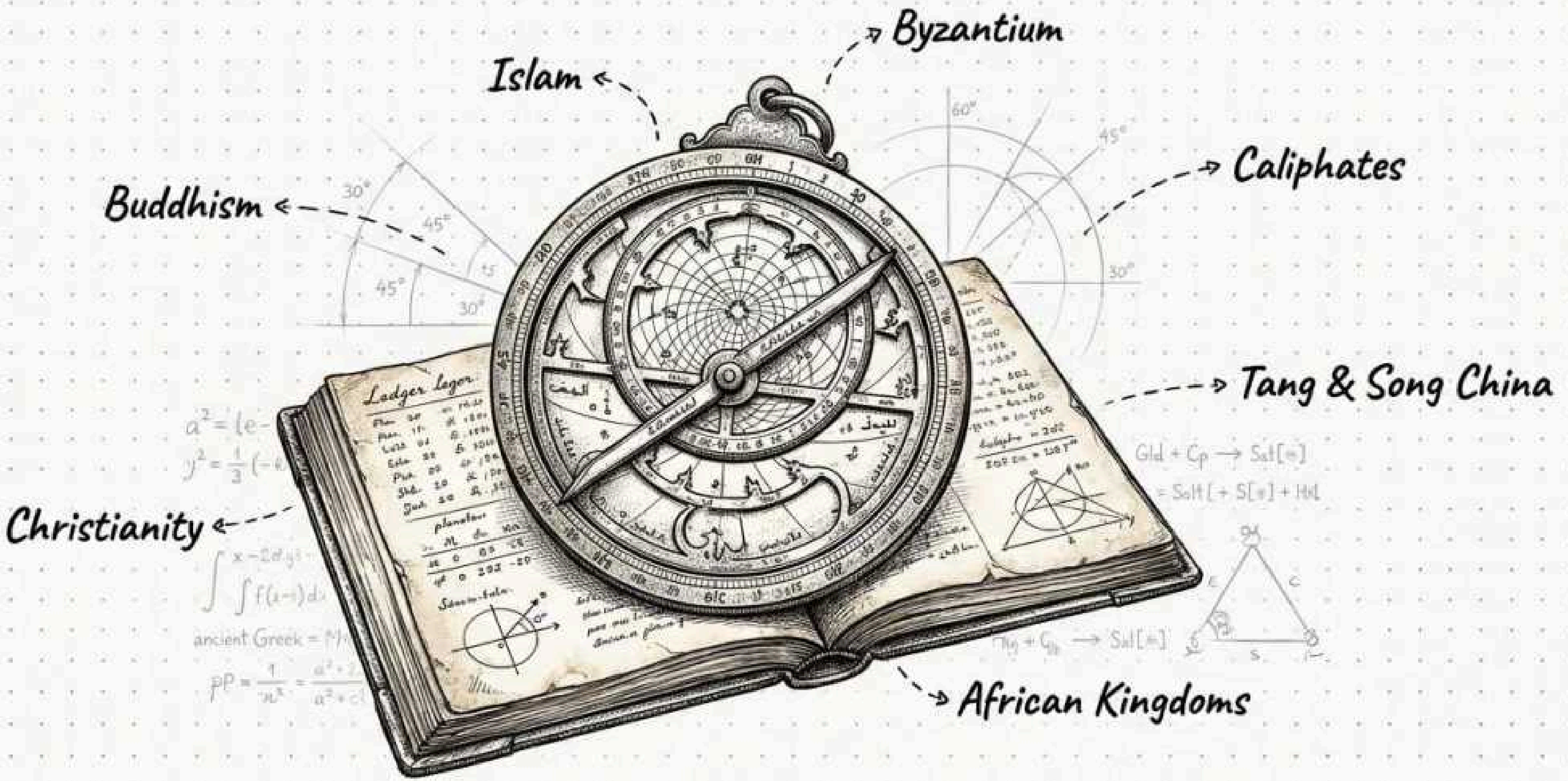
Lecture 4: Faith and the Rise of Islam

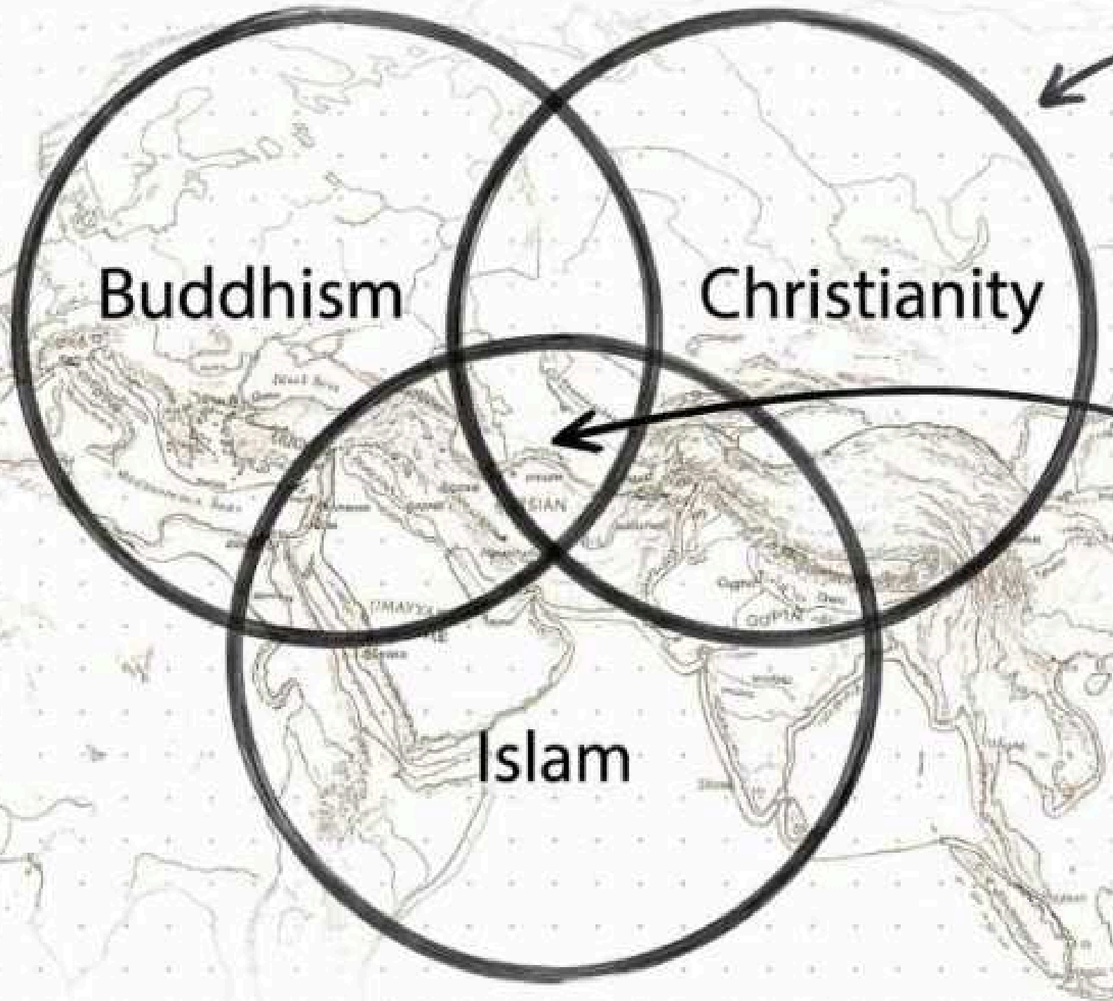
¶ 4.1



[At a glance: The survival of empires and the spread of belief.]

