

Theme 2.3; Connections Across Land, Empires and Trade

Use the following sources to determine how the rises and falls of empires and states affected the expansions and contractions of major trading networks such as the Silk Roads, the Gold Roads, and the Turquoise Roads.

- Ibn Kurdahbeh, ninth-century Persian geographer and postal official for the Abbasid Caliphate:

The Radanites' network stretched from the Mediterranean to China, and they made use of both land and sea routes in conducting their business. They commanded Persian and Arabic as well as Western and Slavic languages, and they traded in a wide variety of commodities, such as silk, furs, swords, aromatics, spices, eunuchs, and slaves

- Abu al-Fadl Ja'far bin 'Ali ad-Dimashqi in his work *A Guide to the Merits of Commerce and to Recognition of Both Fine and Defective Merchandise and the Swindles of Those Who Deal Dishonestly* in ninth-century Damascus (Abbasid Caliphate):

There are three kinds of merchants: he who travels, he who stocks, he who exports. Their trade is carried out in three ways: cash sale with a time limit for delivery, purchase on credit with payments by installment, and muqaradah (in Islamic law, a contract in which one individual entrusts capital to a merchant for investment in trade in order to receive a share of the profits). The investor bears all of the financial risks; the managing party risks his labor.

- This passage from the *Florentine Codex*, collected by Spanish monk Fray Bernadino de Sahagún, illustrates the riches acquired by the Mexica (Aztecs) in the course of their conquests:

And in their time appeared gold lip and ear plugs and rings for the fingers...and necklaces with radiating pendants, and fine turquoise and enormous green stones, and long quetzal feathers, and the skins of wild animals, and long tropical feathers, and blue cotinga and red spoonbill feathers.

- The Anasazi settlement of Chaco Canyon in northwestern New Mexico became a “distribution center” for the trading networks that connected the mines with their Mesoamerican customers. Among the first importers of turquoise were the dwellers at Alta Vista, in modern-day northwestern Mexico. This area was controlled by Teotihuacán, the dominant city of Mesoamerica at that time. In Teotihuacán, artisans imported raw chunks of the precious mineral and created finished pieces for export to the wealthy markets of central Mexico. Chaco Canyon's reign as the hub of the turquoise trade lasted about 150 years; at its height, the distribution network stretched from the Pacific coast to the Yucatan Peninsula. The Anasazi left no written memoirs, so our knowledge of them is very incomplete. But there are very tantalizing hints of why these agrarian people invested so much energy in mining and trading vast amounts of turquoise to central Mexico. For example, at the north end of the Anasazi trade route, pens were discovered for holding macaws—tropical birds—suggesting that they were part of the deal. There's also evidence of the impact of Toltec religious ideas among both the Anasazi and their later Hopi and Zuni successors, including adoration of Quetzalcoatl—the feathered serpent god—whose worship required a variety of tropical feathers. Other scholars have speculated that perhaps the Anasazi traded turquoise in exchange for food as a hedge against famine in an unreliable desert environment. What we know is that the commodities that traveled in both directions along the Turquoise Road were sufficiently

compelling to sustain that trade route for several centuries. At the high point of turquoise traffic from Chaco Canyon, around the mid-tenth through twelfth centuries, the Toltec culture in Central Mexico was reaching its zenith. Turquoise passed through the Toltec city of Tula and continued south another 900 miles to the Mayan complex of Chichén Itzá. Around 1050 CE, the vastly dispersed communities across the Colorado Plateau suddenly changed into a highly structured, densely populated society. Their architecture began exhibiting features of Mesoamerican building styles, and high-status imports such as macaws, copper bells, and worked obsidian began to appear. And now, for the first time, the Anasazi themselves began to use turquoise in their rituals.

· Tenth-century Muslim geographer al-Bakri left a detailed description of how vibrant trade in Ghana contributed to the ascension of a region Arab merchants would come to refer to as the “Land of Gold”:

“The nuggets found in all the mines of this country are reserved for the king, only this gold dust being left for the people ... the nuggets may weigh from an ounce to a pound. It is related that the king owns a nugget as large as a big stone ...” (Alfred J. Andrea and James H. Overfield, *The Human Record: Sources of Global History* [Houghton Mifflin, 1998] 373.) Local merchants in ancient Ghana traded ivory, salt, fine leather, and later slaves in exchange for horses, cloth, and manufactured goods from the north. As was the case along the Silk Roads, rulers in West Africa sought ways to encourage traffic along the routes that connected West Africa’s gold fields with the cities of Mediterranean North Africa and beyond. While archaeology provides a picture of indigenous expansion of trade long before Islam arrived, it’s through accounts such as these by Arab traveler Al-Bakri that the spread of Islam along the trade routes can be clearly traced. “The king had as his guest a Muslim who used to read the Qur’an ... to this man the king complained of the calamities that assailed him and his people. The man said: ‘O King, if you believed in God ... and testified that He is One ... and if you accepted all the religious laws of Islam, I would pray for your plight.’ Thus he continued to press the king until the latter accepted Islam and became a sincere Muslim.” (ibid.) In the late eleventh century, struggles to control the lucrative caravan trade resulted in the disintegration of Ghana. In place of Ghana, the trading states of Mali in the thirteenth century and Songhay in the fifteenth followed as hubs of commercial power and prestige. They filled the African demand for salt, as well as the desire of the rest of the trading world for gold.