

## CHAPTER 15

# *The World in 1450: Changing Balance of World Power*

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Fundamental to navigation

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7<sup>th</sup> century

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### Chapter Summary

**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 Compass.** The Chinese were responsible for the invention of the compass. Using natural magnets, they may have been used as early as the Tang dynasty. By 1100, the use of the compass enabled the Chinese to go further afield to pursue the sources of spices and teas. Arab merchants in the Indian Ocean soon followed, and the first use by the Europeans is dated to 1187. The compass fundamentally changed the nature of ocean voyages, notably that of Columbus. It also brought deep-seated changes in international relations, as Europeans took to the sea. The concurrent Mongol movements into Asia and Europe and the decline in Arab dominance added to the shift in power. In this period, global interactions underwent long-lasting reorientation.

**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 Abbasid caliphate had been destroyed by the Mongols in the 13th century. The Byzantine Empire was pressed by Ottoman Turks, and finally fell with Constantinople in 1453.

**Social and Cultural Change in the Middle East.** By the beginning of the 14th century, Islamic religious leaders had won preeminence over poets, philosophers, and scientists. The Arab rationalist philosopher Ibn-Rushd (Averröes) in Iberia was more influential in Europe than among Muslims. Islamic scholarship focused upon 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 they became serfs on large estates. As a result, agricultural productivity fell. Tax revenues decreased and Middle Eastern merchants lost ground to European competitors. However, 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 Mongols had temporarily created an alternative global framework in their vast dominions, uniting European, Asian, and Middle Eastern regions in Asia, but their decline diminished international contacts and commerce. Seaborne trade became increasingly attractive as passage over land routes was threatened.

**Chinese Thrust and Withdrawal.** The Ming dynasty (1368–1644) replaced the Yuan and pushed to regain former Chinese 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. Fleets, led by the Chinese Muslim admiral Zheng He and others, were technological world leaders. Yet 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 own 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 a backward region during the 14th and 15th centuries. The staples of medieval culture, including the Catholic church, were under attack. Philosophy had passed a highly creative phase. Warrior aristocrats lost their useful role and indulged in courtly rituals. The economic activities of ordinary Europeans were in disarray. Growing population outstripped food supplies, and famines were a recurrent threat after 1300. The arrival of the deadly 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 monarchs provided effective government, ruling increasingly centralized states. The Hundred Years' War stimulated military innovation. In Spain and Portugal, regional rulers drove back the Muslim Arabs. Urban economic growth continued to spur commerce, and the church accepted key capitalistic principles. Technology, especially in ironworking 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, a 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. Artists and writers became more concerned with personal reputation and glory. In commerce, merchants sought out 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, inspired by the Humanist's passion for the Roman past. It began in Florence and focused on literature and the arts. The movement developed 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 impact 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 seamen seeking the renaissance goal for personal glory, set the stage for future expansion. Moreover, the Renaissance brought a passion for innovation, and a mood of confidence that remained hallmarks of the west.

**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 agenda; they believed they had a mission to convert or expel Muslims and Jews and to maintain doctrinal purity. Close links formed between church and state. The changes stimulated the West's surge into wider world contacts.

**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 vanished after passing the Straits 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 by 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 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 with them Western plants, animals, and diseases. They had inaugurated a laboratory for later European imperialism. Large estates produced cash crops—sugar, cotton, tobacco—for Western markets. Slaves were introduced for crop cultivation. The initial 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 encountered 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 thoroughly changed the developing dynamics of the peoples of the Americas.

**Expansion, Migration, and Conquest in Polynesia.** Between the 7th century and 1400, Polynesian culture 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 where priests and nobles enjoyed special privileges over commoners. Rich oral traditions preserved their cultural values.

**Thinking Historically: The Problem of Ethnocentrism.** The presence of ethnocentric outlooks in most cultures creates problems of interpretation in world history. The practices of foreign peoples often are regarded as inferior. Although many civilizations looked down on others, the present power of Western standards and its ethnocentrism is a real issue. It is necessary to remain open-minded when thinking about other cultures, and to consider how their patterns are the result of their particular historical development.

**Isolated Achievements by the Maoris.** A second channel of migration brought settlers to New Zealand perhaps as early as the 8th century. The Polynesians, called the Maori, 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. As in Hawaii, all the accomplishments were achieved in isolation from the rest of the world.

**Adding Up the Changes.** The era around 1400 clearly was a time of transition in world history. Influential technological exchanges occurred between different civilizations. Individual initiatives took place within more general trends, such as Europe's international commercial difficulties. The changes affected societies where existing patterns endured. Although sub-Saharan Africa continued along independent paths of evolution long after 1400, the altering world patterns reduced Africa's contacts with Muslim civilizations. African relationships with western Europe were altering.

**GLOBAL CONNECTIONS: 1450 and the World.** Continuity and change in contacts between world civilizations marked the closing of the postclassical era. Muslim individuals remained active in many regions, but the Mongol successes brought fundamental alterations in contact patterns. Mongols drew knowledge from many cultures; their decline stimulated seaborne activity. Despite the vitality of Chinese civilization, the question of global leadership by 1450 was in flux.

## KEY TERMS

**Ottoman Empire:** Turkish Empire established in Asia Minor and eventually extending through the Middle East and the Balkans; conquered Constantinople in 1453 and ended Byzantine Empire.

**Ibn-Rushd (Averröes):** 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.

**Zheng He:** Muslim Chinese seaman; commanded expeditions throughout the India Ocean.

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

**Renaissance:** cultural and political elite movement beginning in Italy circa 1400; rested 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 peninsula from Muslims; developed a vigorous military and religious agenda.

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

**Vivaldi brothers:** Genoese explorers who attempted to find a western route to the “Indies”; precursors of European thrust into southern Atlantic.

**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.