Period 3 – c. 600 C.E. to c. 1450 C.E.
Unit Essay Questions

Essays written by the AP World History students of Mr. Rosselle, who lightly (and sometimes not so lightly) edited them for clarity and thoroughness.

1. **Describe how changes in technologies and commercial practices transformed trade networks.**

During 600 C.E. to around 1450 C.E., several new technologies and commercial practices arose and began to transform the trade networks of certain areas such as those linked by the Silk Roads and Trans-Sahara gold-salt trade, as well as those surrounding the Mediterranean Sea and Indian Ocean. These innovations ranged from more sophisticated caravan organizations and the widespread adoption of camels and camel saddles on land, to the use of the magnetic compass and astrolabe for better navigation of the seas, to new forms of credit and monetization, as well as state-sponsored developments that also spurred trade.

The improvement of caravans leads to major transformations in trade networks. These improvements were caravanserais and camel caravans. Caravanserais were like roadside inns for the merchant who traveled all day and needed a place to recover. In the caravanserais, the travelers could protect their goods and were provided with food and drink. There was also lodging available for the merchants and their animals. Most of the animals used on the Silk Roads were camels. Camels provided good transportation through deserts because they could endure the absence of water more than oxen and horses. The invention of the saddle made the ride on camels easier for merchants. The idea of the use of camels spread from Arabia to North Africa and Southwest Asia, making trade easier throughout the desert.

The compass helped transform naval trading in regions such as the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean Sea. The compass provided sailors with confidence that they could travel deep seas for long distances and return home safely. The compass was invented during the Tang or Song dynasty in China and was in widespread use through cultural diffusion throughout the Indian Ocean by the 11th century. By the mid 12th century, European mariners were using compasses to determine their directions in Mediterranean and Atlantic waters. The compass helped trade networks transform by making it easier for merchants to navigate on water.

Another innovation that helped transform networks was new business techniques. One of the new techniques was bankers would issue letters of credit to merchants traveling to distant markets so they would have to worry about carrying cash or bullion. Once the merchants arrived at their destinations, they could exchange their letters of credit for merchandise or cash in local currency. Without this improvement in banking, it would have been impossible for merchants to trade on a large scale. In the Islamic world, sakks – the forerunner to modern bank checks – were introduced, and in China, paper currency was invented.

Governments also spurred trade with state-sponsored innovations of their own. In northern Europe, the Hanseatic League was an association of trading cities linking the Baltic to London and commercial centers in Poland, northern Germany and Scandinavia. These cities worked together to promote trade in items such as grain, fish, furs and timber. These cities were, in turn, linked by Europe’s major rivers to the more thriving Mediterranean trade network. On the other side of Eurasia, China’s Sui Dynasty built the Grand Canal in the late sixth century. The canal was a series of artificial waterways that extended about 1,240 miles and was reportedly forty paces wide, with roads running parallel to the water way on either side. It linked China’s two major east-west rivers – the Yellow and Yangzi – integrating the economies of northern and southern China, establishing an economic foundation for political and cultural unity for a millennium.

Trade also expanded due to the role of existing empires, and one notable new empire beginning in the 1200s. Byzantium played a central clearinghouse role in linking Europe and Asia, and its coin – the bezant – was the common currency in the western part of Eurasia. It grew enormously wealthy by levying customs duties on the merchandise filtering through its lands, strategically placed astride the Mediterranean and Black seas. The trade-friendly Islamic world covered much of the land of southwest Asia through central Asia and northern India. In China, a
golden age of prosperity marked much of the Tang and Song eras as innovation and economic activity anchored that end of the continent. When the Song fell to the Mongols in the 13th century, the Pax Mongolica, or “Mongol peace,” revitalized the Silk Roads for a century as the strength of Mongol rule secured the safety of what had become a dangerous zone for brigands, or bandits.

2. **Describe how the movement of peoples caused environmental and linguistic effects.**
   
   People of the world migrated from place to place bringing themselves and their culture along with them. When they brought new crops, animals or agricultural methods with them, significant environmental effects could often be seen. With the introduction of their language to new lands, new linguistic effects could be seen.

