arduous sea routes, setting sail from the Persian Gulf (controlled by the Mongols) and rounding India before arriving in China. Marco Polo (1254–1324) was the most famous of the travelers to the East only because he left a fascinating travel book. His descriptions of the fabulous wealth of the orient fired up new adventurers. In a sense, the Mongols initiated the search for exotic goods and missionary opportunities that culminated in the European “discovery” of a new world, the Americas.

THE MATURATION OF THE EUROPEAN ECONOMY

The pull of the East on the trade of the great Italian maritime cities was part of a series of shifts in Europe’s commercial patterns. Another one, even more important, was toward the Atlantic. At the same time, new roads and bridges within Europe made land trade both possible and profitable. The need for large-scale payments meant the introduction of new sorts of coins. Europeans now had access to material goods of every sort, but wealth also heightened social tensions, especially within the cities.