

The Worlds of the Fifteenth Century

CHAPTER LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- To step back and consider the variety of human experiences in the fifteenth century
 - To compare conditions in China and Europe on the cusp of the modern world
 - To encourage students to consider why Europe came to dominate the world in the modern era, and how well this could have been predicted in 1500
 - To examine the Islamic world in the fifteenth century
 - To provide a preview of important trends to come in the modern world

CHAPTER OUTLINE

I. Opening Vignette

- A. Columbus's legacy has been the subject of much debate.
 1. his reputation as heroic discoverer has been challenged
 2. emphasis has been placed on the history of death, slavery, racism, and exploitation that followed his voyage
 3. reminder that the past is as unpredictable as the future

- B. Even though Columbus's voyage is arguably the most important single event of the fifteenth century, many other developments were occurring across the globe at the same time.
- C. This chapter's purpose is to review the human story up to the sixteenth century and to establish a baseline against which to measure the transformations of the period 1500–2000.

II. The Shapes of Human Communities

- A. In 1500, the world still had all types of societies, from bands of gatherers and hunters to empires, but the balance between them was different from what it had been in 500.
- B. Paleolithic Persistence: Australia and North America
 1. gathering and hunting societies (Paleolithic peoples) still existed throughout all of Australia, much of Siberia, the arctic coastlands, and parts of Africa and the Americas
 2. they had changed over time, interacted with their neighbors
 3. example of Australian gatherers and hunters
 - a. some 250 separate groups

- b. had assimilated outside technologies and ideas, e.g., outrigger canoes, fish hooks, netting techniques, artistic styles, rituals, mythological concepts
 - c. had not adopted agriculture
 - d. manipulated their environment through “firestick farming”
 - e. exchanged goods over hundreds of miles
 - f. developed sophisticated sculpture and rock painting
4. northwest coast of North America developed very differently
- a. abundant environment allowed development of a complex gathering and hunting culture
 - b. had permanent villages, economic specialization, hierarchies that sometimes included slavery, chiefdoms, food storage
5. elsewhere, farming had advanced and absorbed Paleolithic lands
- C. Agricultural Village Societies: The Igbo and the Iroquois
- 1. predominated in much of North America, in parts of the Amazon River basin, Southeast Asia, and Africa south of the Equator
 - 2. their societies mostly avoided oppressive authority, class inequalities, and seclusion of women typical of other civilizations
 - 3. example of forested region in present-day southern Nigeria
 - a. by fifteenth century Yoruba and Benin people had begun to develop small states and urban centers
 - b. Igbo peoples: dense population and trade, but purposely rejected kingship and state building
 - c. Igbo instead relied on title societies, woman’s associations, and hereditary ritual experts to create a stateless society
 - d. Yoruba, Bini, and Igbo peoples traded among themselves and beyond
 - e. the region shared common artistic traditions
 - f. all shifted from matrilineal to patrilineal system
4. in what is now central New York State, agricultural village societies underwent substantial change in the centuries before 1500
- a. Iroquois speakers had become fully agricultural (maize and beans) by around 1300
 - b. population growth, emergence of distinct peoples
 - c. rise of warfare as key to male prestige (perhaps since women did the farming, so males were no longer needed for getting food)
 - d. warfare triggered the creation of the Iroquois confederation
 - e. some European colonists appreciated Iroquois values of social equality and personal freedom (even for women)
- D. Pastoral Peoples: Central Asia and West Africa
- 1. Turkic warrior Timur (Tamerlane) tried to restore the Mongol Empire ca. 1400
 - a. his army devastated Russia, Persia, and India
 - b. Timur died in 1405, while preparing an invasion of China
 - c. his successors kept control of the area between Persia and Afghanistan for a century
 - d. Timur’s conquest was the last great military success of Central Asian nomads
 - 2. in the following centuries, the steppe nomads’ homeland was swallowed up in expanding Russian and Chinese empires
 - 3. African pastoralists remained independent from established empires for several centuries longer (until late nineteenth century)
 - 4. example of the Fulbe (West Africa’s largest pastoral society)

- a. gradual eastward migration after 1000 C.E.
- b. usually lived in small communities among agriculturalists
- c. gradually adopted Islam
- d. some moved to towns and became noted religious leaders
- e. series of jihads in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries created new states ruled by the Fulbe