Belief as a Historical Force

¶ 4.2



The Scope: Tracing the spread of faith and the survival of empires across continents.

The Method: Approached strictly as a historical force.

The Focus: What followers believed and what they did—without judging theological truth.

The Search for Meaning in an Age of Upheaval

¶ 4.3

Mid-1st Millennium BCE



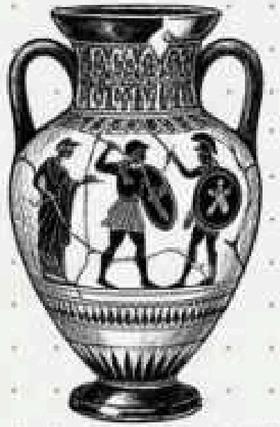
Confucius & Laozi



The Buddha



The Prophets



Socrates & Philosophers

The Axial Age: Multiple traditions begin asking how a person should live.

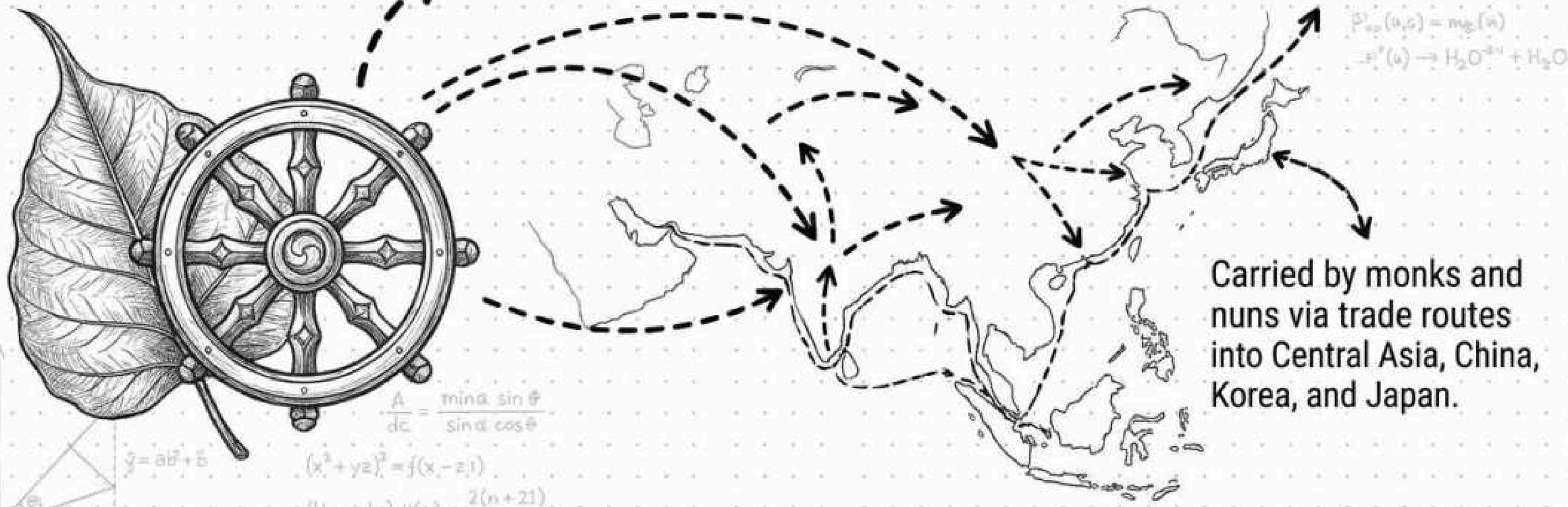
The Path of the Awakened One

¶ 4.4

Origin: Siddhartha Gautama (5th c. BCE) — left the palace to search for meaning.

Life = Suffering (caused by craving)
-> Cure = Ethical living & meditation.

Transmission Vectors:
Carried by monks and nuns via trade routes into Central Asia, China, Korea, and Japan.



Carried by monks and nuns via trade routes into Central Asia, China, Korea, and Japan.

¶ 4.5

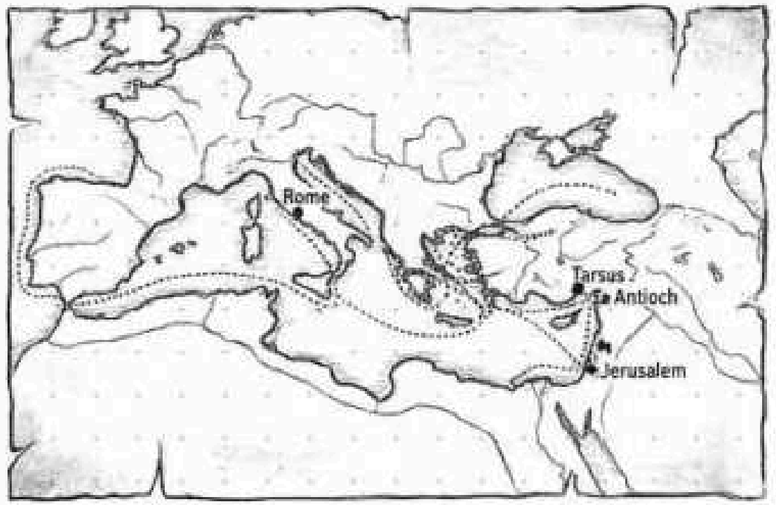
From Roman Judea to the Roman State

Phase 1



30 CE — Jesus of Nazareth executed; followers proclaim resurrection.

Phase 2



Paul of Tarsus carries the message to non-Jews. Status: Persecuted movement.

Phase 3



380 CE — Emperor Constantine's favor transforms the movement into the official religion of the Roman world.

Byzantium & The Justinian Foundation

¶ 4.6

The Survivor: Eastern Roman Empire (Constantinople) outlasts the West; holds off invaders for centuries.

$$\text{Thrust} = \frac{w \cdot L^2}{8 \cdot h}$$

$$\text{Material} = \frac{(\text{Roman}) - (4.7\ \text{[illegible]})}{\tan \times h}$$