   One notable mass movement of a people in world history – one that had both environmental and linguistic effects – was the millennia-long migration of the Bantu people in Africa, which did not come to an end until around the 11th century. The Bantu people spoke a related family of languages, which they brought with them, along with their iron technology and slash-and-burn farming techniques as they migrated down through sub-Saharan Africa. With the help of bananas – brought earlier by Malays to Madagascar and then to Africa proper – the Bantu settled into heavily forested areas, over time greatly affecting the land by clearing it for cultivation. During this time as the Bantu migrated, they also spread the cultivation of yams, oil palms, millet, and sorghum. As a result of this, there was a rapid distribution of these crops throughout Africa. The environment was gradually transformed, then, as new agriculture and agricultural techniques were introduced by the Bantu. When Muslim sailors and merchants operating in the Indian Ocean basin began helping to establish wealthy port cities along the East African coast, they brought their Arab language with them. The result – after blending Arabic with the native Bantu – became known as Swahili.

   Polynesian people had the same affect on their region. They sailed from island to island in the Pacific Ocean. When they found land, their crops and domesticated animals allowed them to establish strong agricultural societies on these islands throughout the Pacific, which later spread to all the parts of New Zealand. Sweet potatoes became a particularly important diet staple for many peoples, including the Maori population of New Zealand. But as population increased, pressure was sometimes placed on the limited resources of these isolated islands. The most notable example of this kind of environmental degradation – and how it could apparently lead to social strife – came on Easter Island, where Polynesian migrants had initially settled in the early centuries C.E. Between 1000 and 1500, an Easter Island population of perhaps 10,000 people so taxed the island’s resources that rival camps fought to the death and the society disintegrated in a nightmare of cannibalism.

   Another key instance of linguistic effects stemming from the movement of peoples can be seen across much of Afro-Eurasia throughout nearly this entire timeframe – 600 to 1450. And that’s the spread of Turkic and Arabic languages as the influence of Islam spread across northern Africa, on to the Iberian peninsula, across southwest and Central Asia, and Africa. These languages were prevalent in the Muslim world, and people coming under the political control of the caliphate or in contact with Muslim merchants adopted them or blended them with their local vernacular.

3. **Describe how cross-cultural exchanges developed with the changes in networks of trade and communication.**

   This period of history – 600 to 1450 – can be seen as a continuing intensification of trade across regions and networks that were already, for the most part, fairly well integrated. Among the most notable cross-cultural developments were a) the expansion of merchant and missionary activity by Muslims across many parts of Afro-Eurasia, b) the establishment of diasporic communities in thriving centers of trade, c) the diffusion of literary, artistic and cultural belief systems, and d) the diffusion of scientific and technological traditions.

   After the militaristic early rise of Islam and the ethnocentric views of the Umayyads, the Abbasids turned increasingly to Persian cultural influences and established a realm noted for its cosmopolitan mix of ethnicities, languages and even religions. The Islamic world was famous at
Describe how crops and pathogens diffused throughout the Eastern Hemisphere along the trade routes.

In the early Islamic world, the creation of large empires had dramatic economic implications. As the soldiers, administrators, diplomats, and merchants traveled through the extensive and merchant-friendly dar al-Islam, they encountered plants and agricultural techniques that were specific to that region and then introduced them to new regions. The most important transfers of this so-called Muslim Agricultural Revolution went west from India to Persia, southwest Asia and all the way to the Mediterranean and Spain. Among the staple crops transplanted in these new lands were sugarcane, rice, new types of wheat, and a variety of vegetables and fruits, including citrus.

Sometimes crops were spread by force. Such was the case in China during the Sui and Tang dynasties, when emperors imposed their will over southern China and ventured into Vietnam, where they discovered a fast-ripening strain of rice. This crop had two growing seasons per year and, when brought to China, helped sustain a large expansion of the food supply and
population growth. China continued to anchor the eastern terminus of the Silk Roads, where food items continued to be a vital part of the economic mix. Coming to China were items such as alfalfa, wine grapes, pistachios, walnuts, sesame, coriander and spinach. Items heading in the other direction included peaches, apricots, cinnamon, ginger and other spices.