III. Civilizations of the Fifteenth Century:

Comparing China and Europe

- A. By the fifteenth century C.E., a majority of the world's population lived within a major civilization.
- B. Ming Dynasty China
 - 1. China had been badly disrupted by Mongol rule and the plague
 - 2. recovery under the Ming dynasty (1368–1644)
 - a. effort to eliminate all signs of foreign rule
 - b. promotion of Confucian learning
 - c. Emperor Yongle (r. 1402–1422) sponsored an 11,000-volume *Encyclopedia* summarizing all the wisdom of the past
 - 3. reestablished the civil service examination system
 - 4. created a highly centralized government
 - a. great power was given to court eunuchs
 - b. state restored land to cultivation, constructed waterworks, planted perhaps a billion trees
 - c. was perhaps the best-governed and most prosperous civilization of the fifteenth century
 - 5. maritime ventures
 - a. Chinese sailors and traders had become important in the South China Sea and in Southeast Asian ports in the eleventh century
 - b. Emperor Yongle commissioned a massive fleet; launched in 1405

- c. Chinese government abruptly stopped the voyages in 1433; many had regarded them as waste of resources
- d. Chinese merchants and craftsmen continued to settle and trade in Japan, Philippines, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia, but without government support
- C. European Comparisons: State Building and Cultural Renewal
 - 1. a similar process of demographic recovery, consolidation, cultural flowering, and European expansion took place in Western Europe
 - 2. European population began to rise again ca. 1450
 - 3. state building, but fragmented, with many independent and competitive states
 - 4. the Renaissance: reclamation of classical Greek traditions
 - a. began in the commercial cities of Italy ca. 1350–1500
 - b. “returning to the sources” as a cultural standard to imitate
 - c. turn to greater naturalism in art (e.g., Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, Michelangelo)
 - d. “humanist” scholars explored secular topics in addition to religious matters
 - 5. Christine de Pizan wrote against misogyny
 - 6. Renaissance thinkers more concerned with describing the world as it is rather than exploring eternal truths
- D. European Comparisons: Maritime Voyaging
 - 1. Portuguese voyages of discovery began in 1415
 - 2. 1492: Columbus reached the Americas
 - 3. 1497–1498: Vasco da Gama sailed around Africa to India
 - 4. European voyages were very small compared to Chinese ones
 - 5. unlike the Chinese voyages, Europeans were seeking wealth, converts, allies in Crusades against Islam
 - 6. Europeans used violence to carve out empires

7. Chinese voyages ended; European ones kept escalating
 - a. no overarching political authority in Europe to end the voyages
 - b. rivalry between states encouraged more exploration
 - c. much of European elite interested in overseas expansion
 - d. China had everything it needed; Europeans wanted the greater riches of the East
 - e. China's food production could expand internally; European system expanded by acquiring new lands

IV. Civilizations of the Fifteenth Century: The Islamic World

- A. The long-fragmented Islamic world crystallized into four major states or empires.
- B. In the Islamic Heartland: The Ottoman and Safavid Empires
 1. Ottoman Empire lasted from fourteenth to early twentieth century
 - a. huge territory: Anatolia, eastern Europe, much of Middle East, North African coast, lands around Black Sea
 - b. sultans claimed the title "caliph" and the legacy of the Abbasids
 - c. effort to bring new unity to the Islamic world
 2. Ottoman aggression toward Christian lands
 - a. fall of Constantinople in 1453
 - b. 1529 siege of Vienna
 - c. Europeans feared Turkish expansion
 3. Safavid Empire emerged in Persia from a Sufi religious order
 - a. empire was established shortly after 1500
 - b. imposed Shia Islam as the official religion of the state
 4. Sunni Ottoman Empire and Shia Safavid Empire fought periodically between 1534 and 1639

C. On the Frontiers of Islam: The Songhay and Mughal Empires

1. Songhay Empire rose in West Africa in the second half of the fifteenth century
 - a. Islam was limited largely to urban elites
 - b. Sonni Ali (r. 1465–1492) followed Muslim practices, but was also regarded as a magician with an invisibility charm
 - c. Songhay Empire was a major center of Islamic learning/trade
2. Mughal Empire in India was created by Turkic group that invaded India in 1526
 - a. over the sixteenth century, Mughals gained control of most of India
 - b. effort to create a partnership between Hindus and Muslims
 - c. Hindu kingdom of Vijayanagara continued to flourish in the south
- D. The age of these four great Muslim empires is sometimes called a "second flowering of Islam."
 1. new age of energy, prosperity, and cultural brilliance
 2. spread of Islam to new areas, such as Southeast Asia
 3. rise of Malacca as a sign of the times—became a major Muslim port city in the fifteenth century
 - a. Malaccan Islam blended with Hindu/Buddhist traditions
 - b. was a center for Islamic learning

V. Civilizations of the Fifteenth Century: The Americas

- A. Both the Aztec and the Inca empires were established by once-marginal peoples who took over and absorbed older cultures.
- B. The Aztec Empire
 1. the Mexica were a seminomadic people who migrated southward from northern Mexico
 - a. established themselves on an island in Lake Texcoco by 1325