Roman concrete:
$\mu = 36 \times 10^{-12}\ nm^{-3}$
$A = 1.8\ \mu g \sim m$

$$F_{horizontal} = \frac{F_{vertical}}{\tan(\theta)}$$

$$F_{thrust} = \frac{F_{vertical}}{\tan(\theta)}$$

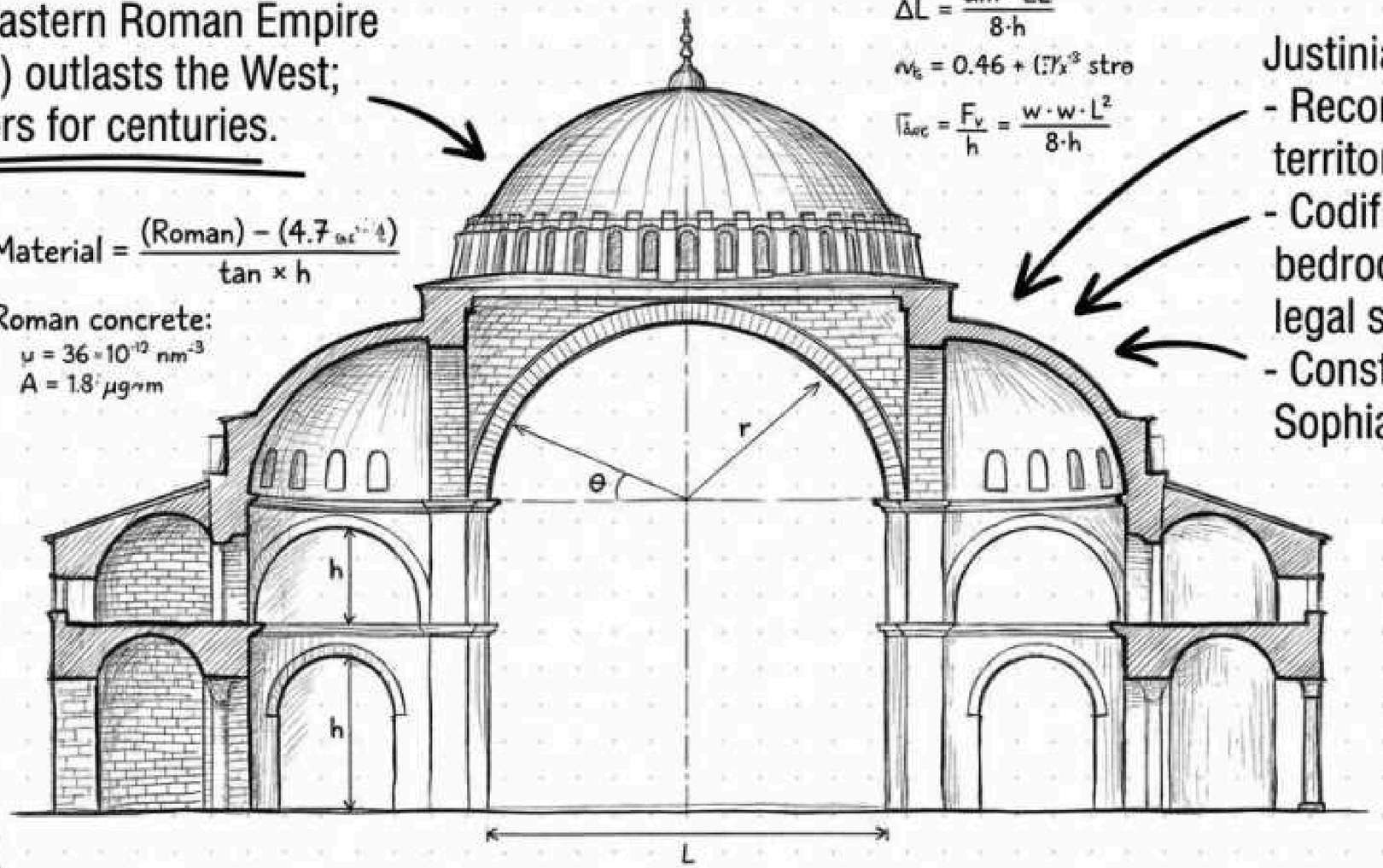
Load distribution for masonry arches.

$$\Delta L = \frac{am \cdot LL}{8 \cdot h}$$

$$\sigma_{\theta} = 0.46 + (\text{[illegible]})^{-3}\ \text{stro}$$

$$\overline{\delta_{arc}} = \frac{F_v}{h} = \frac{w \cdot w \cdot L^2}{8 \cdot h}$$

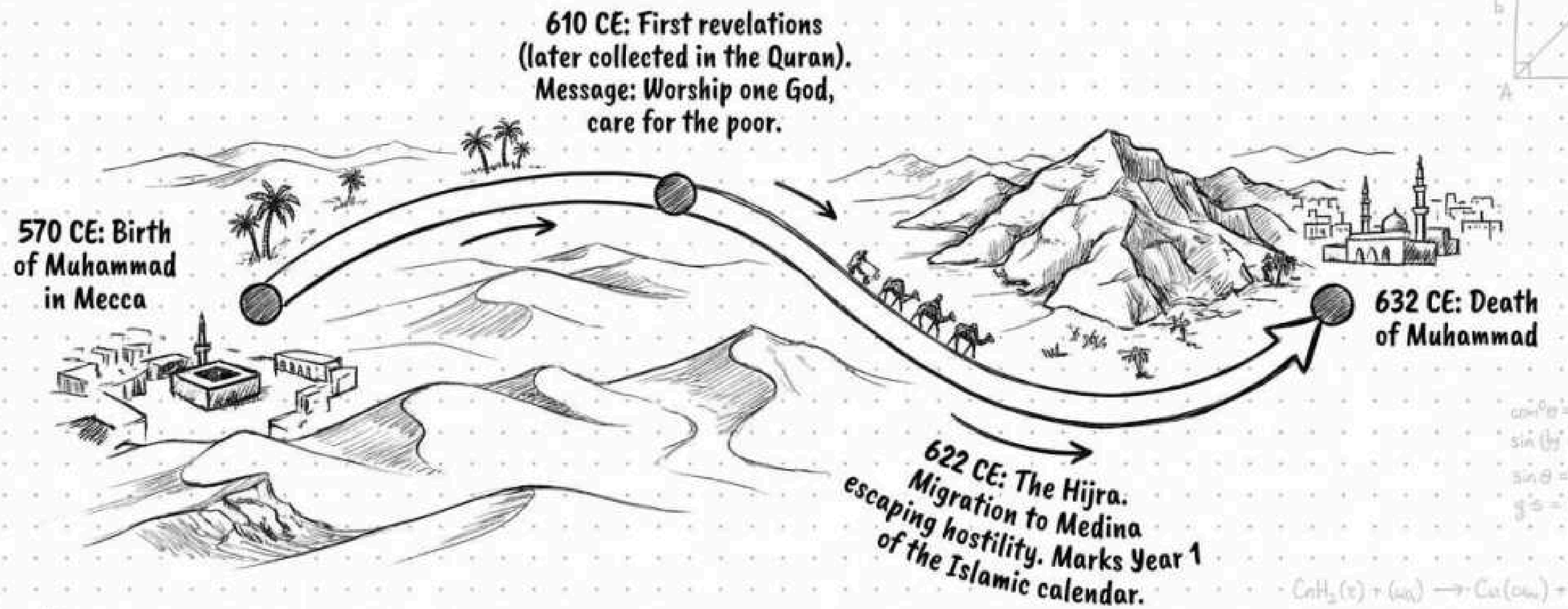
Justinian 527–565 CE:
- Reconquered Western territories.
- Codified Roman Law (the bedrock of European legal systems).
- Constructed the Hagia Sophia (finished 537 CE).



Legacy: Preserved Greek learning through the medieval period.

