

# How Did Other Civilizations Set the Stage for the Renaissance in Europe?

**Middle Ages:** a historical period in Europe stretching from the fall of the Roman Empire in the 4th century to the beginning of the Renaissance in the 14th century

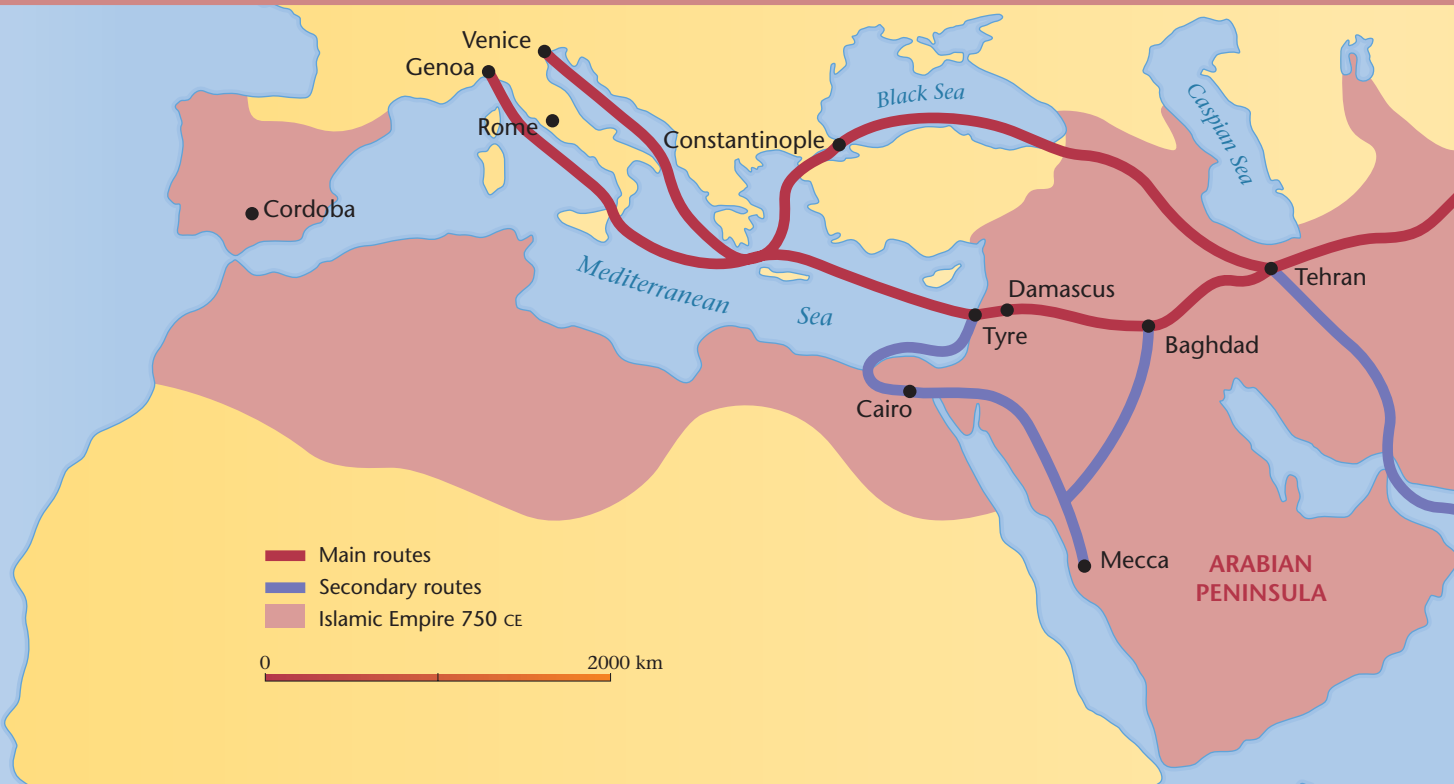
The word *Europe* has two possible origins. One is from the Greek word *Europa*, meaning "broad face." Another is from the ancient Akkadian word *erebu*, which meant "to go down" or "to set." To the Akkadians, who lived in what is now Iraq, Europe was in the west, the lands where the sun set.

