

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

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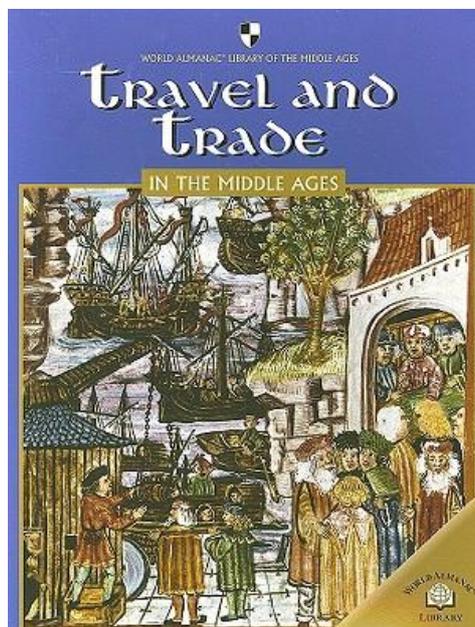
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Macdonald, F. (2006). *Travel and trade in the Middle Ages*. Milwaukee, Wisconsin : World Almanac Library.



How Did Medieval People Travel?

Whether they were planning a long or a short journey, medieval people had only two options.

They could travel overland: on foot, on horseback, or in carts and wagons pulled by horses, donkeys, mules, and oxen. Their other choice was to travel by water: across lakes, along rivers, or over the sea.

▼ A caravan of heavily laden pack animals (camels, mules, and horses) climbs a winding pathway in the mountains of Italy around 1460. Lookouts and guards with fierce dogs walk alongside.



Most medieval carts and wagons were heavy, awkward, and slow. Their wooden wheels and iron tires were easily broken on rocky ground and quickly sank and became stuck in mud. Early medieval carts were difficult to steer. After about A.D. 800, new designs for harnesses and cart shafts meant that horsepower could be used more efficiently and horses guided more easily.

Horses, donkeys, and mules were also loaded with sacks, bags, or baskets and used to transport heavy loads. Many routes across medieval Europe were unsuitable for wheeled transport. A single animal carrying baggage—or a long “train” of packhorses traveling in single file—could negotiate steep mountain tracks or narrow bridges and find its way around many other obstacles.

How far, how fast?

- On an average, a man or woman walking could cover around 20 miles (32 km) a day.
- A messenger riding a fast horse could cover about 60 miles (96 km) a day.
- A two-horse baggage cart could cover about 18 miles (29 km) a day.
- A packhorse train could cover about 12 miles (19 km) a day.

Travelers and pack animals might travel farther and faster in fine weather and on smooth ground. In bad weather, or across rocky or marshy territory, they moved more slowly.