

The West and the Changing World Balance

CHAPTER SUMMARY

By 1400, there was a shifting balance between world civilizations. The international role of the Islamic world, with the fall of the Abbasids and other Mongol disruptions, was in decline. The Ming dynasty of China attempted, for a time, to expand into the vacuum. The most dynamic contender was western Europe. The West was not a major power, but important changes were occurring within its civilization. Italy, Spain, and Portugal took new leadership roles. The civilizations outside the international network, the Americas and Polynesia, also experienced important changes.

The Decline of the Old Order. In the Middle East and north Africa, the once-powerful civilizations of Byzantium and the Abbasids had crumbled. The Byzantine Empire was pressed by Ottoman Turks; Constantinople fell in 1453. The Abbasids were destroyed by the Mongols in 1258.

Social and Cultural Change in the Middle East. By around 1300, Islamic religious leaders had won paramouncy over poets, philosophers, and scientists. A rationalist philosopher like Ibn-Rushd (Averroës) in Spain was more influential in Europe than among Muslims. Islamic scholarship focused on religion and legal traditions, although Sufis continued to emphasize mystical contacts with god. Changes occurred in economic and social life as landlords seized power over the peasantry. From 1100, peasants became serfs on large estates. As a result, agricultural productivity fell. Tax revenues decreased and Middle Eastern merchants lost ground to European competitors. The Islamic decline was gradual and incomplete. Muslim merchants remained active in the Indian Ocean, and the Ottoman Turks were beginning to build one of the world's most powerful empires.

A Power Vacuum in International Leadership. The rise of the Ottomans did not restore Islam's international vigor. The Turkish rulers focused on conquest and administration and awarded less attention to commerce. The result was a power vacuum beyond Ottoman borders. The Mongol dominions in Asia provided a temporary international alternative, but their decline opened opportunities for China and western Europe.

Chinese Thrust and Withdrawal. The Ming dynasty (1368-1644) replaced the Yuan and pushed to regain China's previous borders. It established influence in Mongolia, Korea, Vietnam, and Tibet. In a new policy, the Ming mounted state-sponsored trading expeditions to India, the Middle East, and eastern Africa. The fleets, led by Chinese Muslim admiral Cheng Ho and others, were technological world leaders. Ming rulers halted the expeditions in 1433 because of their high costs and opposition from Confucian bureaucrats. Chinese merchants remained active in southeast Asian waters, establishing permanent settlements in the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia, but China had lost a chance to become a dominant world trading power. The Chinese, from their viewpoint, had ended an unusual experiment, returning to their accustomed inward-looking policies. Since internal economic development flourished, there was little need for foreign products. The withdrawal opened opportunities for European expansion.

The Rise of the West. The small states of the West were still backward during the 14th and 15th centuries. The staples of medieval culture, including the Catholic church, were under attack. Philosophy had passed its creative phase. Warrior aristocrats lost their militaristic focus and indulged in courtly rituals. The economic activities of ordinary Europeans were in disarray. Growing populations outstripped food supplies, and famines were a recurrent threat after 1300. The arrival of the Black Death (bubonic plague) during the 14th century cost Europe one-third of its population.

Sources of Dynamism: Medieval Vitality. The West, despite the reverses, remained a dynamic society. Strengthened feudal monarchs provided effective government. The Hundred Years War stimulated military innovation. In Spain and Portugal, regional rulers drove back Muslim occupiers. Urban economic growth continued to spur commerce, and the church accepted key capitalistic principles. Technology, especially in iron working and timekeeping, continued to progress.

Imitation and International Problems. New opportunities for imitation occurred when the rise of the large and stable Mongol empire provided access to Asian knowledge and technology. Western elites sought Asian luxury products, paying for them by exporting raw materials. The ensuing unfavorable trade balance had to be made up in gold. By 1400, gold shortage threatened the economy with collapse. The rise of the Ottoman Empire and other Muslim successes further threatened Europe's balance of trade with Asia. The reaction included the expansion in the Adriatic of the city-state of Venice and the beginning of explorations to bypass Muslim-dominated routes to Asia.

Secular Directions in the Italian Renaissance. A final ingredient of the West's surge was internal change. The Renaissance, a cultural and political movement grounded in urban vitality and expanding commerce, began in Italy during the 14th century. The earlier phases involved literary and artistic themes more friendly to the secular world than the previous religiously oriented outlook had been. Artists and writers became more concerned with personal reputation and glory. In commerce, merchants sought new markets. City-state governments, eager for increased revenue, supported their expansion.

Human Values and Renaissance Culture. The Renaissance, above all, was a cultural movement. It began in Florence and focused on literature and the arts. The movement stressed stylistic grace and a concern for a code of behavior for urban gentlemen. There was innovation in music and the visual arts. Painters realistically portrayed nature and individuals in religious and secular themes and introduced perspective. The early Renaissance did not represent a full break from medieval tendencies. It had little effect outside of Italy, and in Italy it focused on high culture and was little concerned with science. Still, the Renaissance marked the beginning of important changes in Western development. The developing scope of Italian commerce and shipping; ambitious, revenue-seeking city-states; and sailors with the Renaissance goal of personal glory set the stage for future expansion.

The Iberian Spirit of Religious Mission. The Iberian Peninsula also was a key center for change. Spanish and Portuguese Christian military leaders had for centuries been pushing back the borders of Islam. Castile and Aragon established regional monarchies after 1400; they united through royal marriage in 1469. Iberian rulers developed a religious and military

Western Expansion: The Experimental Phase. European efforts to explore the Atlantic began in the late 13th century. After early discoveries, a rapid move was made to a colonial system.