- b. built themselves up and established capital city of Tenochtitlán
 - 2. Triple Alliance (1428): Mexica and two other city-states united
 - a. launched a program of military conquest
 - b. conquered much of Mesoamerica in under a century
 - c. Aztec rulers claimed descent from earlier peoples
 - 3. Aztec Empire was a loosely structured, unstable conquest state
 - a. population of 5–6 million
 - b. conquered peoples paid regular tribute
 - c. Tenochtitlán had 150,000–200,000 people
 - d. local and long-distance trade on a vast scale
 - 4. trade included slaves, many intended for sacrifice
 - a. human sacrifice much more prominent in Aztec Empire than in earlier Mesoamerica
 - b. Tlacaelel is credited with crystallizing ideology of state, giving human sacrifice such importance
 - 5. created an important philosophical/poetic tradition focused on the fragility of human life
- C. The Inca Empire
1. Quechua speakers established the Inca Empire along the length of the Andes
 - a. empire was 2,500 miles long
 - b. around 10 million subjects
 2. Inca Empire was more bureaucratic, centralized than the Aztecs
 - a. emperor was an absolute ruler regarded as divine
 - b. state theoretically owned all land and resources
 - c. around 80 provinces, each with an Inca governor
 - d. subjects grouped into hierarchical units of people (10, 50, 100, 500, etc.), at least in the central regions
 - e. inspectors checked up on provincial officials
 - f. population data was recorded on quipus (knotted cords)
 - g. massive resettlement program moved much of the population
3. Incas attempted cultural integration
- a. leaders of conquered peoples had to learn Quechua
 - b. sons were taken to Cuzco (the capital) for acculturation
 - c. subjects had to acknowledge major Inca deities
4. almost everyone had to perform labor service (mita) for the Inca state
- a. work on state farms, herding, mining, military service, state construction
 - b. also production of goods for the state
 - c. state provided elaborate feasts in return
5. the state played a large role in distribution of goods
- D. Both the Inca and Aztec civilizations practiced “gender parallelism.”
1. women and men operated in “separate but equivalent spheres”
 2. parallel religious cults for women and men
 3. parallel hierarchies of female and male political officials (especially among Incas)
 4. women’s household tasks were not regarded as inferior
 5. still, men had top positions in political and religious life
 6. glorification of the military probably undermined gender parallelism
 7. Inca ruler and his wife governed jointly, were descended from sun and moon, respectively
- VI. Webs of Connection**
- A. Large-scale political systems brought together culturally different people.
- B. Religion both united and divided far-flung peoples.
1. common religious culture of Christendom, but divided into Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy

2. Buddhism linked people in China, Korea, Tibet, Japan, and parts of Southeast Asia
 3. Islam was particularly good at bringing together its people
 - a. the annual hajj
 - b. yet conflict within the umma persisted
- C. Patterns of trade were certainly evident in the fifteenth century.
1. trade was going on almost everywhere
 2. the balance of Afro-Eurasian trade was changing
 - a. the Silk Road network was contracting
 - b. ocean trade in the west Atlantic/Indian Ocean picked up

VII. A Preview of Coming Attractions: Looking Ahead to the Modern Era, 1500–2015

- A. No fifteenth-century connections were truly global.
1. those came only with European expansion in the sixteenth century
 2. 1500–2000: inextricable linking of the worlds of Afro-Eurasia, the Americas, and Pacific Oceania
- B. “Modern” human society emerged first in Europe in the nineteenth century and then throughout the world.
1. core feature: industrialization
 2. accompanied by massive population increase
 3. societies favored holders of urban wealth over rural landowning elites
 4. states became more powerful and intrusive
 5. opening up of public and political life to more of the population
 6. self-conscious departure from tradition
 7. the modernity revolution was as important as the Agricultural Revolution
 - a. introduced new divisions and conflicts, new economic inequalities
 - b. destruction of older patterns of human life
- C. The prominence of European peoples on the global stage grew over the last 500 years.
1. after 1500, Western Europe became the most innovative, prosperous, powerful, imitated part of the world

2. spread of European languages and Christian religion throughout the world
3. initiated the Scientific Revolution and the Industrial Revolution
4. origin of modern -isms: liberalism, nationalism, feminism, socialism
5. rest of the world was confronted by powerful, intrusive Europeans

VIII. Reflections: What If? Chance and Contingency in World History

- A. Might history have been shaped, at least at certain points, by coincidence, chance, or the decisions of a few?
1. What if Ogodei Khan hadn’t died in 1241 and the Mongols had continued their advance into Europe?
 2. What if China had continued maritime exploration after 1433?
 3. What if the Ottomans had taken Vienna in 1529?
- B. It’s worthwhile to sometimes take a “what if” approach to history.