During the time period known as the **Middle Ages** in Europe, many civilizations flourished in other parts of the world. In the Americas, the great Mayan Empire had reached its peak and the Incan and Aztec Empires were beginning to flourish. Empires in Africa from the 8th to 17th centuries, such as the Ghana, Mali, and Songhai Empires, were centres of learning, trade, and wealth. But it was the empires in Asia and northern Africa that would have the most impact on Europe's moving out of the Middle Ages and into its Renaissance.

## The Silk Road

From about 300 BCE, when the Roman Empire extended into what is now the Middle East, people in the West had welcomed exotic goods from as far away as China and Japan. These items, such as silks, glassware, paper, or spices such as pepper and cinnamon, were extremely rare, moving from trader to trader as they travelled on foot or by caravan along a network known as the Silk Road. Movement of goods went both ways. Inventions such as the irrigation waterwheel, invented in the region around Damascus, moved in both directions,

## The Silk Road



being found in the far western reaches of the Islamic civilization and as far east as Cathay (China). Apples developed in central Asia moved to both the East and the West. Oranges, originally from China, made their way to the Mediterranean world; grapes from the Mediterranean made their way to China. Most often, items passed through so many hands that their original source was not known. But wherever these items came from, Europeans desired them. These consumer demands spurred many people to become traders, increasing the links of the societies along the Silk Road.

Not all the things that moved along the Silk Road were good; disease also passed from caravan to caravan. Possibly the most famous example is the Black Death that came from central Asia to the Mediterranean. The Black Death resulted in the deaths of millions of people throughout Europe and Asia.

Perhaps more important than the material goods that moved along the Silk Road were ideas and knowledge. Understandings of religion, science, technology, philosophy, music, and mathematics passed from society to society along the Silk Road. Above all, there was a sharing of worldviews.

*I wonder ... what would it have been like to be a trader along the Silk Road?*

*I wonder ... what countries today lie along the route of the Silk Road?*



Family of Marco Polo travelling by camel caravan, *Catalan Atlas*, 1375



## The Role of Islamic Civilization

**astrolabe:** an instrument used to measure the locations of stars and planets as an aid to navigation

After its beginnings in the 7th century, the Islamic faith spread quickly from its beginning in the Arabian Peninsula. It moved westward across North Africa. By 750, what is now Spain was under Muslim control. To the east, Islam spread through what is now Iraq and Iran, into India, and continued to the islands of Indonesia.

The centre of the Islamic world was at the crossroads of the Silk Road trading routes. All trade between the Far East and Europe was controlled by Muslim middlemen. This brought great wealth to the Muslim world. More importantly, it made the Muslim Empires centres

of learning during Europe's Middle Ages. The Muslim faith promoted scholarship and inquiry, and scholars collected knowledge and documents from the then-known world. Libraries across the empire, in centres such as Baghdad, Cairo, and Cordoba, preserved these documents and those of Islamic scholars.

Islamic scientists and scholars pursued knowledge in many areas. They took mathematical ideas from India and refined them into the understanding of numbers known today. They studied astronomy and added to the understanding of the movement of planets. They used their understanding of astronomy to invent aids to navigation, such as the **astrolabe**. Scientists, such as Ibn Sina (980–1037), studied diseases and the human body and wrote medical texts that were used for hundreds of years throughout the world.

*Wise Men and Astronomers in the Galata [Turkey] Observation Tower, Ottoman miniature, 16th century. Knowledge collected by Islamic astronomers through the Middle Ages and into the 1500s was used by European scientists.*



### REFLECT AND RESPOND

1. Think about how difficult it was to move trade goods from China to Italy in the Middle Ages. Compare the transportation of those trade goods to how they would be transported today.
2. Explain how the geographic location of the Islamic Empire made it a centre for learning and discovery from 750 to 1100. Use the map of the Silk Road to help you answer.
3. Suppose you would like to research the origin of a silk or cotton shirt. List all the methods by which you might be able to gain information about it. How might this availability of information about so many things affect worldview?