¶ 4.7

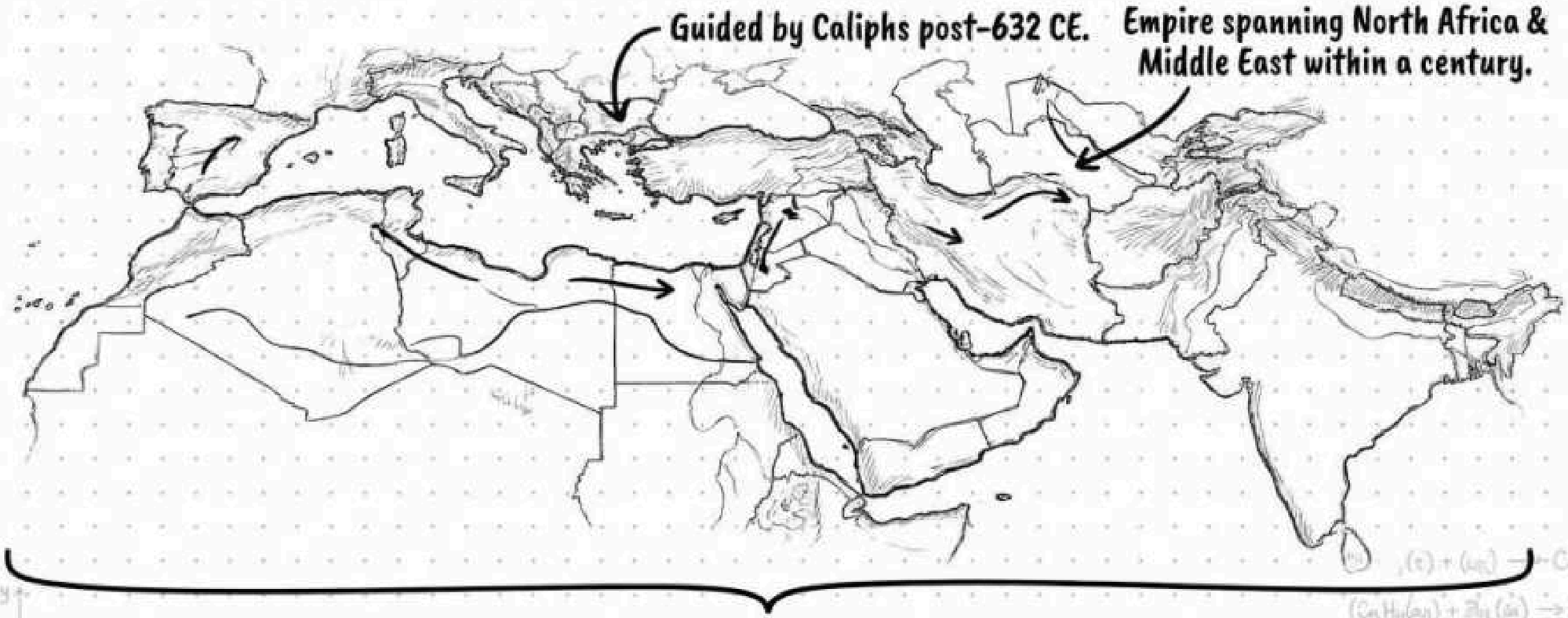
Revelations in Arabia



¶ 4.8

Rapid Expansion of the Caliphate

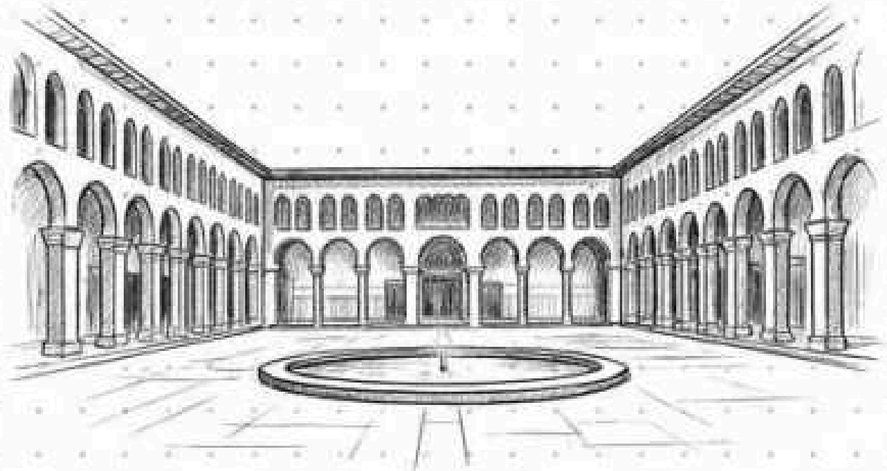
[Byzantine Exhaustion] + [Persian Exhaustion] = Power Vacuum



Social Fabric: Gradual conversion. Many subjects welcomed lower taxes; Jews and Christians maintained their own communities via a specific tax.

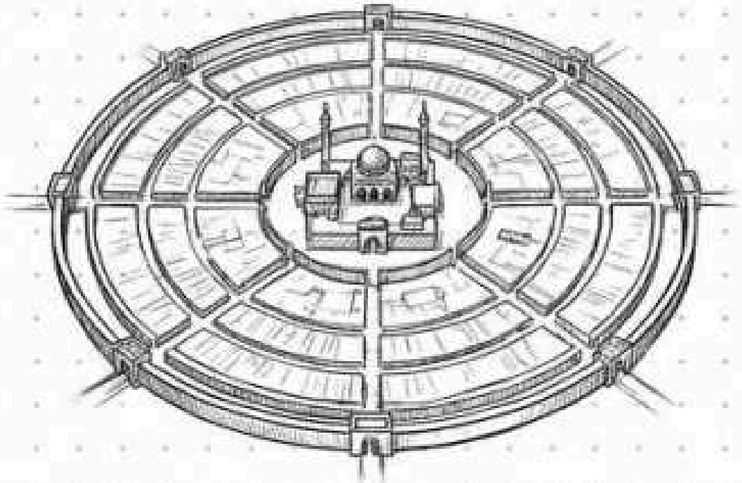
The Shift in Dynastic Power

Umayyad Dynasty



- **Era:** 661–750 CE
- **Capital:** Damascus

Abbasid Dynasty



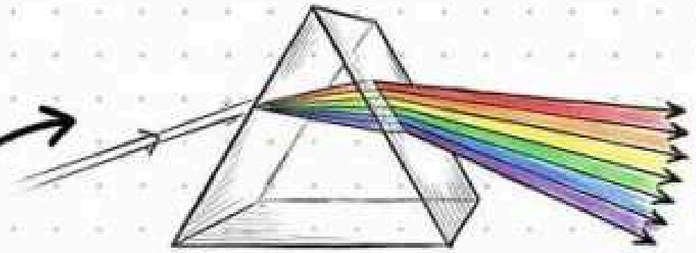
- **Era:** 762 CE onward
- **Capital:** Baghdad (growing into a global metropolis)

Fostered a unified sense of a global Muslim community, even as political unity eventually fractured into regional states.

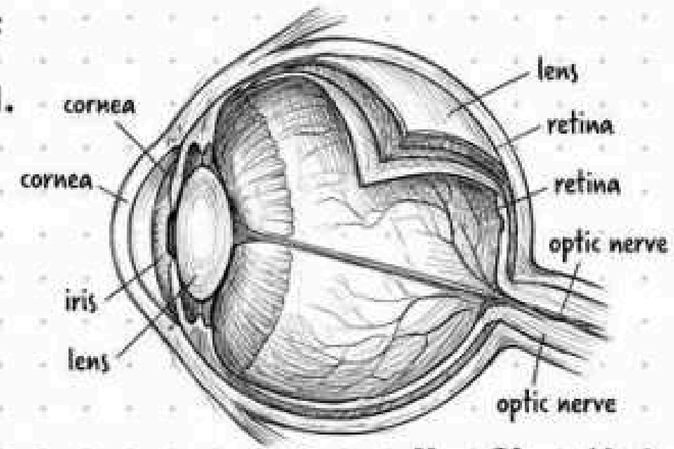
¶ 4.10

The House of Wisdom

Core Insight: Scholars in Baghdad translated Greek, Persian, and Indian works—and actively improved them.



Ibn al-Haytham — pioneered the study of light and human vision.



مال ودرهم ساوي نصشر اعشرة
وميتة – دوف – تمة اشرة ...

$$ax^2 + bx + c = 0$$
$$ax^2 - bx^2 - c = 4$$
$$-ax^2 - bx^2 - 2) = 1$$
$$a - 2$$

$$ax^2 + bx + c = 0$$
$$ax^2 + bx + c = 0$$
$$x^2 + bx + c = 0$$
$$x + c = 0$$

Al-Khwarizmi — wrote the foundational text that gave us the word algebra.

