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Coal and Iron Production

The scale of production of iron and coal in China during the Tang and Northern Song dynasties (A.D. 618—1127) was vastly greater than anywhere else in the world until the nineteenth century. In the fourth century B.C., the Chinese had discovered the use of coal—which they called “black earth”—as fuel. It wasn’t until 300 years after Marco Polo observed the Chinese using coal that the fuel was commonly used in England. Using coal to melt iron, the Chinese began mass production of cast iron goods by the second century A.D. Later, by taking the carbon out of cast iron, the Chinese were able to manufacture steel. By the seventh century, much of the iron and steel produced in China went to equip the Song army of well over one million men, providing them with swords, steel-tipped arrows, and armor. Iron was also forged to make tools for farmers and carpenters, and consumer items, such as nails, needles, and stoves. By 1078, 125,000 tons of iron were being produced each year to make such common items as ship anchors, bridges, gates, pagodas, and Buddhist statues.