Early Explorations. The Genoese Vivaldi brothers in 1291 had vanished after passing the Strait of Gibraltar in search of a route to the “Indies.” Other Genoese explorers reached the Canary Islands, the Madeiras, and perhaps the Azores during the 14th century. Vessels from Spain sailed southward along the west African coast as far as Sierra Leone. Technological barriers hindered further exploration until 1430. Europeans solved problems through building better ships and learning from the Arabs the use of the Chinese compass and astrolabe. European mapmaking also steadily improved.

Colonial Patterns. The Portuguese and Spanish began to exploit the discovered island territories of the Azores, Madeiras, and Canaries. Prince Henry of Portugal, motivated by a combination of intellectual curiosity, religious fervor, and financial interest, reflected many of the key factors then stimulating European expansion. Land grants were given to colonists who brought along Western plants, animals, and diseases. They began a laboratory for later European imperialism. Large estates produced cash crops—sugar, cotton, tobacco—for Western markets. Slaves were introduced for crop cultivation. The developments were modest, but their patterns established precedents for the future.

Outside the World Network. The international framework developing during the postclassical period left out many regions and peoples. The Americas and Polynesia were not part of the new international exchange. Some of their societies experienced new problems that placed them at a disadvantage when experiencing outsider intervention.

Political Issues in the Americas. Both the Aztec and Inca empires experienced difficulties after 1400. Aztec exploitation of their subject peoples roused resentment and created opportunities for outside intervention. The Inca system created tensions between central and local leadership, stresses exacerbated by imperial overextension. The complications stemming from European invasion changed all of the developing dynamics of the peoples of the Americas.

Expansion, Migration, and Conquest in Polynesia. Polynesian culture between the 7th century and 1400 experienced spurts of migration and conquest that spread peoples far beyond the initial base in the Society Islands. One migration channel brought Polynesians to the Hawaiian Islands. After 1400, Hawaiian society was cut off from Polynesia. In Hawaii, the newcomers, living from agriculture and fishing, spread widely across the islands; pigs were introduced from the Society Islands. Warlike regional kingdoms were formed. In them a complex society emerged in which priests and nobles enjoyed special privileges over commoners. Rich oral traditions preserved their cultural values.

In Depth: The Problem of Ethnocentrism. The presence of ethnocentric outlooks in most cultures creates problems of interpretation in world history. The practices of foreign peoples are often regarded as inferior. Although many civilizations looked down on others, the present power of Western standards makes ethnocentrism a real issue. It is necessary to remain open

Isolated Achievements by the Maoris. A second channel of migration brought settlers to New Zealand perhaps as early as the 8th century. The Polynesians adapted to the different environment, producing an expanding population and developing the most elaborate Polynesian art. Tribal military leaders and priests dominated a society that possessed many slaves gained in warfare. The Polynesians did not work metals, but they created a vigorous economy based on agriculture and domestic animals. They produced a rich oral tradition. As in Hawaii, all the accomplishments were achieved in isolation from the rest of the world.

Adding Up the Changes. Clearly, the era around 1400 was a time of transition in world history. It marked the most significant shift since the fall of the classical empires. The rising of the West was part of a series of complex events all over the world. There were shifts in international trade leadership, in power relationships, and civilization dynamism. The changes even affected societies where existing patterns endured. Although sub-Saharan Africa continued along independent paths of evolution long after 1400, the altering world patterns were drawing Africans into a new relationship with Europe.

Global Connections: 1450 and the World. Changes and continuities affected many societies in Asia, Africa, and Europe. Muslim traders and missionaries continued to be active, but the Mongols introduced a new set of contacts. Subsequent Mongol decline returned attention to trade in the Indian Ocean. The question of leadership in global contacts was in flux in 1450. African merchants continued to rely on interactions with the Middle East. Western Europe's position was strengthening. Southeast Asia was increasingly drawn into trade and missionary activity.

KEY TERMS

Ibn-Rushd (Averroës): Iberian Muslim philosopher; studied Greek rationalism; ignored among Muslims but influential in Europe.

Ming Dynasty: Replaced Mongol Yuan dynasty in China in 1368; lasted until 1644; initially mounted large trade expeditions to southern Asia and Africa; later concentrated on internal development within China.

Zhenghe: Muslim Chinese seaman; commanded expeditions throughout the Indian Ocean.

Black Death: 14th-century bubonic plague; decimated populations in Asia and Europe.

Renaissance: Cultural and political elite movement beginning in Italy circa 1400; based on urban vitality and expanding commerce; produced literature and art with distinctly more secular priorities than those of the European Middle Ages.

Portugal, Castile, and Aragon: Regional Iberian kingdoms; participated in reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula from the Muslims; developed a vigorous military and religious agenda.

Francesco Petrarch: Italian author and humanist; a major literary figure of the Renaissance.

Vasco da Gama: Portuguese explorer; first European to reach India by sea around Africa.

Henry the Navigator: Portuguese prince; sponsored Atlantic voyages; reflected the forces present in late postclassical Europe.

Ethnocentrism: Judging foreigners by the standards of one's own group; leads to problems in interpreting world history.

LESSON SUGGESTIONS

Leader Analysis Henry the Navigator

Peoples Analysis Maoris

Change Analysis European Renaissance

Societal Comparison Medieval and Renaissance Europe

Document Analysis Italian Renaissance Culture

Dialectical Journal In Depth: The Problem of Ethnocentrism