The spread of deadly pathogens continued to be a common but unwelcome feature of eastern hemispheric trade, as multiple occurrences of bubonic plague broke out during this time (600-1450). By far the most deadly and consequential of these occurrences happened in the mid-14th century, when the Black Death (aka “Great Mortality”) killed untold millions from China to Europe. The disease spread via the fleas on rats accompanying grain shipments. When the rats died, the fleas jumped to nearby humans … and the track of the plague outbreak closely followed important trade cities. Mortality rates hit as high as 70% in some places, ultimately dropping China’s population by 10 million and Europe’s by 25 million. Islamic societies were also racked and slow to recover, but the plague did not greatly affect Scandinavia in the north or India and sub-Saharan Africa to the south. The Black Death’s social and economic effects were huge: Massive labor shortages led to social unrest in western Europe, where workers demanded higher wages. When authorities resisted change, peasant rebellions ensued.

5. Describe how new political forms emerged after the collapse of previous empires.

As old empires collapsed and new empires emerged between 600 and 1450, a variety of approaches to the administration of state were attempted. In Byzantium and China, many traditional features of empire continued. Byzantium was in many ways a continuation of the Roman Empire in the east, and when the dynastic cycle was re-established in China with the Sui, Tang and Song dynasties, there was a return to patriarchal Confucian traditions and a merit-based bureaucracy, which were both central to the Han dynasty. But in both empires, new political innovations were tried. Emperors in Byzantium took a caesaropapist approach, ruling as secular lord but also playing an active role in ecclesiastical affairs. And in the face of Muslim encroachments, the theme system was developed, whereby Byzantine society was reorganized into imperial themes, or provinces, each governed by a general responsible for both military defense and civil administration. In China, perhaps the most notable innovations were tried during the Song dynasty, when military leaders were replaced by scholar-bureaucrats with little military training, and neo-Confucianism emerged as an attempt to reconcile Confucianism with Buddhism. In both Byzantium and China, the issue of land distribution and taxation was a source of ongoing trouble as large land-owning families came to undermine imperial policies.

In other regions, a variety of new political forms took shape. The Islamic state under the Abbasids – in marked contrast to the Umayyad policy of exploiting an Arab-only aristocracy – attempted to govern its cosmopolitan realm by adopting long-standing Mesopotamian and Persian techniques of administration. These techniques included having the ruler devise policies and build capital cities but otherwise organize their territories through regional governors and bureaucracies. The Mongol Empire, meanwhile, was split into four khanates following the death of Genghis Khan, and each was administered differently. In China, for example, the Mongols stood aloof from the Chinese and foreigners were brought in to administer the bureaucracy, whereas in Persia they assimilated to many Persian customs and allowed the Persians to continue administering. In Japan, Chinese influence peaked during the Nara period of the 8th century as an aristocratic clan tried to centralize power with a Tang-inspired court and bureaucracy. But Japan also continued to maintain its own identity despite Chinese influence. During the Heian period (794-1185), Japanese emperors were mere puppet figureheads, behind whom the real power lay in the hands of aristocratic clans. In the Americas, trade-based networks of city states flourished in the Maya region, followed in the last century of this time period by the establishment of imperial rule in Mexico under the Aztecs and in Peru under the Inca. The Aztecs ruled imperially without a centralized bureaucracy, allowing conquered peoples to rule themselves while paying tribute. The Inca, by contrast, used a large class of bureaucrats to administer their empire, and ruled as a military elite. To quell dissent among subjected peoples, they would dispatch loyal subjects as colonists to a given region, provide them with land and establish them in garrisons to maintain order. If rebellion occurred, Inca armies would force the subjects to leave their homes and resettle somewhere else far away. Universal male conscription was used to raise a 200,000-man army –
the biggest and best armed in the region. A key tactic in their expansionist policy was to take hostages from among the ruling elite of the peoples they conquered, and force them to live at the Inca capital. Also key to their rule was an extensive road system that allowed the central government to communicate to all parts of their realm (which also facilitated the spread of their language and religious customs).