Ibn Sina (Avicenna) — authored a medical encyclopedia used in Europe for centuries.

Tang Unity and Song Invention

¶ 4.11

Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE): Restored unity. Capital Chang'an held ~1M people; a global hub for merchants and monks.
Song Dynasty (960 CE+): The Era of Invention.

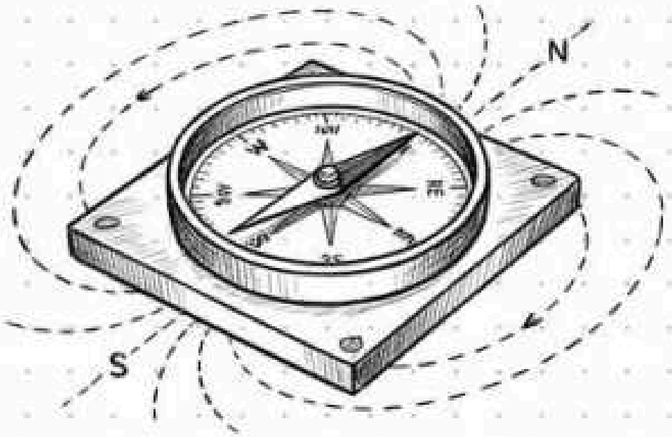


Printing (spreading knowledge)

$$KNO_3 + C + S$$



Gunpowder (changing warfare)



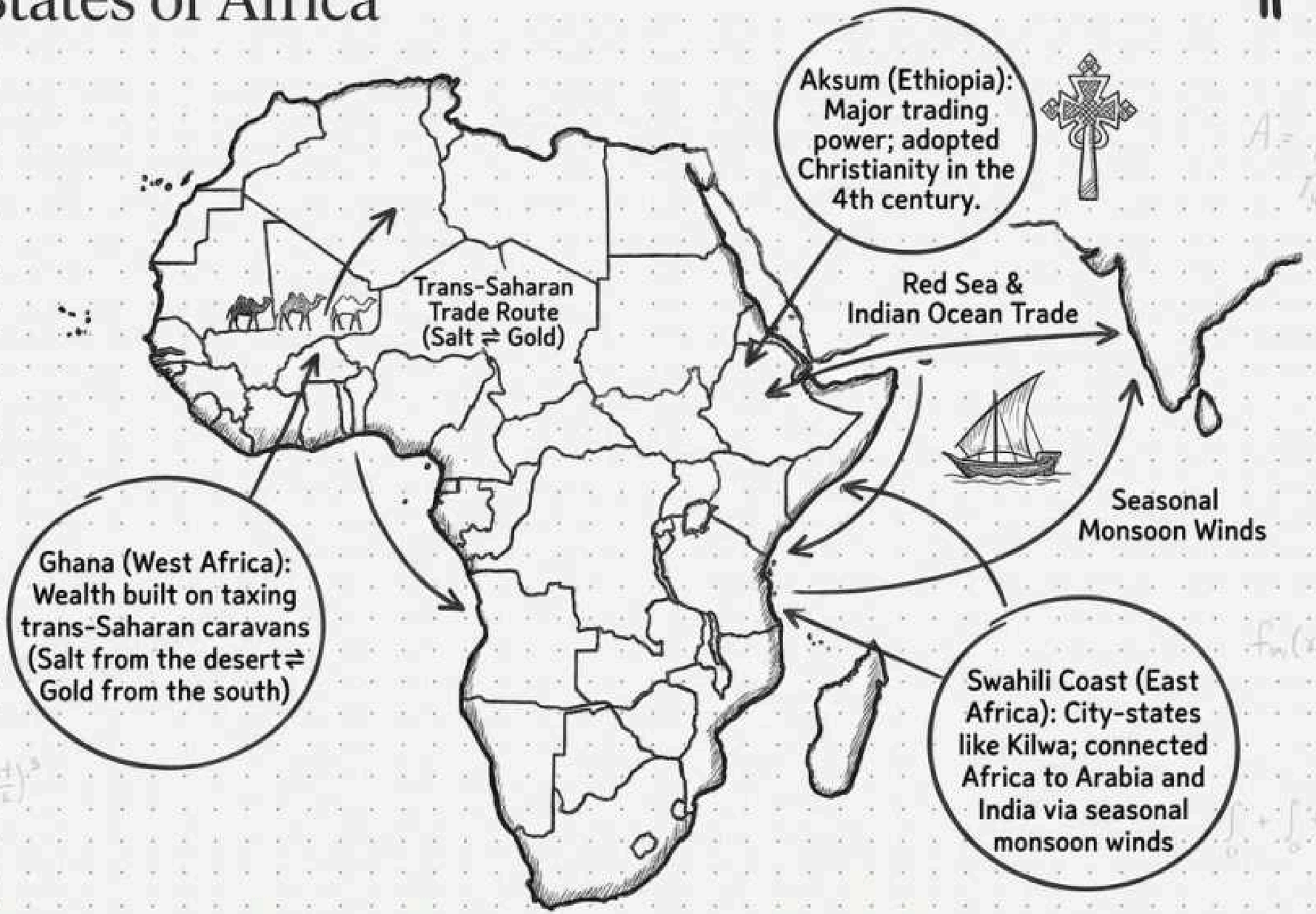
Magnetic Compass (revolutionizing navigation)



Paper Money (facilitating mass commerce)

