| Feature | Change or Continuity? | Explanation |
|--|-----------------------|--|
| Increased safety on Silk Roads | Change | Earlier routes were dangerous; Mongol unification improved safety. |
| Movement of luxury goods | Continuity | Goods still moved, but volume increased due to stability. |
| Use of caravanserai | Change | More frequent and regulated than earlier eras. |
| High demand for Chinese goods | Continuity | China remained a major exporter. |
| Spread of technologies (gunpowder, printing) | Change | Mongols accelerated transfer across regions. |

CCOT / Comparison / Causation Section

Causation:

Mongol expansion led to safer trade routes → merchants traveled more → more goods, crops, and technologies spread across Afro-Eurasia → greater global interconnectedness.

CCOT:

Continuity: The Silk Roads still carried luxury goods.

Change: Under Mongol rule, the volume, safety, and diversity of trade increased dramatically.

Comparison:

Compared to earlier dynasties (Tang, Abbasid), the Mongols created far more stable conditions for interregional trade due to centralized rule and strict enforcement of security.

Student Practice Activity — Short Writing Task

Prompt:

In a well-structured paragraph (8–10 sentences), evaluate the extent to which Mongol expansion changed Afro-Eurasian trade networks between 1200–1350. Use evidence from one of the primary sources and from the lesson.

Key Takeaways

- The Mongols created an integrated economic system across Afro-Eurasia.
- Safe roads, communication networks, and caravanserai increased long-distance trade.
- More people and goods entered global networks, transforming economic and cultural exchange.
- Communication systems such as the yam connected distant regions more closely than before.
- Mongol expansion was a major turning point in the history of global trade.

Source Citations

William of Rubruck, *Report of the Journey to the Eastern Parts* (1255). Fordham Internet Sourcebook: <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/rubruck-report.asp>

Ibn Battuta, *Travels in Asia and Africa, 1325–1354*. Fordham Internet Sourcebook: <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/1347-ibnbattuta.asp>