6. Describe how interregional contacts and conflicts encouraged significant technological and cultural transfers.

How interregional contacts and conflicts encouraged significant technological and cultural transfers can be seen in several examples. When Arab merchants visited China by way of the Silk Roads and Indian Ocean during the Tang dynasty, travelers noted the advanced business practices and carried the new knowledge back to the Islamic world. The merchant Suleiman ventured by ship several times from India to China, and his observations were recorded by a geographer writing for an audience in southwest Asia. Suleiman noted the copper coins in use in China, the silk attire of men, the important import items the Chinese demanded, and the lending and borrowing practices of merchants. During the Mongol interlude in China, Mongols resisted assimilation into Chinese culture and facilitated a notable transfer of foreign cultural traditions to the Middle Kingdom. They let the Confucian tradition wither and brought in Arabs, Persians and perhaps even Europeans to staff administrative posts in the bureaucracy, and they subsidized the construction of churches, temples and shrines to remain on good terms with subjects of various faiths. During the Pax Mongolica, of course, massive technological transfers between East and West included the introduction of gunpowder and printing technologies to Europe. Cultural transfers were also a notable legacy of the Crusades, as European scholars and missionaries came to deal with Muslim philosophers and theologians, and European merchants eagerly traded with their Muslim counterparts. As a result of the centuries-long conflict over the Holy Land, Europeans became acquainted with the works of Aristotle, Islamic science and astronomy, “Arabic” numerals (which had been borrowed from India by Muslims), and techniques of manufacturing paper, which Muslims had learned from China. They also developed a taste for luxury items until then not widely available, such as exotic spices.

7. Describe how innovations stimulated agricultural and industrial production in many regions.

Agricultural production was stimulated in the Americas by the Mexica on an island in a marshy region of Lake Texcoco, which would later become their capital of Tenochtitlan (which ultimately was rebuilt by the Spanish as Mexico City). The Mexica dredged the rich and fertile muck from the lake bottom and mound small plots of land known as chinampas. Water could be drawn from canals leading from the lake during the dry season, and cultivators could harvest as many as seven crops in one year of items such as maize, beans, squashes, tomatoes, peppers and chiles. In Europe, the switch from oxen to horse and the innovation of the horse collar stimulated heightened agricultural production that sustained a significant population growth prior to the mid-14th century Black Death. Also contributing to this was development of crop rotation and the introduction of crops grown to replenish the nitrogen levels in fields.

The introduction of sugarcane to new lands was also a notable feature of the final centuries of this time period. Indigenous to South and Southeast Asia, sugar was spread primarily by Muslims to lands westward, including Mediterranean islands by the 12th century. Italian merchants financed sugar plantations in this region and supplied a growing demand for sweets in Europe. When the Portuguese colonized Atlantic islands such as the Madeiras, Azores and Cape Verde islands, they soon collaborated with Italian investors and established sugar plantations. This set the stage for sugar becoming a key feature of worldwide commerce in the next time period, following the European colonization of the Americas.

China continued to lead the world in industrial production. The country made advances in iron and steel production, and developed new techniques that established porcelain as another major export item. Porcelain manufacturing then spread elsewhere, including Persia, and by this time Byzantium had become an important manufacturing base for silk in the eastern Mediterranean. Indians, meanwhile, continued to develop a robust cotton industry.
8. Describe the factors involved with decline and expansion of urbanization.

All cities at this time were centers of trade and government and started and ended in much the same ways. In general, a decline of population lowered urbanization and a growth in population heightened urbanization. Many factors influenced whether a city declined or expanded.

As mentioned before, factors that lowered the population made urbanization decline. One of these factors was disease. As disease spread through cities, populations became so low that the labor in the urban areas couldn’t continue. One example of this was the mid-14th century Black Death in Europe. The bubonic plague raged throughout the continent and killed over a third of the population. Even though countervailing forces were soon at work to encourage urbanization (e.g., the end to serfdom and a move toward wage labor, which was available in cities), Europe’s plague-reduced population set urbanization back for more than a century. Also reducing population wherever it occurred was invasion. During the Middle Ages, Europe remained a mostly rural land as it turned to feudalism in order to cope with the threat of invasions from Muslims (from the south), Magyars (from the east) and Vikings (from the north). Yet a third factor leading to the decline of urbanization was decreased agricultural production. While most of this timeframe (600-1450) can be described as a long cycle of agricultural advances, global temperatures became much cooler for about a half-millennium beginning around 1300. This so-called “little ice age” may have exacerbated the deadly effects of the Black Death, leading to famine and starvation in some places as farming yields declined.