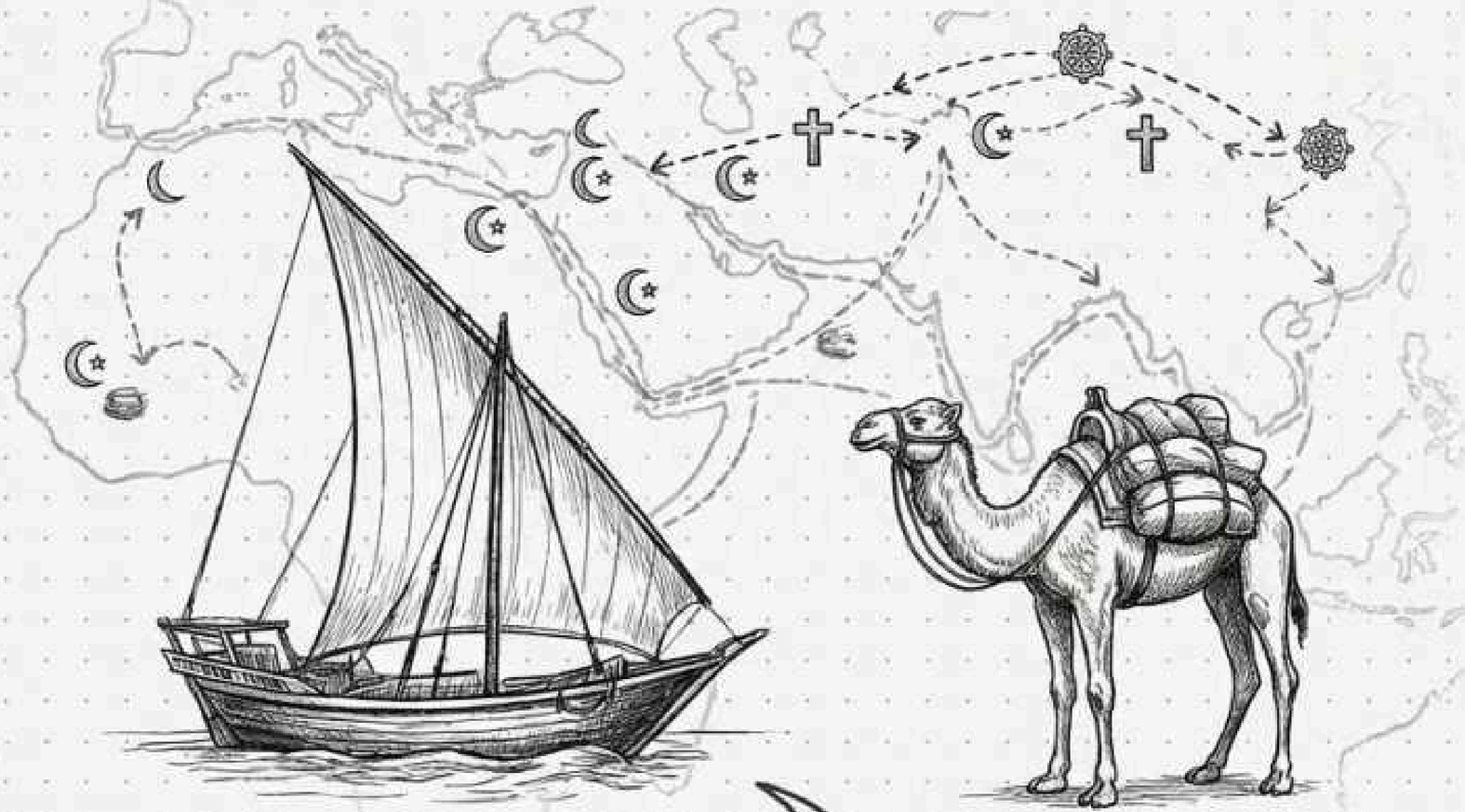
The Great States of Africa

¶ 4.12



Trade Carries Belief

¶ 4.13



The Vectors:

- Muslim merchants (W. Africa, S/SE Asia)
- Buddhist monks (Silk Road)
- Syriac/Nestorian Christians (Tang China)

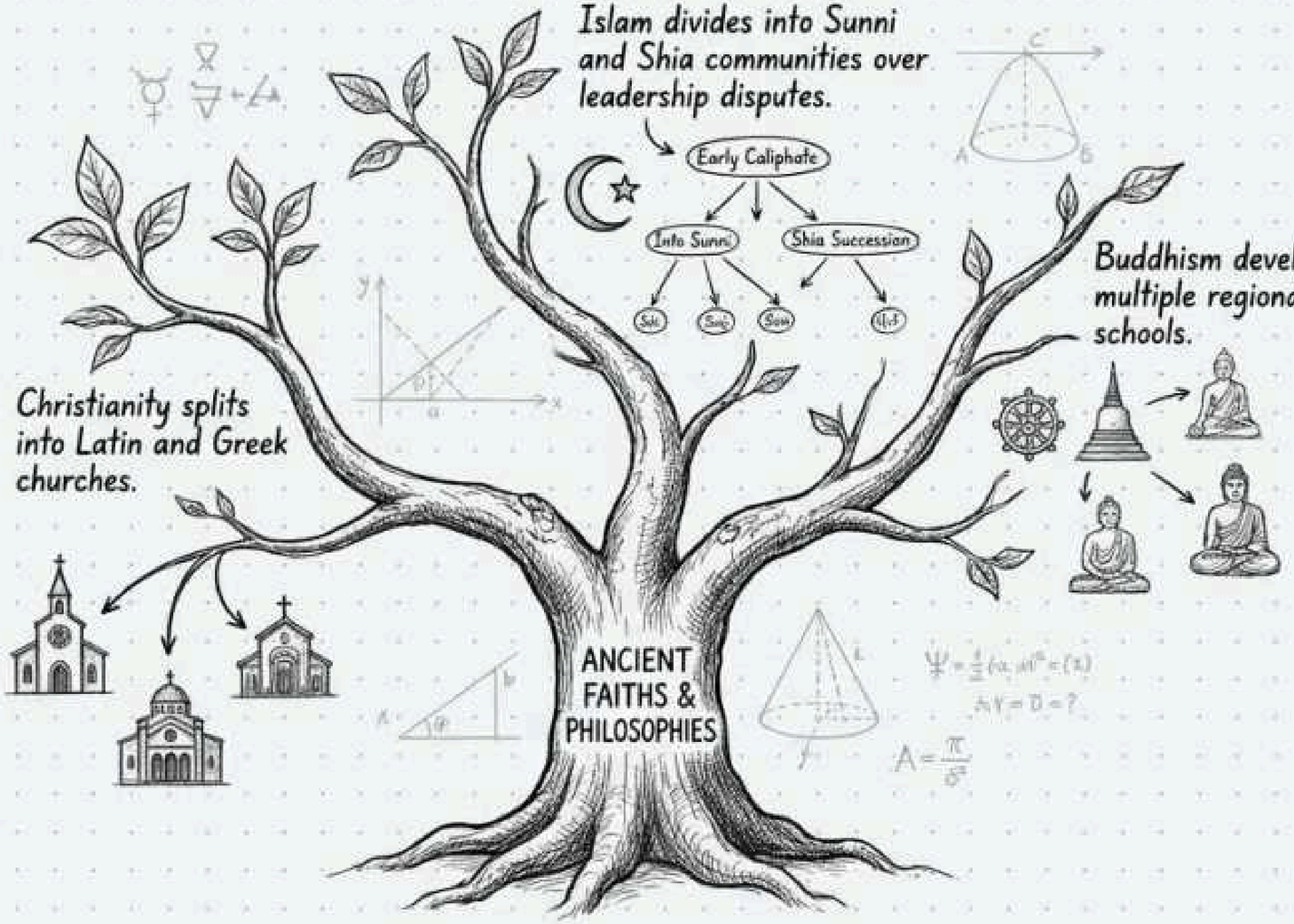
The Dynamics:

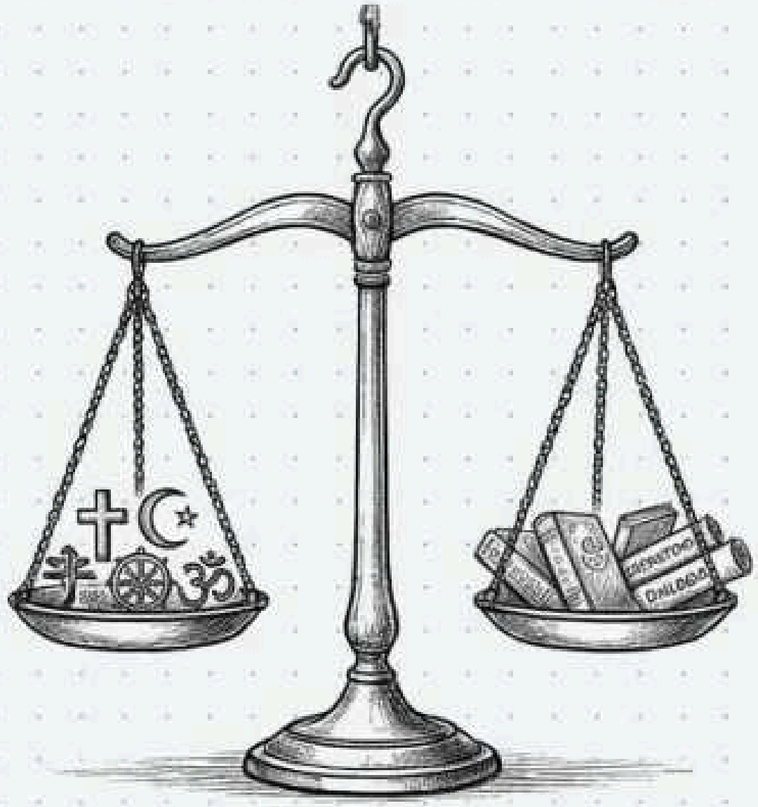
Spread was driven by example, marriage, and commerce, rarely by force alone.

