

Italian City--States and Afroeurasian Trade



Look at the map of the Mediterranean Sea on the left. It is an extremely important body of water for the movement of people and goods across Afroeurasia because of its location. All three continents border this sea, which is the largest in the world. From this body of water, ships have access to the Black Sea, North Africa, Southern Europe, and even the Atlantic Ocean.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the Mediterranean Sea played an important role in the development of trade for the cultures that existed along its shores in the late Middle Ages. The city-state of Venice in Northern Italy is a perfect example of how easy access to the sea resulted in increased contact with other cultures through trade. The wealth of the Italian merchants also resulted in significant differences between the governments and cultures of Italy compared with the rest of Europe during this time period.

For example, from the 11th through the 13th centuries there was a rapid rise in the overall population and the urban population. The cities of Venice, Florence, and Milan were home to over 100,000 people (small by today's standards, but huge at that time) with other cities, such as Genoa and Pisa nearly that large. The literacy rates of Northern and Central Italy were the highest in the world at the time. Over 30% of the male population could read (again, low by today's standards, but very high at that time). A strong, wealthy middle class gave rise to a more democratic form of government in the Italian city-states as opposed to the feudal system practiced throughout the rest of Europe. And in a time where there

Key Differences Between Italian City-States and Feudal Europe

- ✓ **Fast-growing population**
- ✓ **More large cities**
- ✓ **Greater wealth**
- ✓ **Higher literacy rate**
- ✓ **More democratic governance**

was constant war and conquest, Italy was protected from invasion, surrounded on three sides by water with tall mountains in the north.

Just as trade led to the wealth and power of Italy, wealth and power led in turn to more trade. By the late 13th century, for example, Venice employed over 30,000 sailors and 3,000 ships to transport goods across Afroeurasia. For decades, the Italians dominated the trade of finished textile goods. Later, other goods such as ceramics, glassware, lace, and silk became staples of the Italian trade economy.

Bentley, Jerry H., and Herbert F. Ziegler. *Traditions & Encounters: A Global Perspective on the Past*. 3rd ed. New York: McGraw- Hill, 2006. Print.



Textiles were some of the most heavily-traded goods in the late Middle Ages. Fine woolen, cotton, and silk fabrics were highly prized by people in the middle and upper economic classes. Were the people of the time simply obsessed with clothes? They DID enjoy showing off in fancy clothes and bright colors. If that sounds strange, it shouldn't – think about the world today. Celebrities, athletes, the rich and powerful often flaunt their wealth by wearing flashy or expensive clothes and accessories. People all over the world, whether rich or poor, often do the same. Think about your school – do people dress to impress? How many shirts or pants or dresses or pairs of shoes do you have?

Fabrics in the Middle Ages were used for more than just clothes. Just like today, fabrics could be used for blankets or rugs. One important use of fabrics in the Middle Ages was as decorative wall coverings. Tapestries with bright colors and designs could usually be found in the homes of those that could afford them. They also served a purpose besides looking good – they insulated the stone walls and kept rooms and homes warmer.





Cloth was made out of a variety of materials. Woolen cloth was made from the fur of sheep raised in England. Various fabrics were made from cotton imported from Spain and India. Silk, one of the most highly-prized and expensive materials, was imported from China. Images courtesy of Wikimedia Commons