The flip side of that coin had the opposite effect: Rising agricultural production led to population growth and more urbanization. From innovations such as crop rotation and the switch from oxen- to horse-pulled plows, to the introduction of many non-native food crops to new lands (as happened during the so-called “Muslim agricultural revolution”), more food meant more people, which meant the growth of cities. A third factor that expanded urbanization was the safety of trade. If trade was protected, more materials could flow through cities, and more people moved to the cities. One example of this was Mongol control of Asia. As they secured the Pax Mongolica from the mid-13th to mid-14th centuries, banditry along the Silk Roads became less common and trading cities such as Samarkand grew and thrived. Increased trade was a pervasive reality of this period, in fact, and growing trade cities were the engines of that economic activity, from Kilwa on the Swahili coast of east Africa, to Timbuktu in west Africa, Venice in northern Italy and Melaka in southeast Asia.

9. Describe important changes in labor management and the effect of religious conversions on gender relations.

As in the previous period, many forms of labor organization persisted, from free peasant agriculture to various forms of coerced labor, including slavery. Serfdom, in both Europe and Japan, was one major change that occurred in the medieval period. Peasant serfs living on self-sufficient manors were granted land and tools to cultivate crops, some of which they were allowed to keep and some they turned over to their lords. They were not slaves – they could not be bought or sold – but their freedoms were limited. They were tied to the land, for example, and could not move without their lord’s permission. European male serfs would typically work three days a week for their lords and supply additional work during planting and harvesting seasons, while women churned butter, brewed beer, spun thread, etc. With the growth of medieval cities toward the end of this period, however, serfdom waned and urban settings saw the growth of guilds. These were voluntary groups of merchants, artisans, craftsmen and tradesmen who regulated the production and sale of goods by establishing standards of quality, specific manufacturing techniques, and entry of new workers into specific professions. Some of these guilds were open to women, so this new labor management system opened new opportunities for European females.

Forced labor through conscription was not uncommon. As in Egypt and China in earlier times, in Andean South America the Inca requisitioned draft labor, known as the mita system, to find workers for difficult and dangerous jobs free laborers would not perform. What was produced in the home stayed in the home, but almost all of the conquered peoples of the Inca periodically were required to labor for the state in a kind of “work tax.” Many worked on farms or state-run construction projects, but those with special skills filled other jobs. Among these were the “chosen women,” who were removed from their homes as young girls, trained in Inca
ideology, and set to producing corn beer and cloth at state centers. Later they were granted as wives to men of distinction or sent to serve as priestesses, or “wives of the Sun,” in various temples. Forced labor elsewhere included slavery, of course. While not approaching the level of the later Atlantic slave trade, in which Africans were brought to the Americas, the demand for slaves for both military and domestic purposes increased in central Eurasia, parts of Africa and the eastern Mediterranean.

In some cases, labor management abuses and/or taxation schemes led to revolts. Amidst the European worker shortage in the aftermath of the Black Death, peasant survivors demanded higher pay and better conditions, which the rich resisted. The resulting peasant uprisings helped end serfdom in western Europe. In 12th-century Song China, two major peasant rebellions erupted over attempts to raise taxes to pay for the huge Chinese bureaucracy. A similar pattern earlier had undermined Tang rule.

In terms of gender relations, patriarchy continued to mark most societies and deepened in some, as in China under the Song (as evidenced by its practice of foot-binding) and in the dar al-Islam. Heightened levels of patriarchy in China during this time can be explained in part as a Confucian-led backlash against the encroachment of foreign religions, most notably Buddhism. In the Islamic world, the freedoms of women became increasingly constrained after Muslims fell under the cultural sway of Persian traditions, including the practice of veiling women. In some regions, however, women were able to exercise more power and influence. In Mongol lands, Genghis Khan outlawed the kidnapping of women – long a source of conflict in Central Asia – and Mongol women were sometimes allowed to serve as warriors on horseback. In Heian Japan (c. 800-1200) women made notable contributions to Japanese literature, including Murasaki Shikibu’s classic *The Tale of Genji*, which featured quasi-religious themes echoing Japan’s native Shintoism. In Europe and Asia, women could seek active roles in Christian and Buddhist monasteries, respectively. The Catholic Church, meanwhile, took steps to undermine the strength of families and their ability to pass down inheritance through the male line by outlawing divorce, adoption and the marriage of cousins.