Religions localized to fit regional customs, looking quite different from place to place.

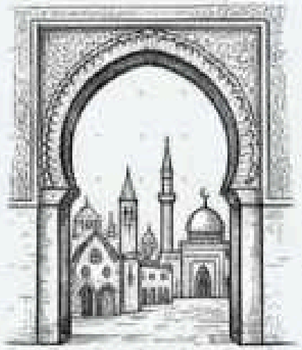
The Division and Coexistence of Faith

¶ 4.14





Internal disputes could be bitter, yet eras of deep coexistence thrived (e.g., Muslim Spain, where Jews, Christians, and Muslims shared a single vibrant culture).

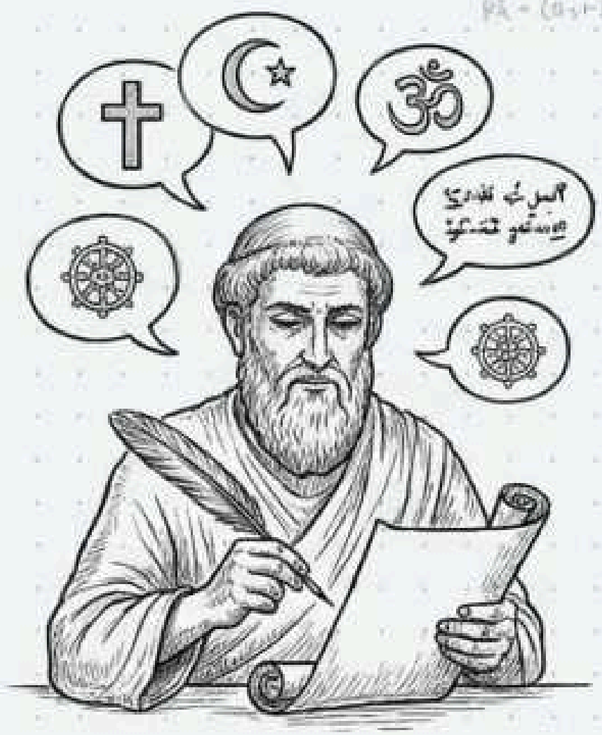


Habits for Studying Religion as History

¶ 4.15

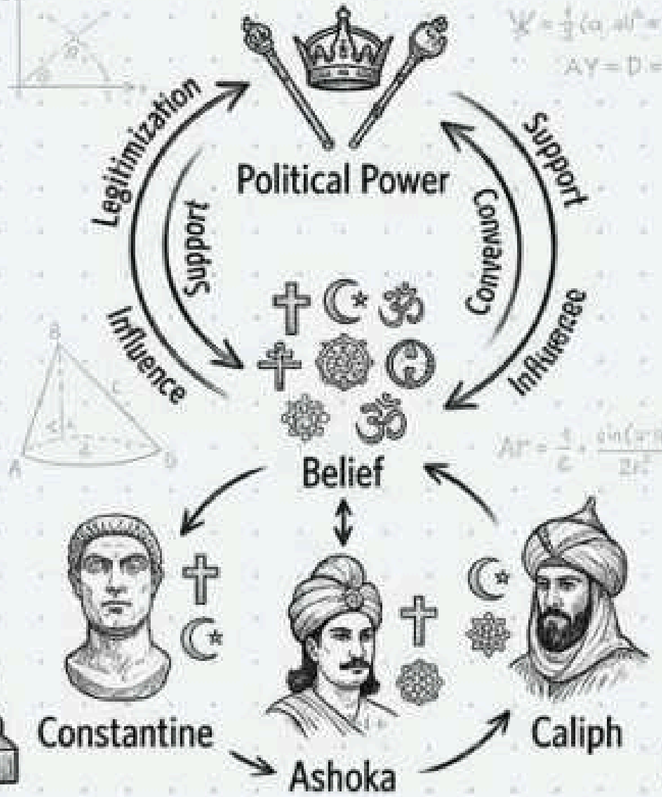
Rule 1: Use Their Words.

Describe what believers say and do using their own terms.



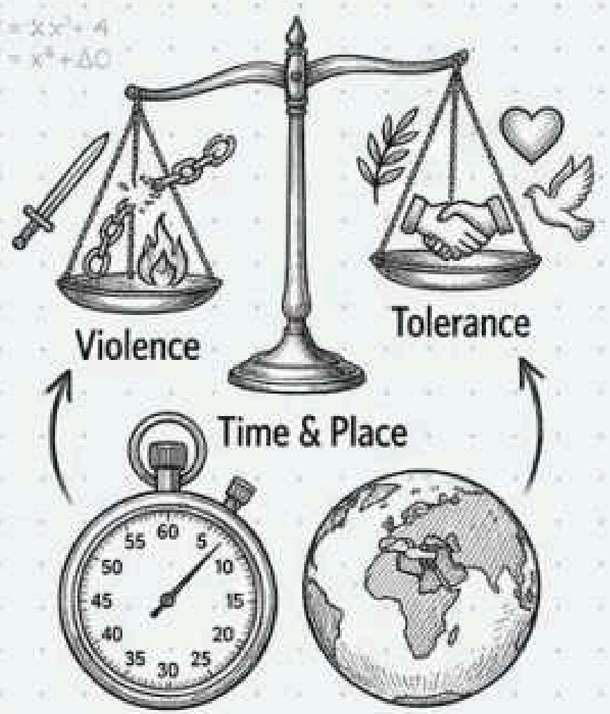
Rule 2: Trace the Power.

Notice the feedback loop between political power and belief (e.g., Constantine, Ashoka, the Caliphs).



Rule 3: Avoid Essentialism.

Do not label one faith inherently more violent or tolerant than another. Every tradition contains both; the reality depends entirely on time and place.

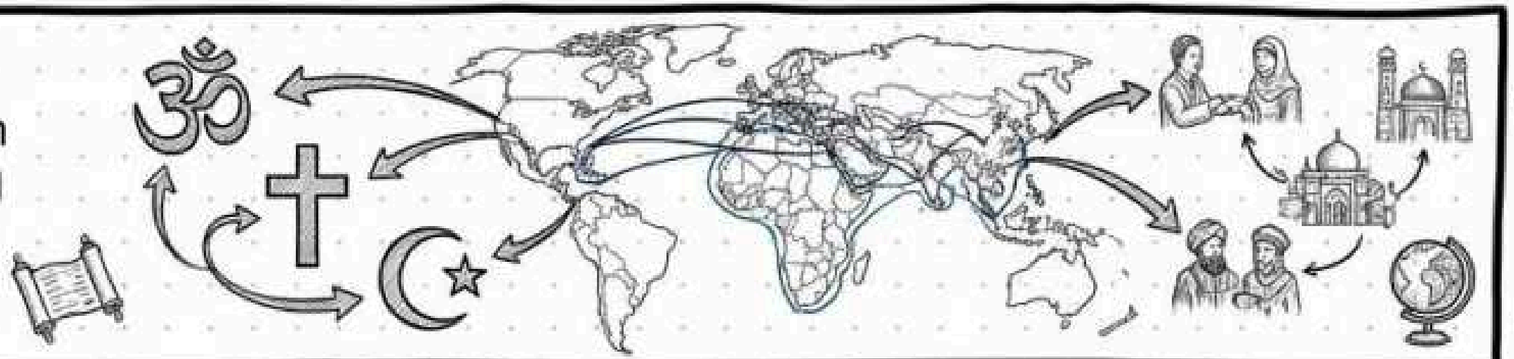


¶ 4.16

Taking Stock: Not a Dark Age

The Connectors:

- Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam became the main bonds crossing borders, languages, and cultures linking distant peoples.



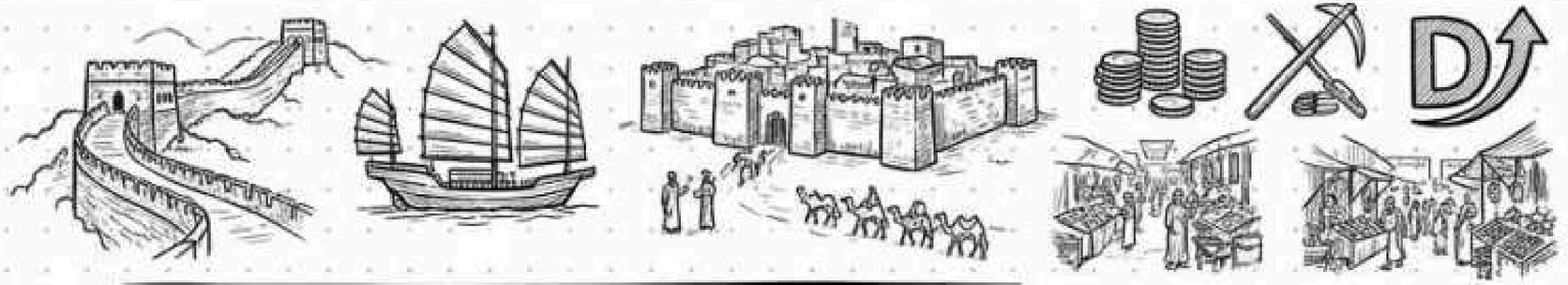
The Preservers:

Byzantium and the Islamic world protected and extended ancient learning.



The Innovators:

China and Africa built vastly wealthy, highly developed states.



In the 1,000 years post-classical empires, the world remained deeply interconnected.

The Guiding Question

¶ 4.17

Religions spread along trade routes as much as through preaching.

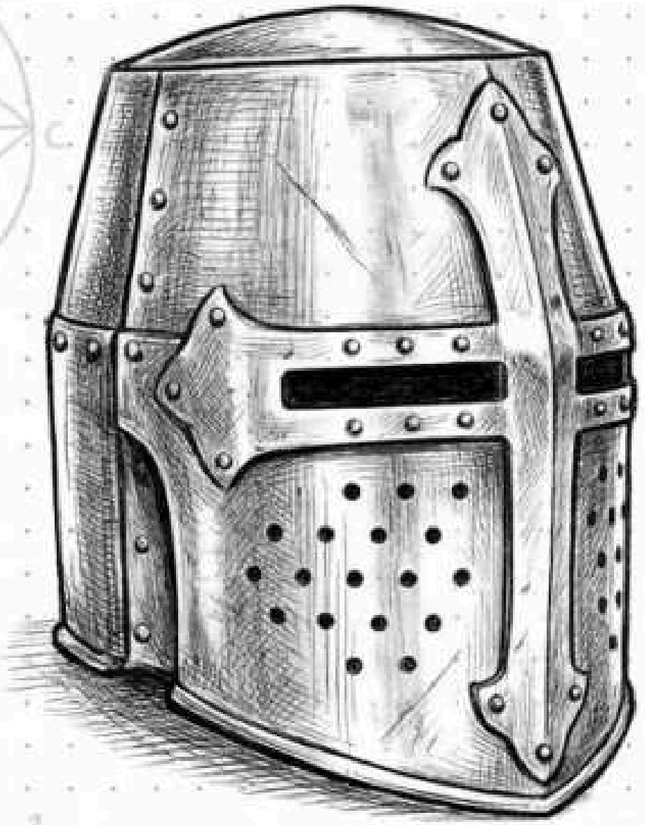


1. What does this reveal about the deep, inescapable connections between belief, commerce, and power?
2. Can you think of a modern idea that spreads along similar commercial routes today?

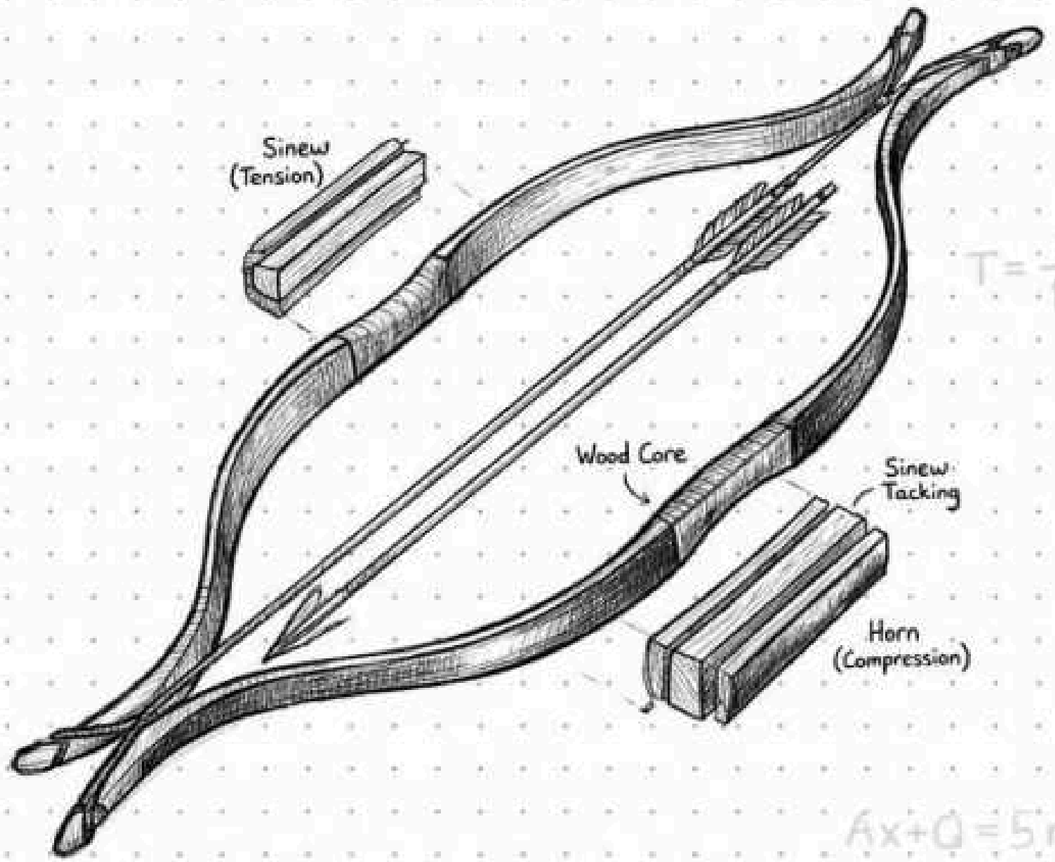
Looking Ahead

In Lecture 5, we explore the physical clashes and cultural exchanges of the Medieval World.

¶ 4.18



From the armored knights of Europe...



...to the devastating speed of the Mongol conquests.