12 The Worlds of the Fifteenth Century
Introduction

– In 2005, China celebrated the 600th anniversary of the initial launching of the country’s great maritime expeditions in 1405.
  • Admiral Zheng He had commanded a fleet of over 300 ships carrying 27,000 people that sailed as far as the East African coast
  • Why is Columbus so much more remembered?
– The fifteenth century was a major turning point in world history.
  • Zheng He’s voyages did not have world-historical consequences
  • Columbus’s voyages did
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Timeline</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1345-1521</td>
<td>Aztec Empire in America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1368-1644</td>
<td>Ming dynasty in China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1370-1406</td>
<td>Conquests of Timur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15th century</td>
<td>Spread of Islam in Southeast Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Civil war among Japanese warlords</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rise of Hindu state of Vijayanagara in southern India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>European Renaissance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Flourishing of African states of Ethiopia, Kongo, Benin, Zimbabwe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1405-1433</td>
<td>Chinese maritime voyages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1420</td>
<td>Beginning or Portuguese exploration of West African coast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1438-1533</td>
<td>Inca Empire along the Andes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1453</td>
<td>Ottoman seizure of Constantinople</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1464-1591</td>
<td>Songhay Empire in West Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1492</td>
<td>Christian reconquest of Spain from Muslims completed; Columbus’s first trans-Atlantic voyage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1497-1520s</td>
<td>Portuguese entry into the Indian Ocean world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1501</td>
<td>Founding of Safavid Empire in Persia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1526</td>
<td>Founding of Mughal Empire in India</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Shapes of Human Communities
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Major Development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Central, East, and Southeast Asia | Ming dynasty China, 1368-1644  
                                      Conquests of Timur, 1370-1406  
                                      Zheng He’s maritime voyages, 1405-1433  
                                      Spread of Islam into Southeast Asia  
                                      Rise of Malacca  
                                      Civil war among competing warlords in Japan |
| South Asia / India            | Timur’s invasion of India, 1398  
                                      Various Muslim sultanates in northern India  
                                      Rise of Hindu states of Vijayanagar in southern India  
                                      Founding of Mughal Empire, 1526 |
| Middle East                   | Expansion of Ottoman Empire  
                                      Ottoman siegeure of Constantinople, 1453  
                                      Founding of Safavid Empire in Persia, 1501  
                                      Ottoman siege of Vienna, 1529 |
| Christendom / Europe          | European Renaissance  
                                      Portuguese voyages of exploration along West African coast  
                                      Completion of reconquest of Spain, ending Muslim control  
                                      End of the Byzantine Empire, 1453  
                                      End of Mongol rule in Russia; reign of Ivan the Great, 1462-1505 |
## Major Developments around the World in the 15th Century continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Major Developments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>Songhay Empire in West Africa, 1464-1591</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kingdom of the Kongo in West Central Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expansion of Ethiopian state of East Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kingdom of Zimbabwe / Mwene Mutapa in southern Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Americas / Western Hemishpere</td>
<td>Aztec Empire in Mesoamerica, 1345-1521</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inca Empire along the Andes, 1438-1533</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Iroquois confederacy (New York state)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Complex” Paleolithic societies along west coast of North America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific Oceania</td>
<td>Paleolithic persistence in Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chiefdoms and stratified societies on Pacific islands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yap as center of oceanic trading network with Guan and Palau</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Paleolithic Persistence

- 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
- they had changed over time, interacted with their neighbors
- example of Australian gatherers and hunters
  - some 250 separate groups
  - had assimilated outside technologies and ideas, e.g., outrigger canoes, fish hooks, netting techniques, artistic styles, rituals, mythological concepts
  - had not adopted agriculture
  - manipulated their environment through “firestick farming”
  - exchanged goods over hundreds of miles
  - developed sophisticated sculpture and rock painting
- northwest coast of North America developed very differently
  - abundant environment allowed development of a complex gathering and hunting culture
  - had permanent villages, economic specialization, hierarchies, chiefdoms, food storage
- elsewhere, farming had advanced and absorbed Paleolithic lands
Agricultural Village Societies

- predominated in much of North America, in Africa south of the equator, in parts of the Amazon River basin and Southeast Asia
- their societies mostly avoided oppressive authority, class inequalities, and seclusion of women typical of other civilizations
- example of forested region in present-day southern Nigeria, where three different political patterns developed
  - Yoruba people created city-states, each ruled by a king (*oba*), many of whom were women and who performed both religious and political functions
  - kingdom of Benin: centralized territorial state ruled by a warrior king named Ewuare
  - Igbo peoples: dense population and trade, but purposely rejected kingship and state building
    » relied on other institutions to maintain social cohesion
    » system was made famous in Chinua Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart*
- Yoruba, Benin, and Igbo peoples traded among themselves and beyond
- the region shared common artistic traditions
- all shifted from matrilineal to patrilineal system
• in what is now central New York State, agricultural village societies underwent substantial change in the centuries before 1500
  – Iroquois speakers had become fully agricultural (maize and beans) by around 1300
  – population growth, emergence of distinct peoples
  – rise of warfare as key to male prestige (perhaps since women did the farming, so males were no longer needed for getting food)
  – warfare triggered the creation of the Iroquois confederation
    » five Iroquois peoples made an agreement (the Great Law of Peace)
    » a confederation council was created to adjudicate disputes
    » the Iroquois League of Five Nations ended blood feuds and tribal conflicts; coordinated Iroquois relations with outsiders
  – some European colonists appreciated Iroquois values of social equality and personal freedom (even for women)
    » descent was matrilineal
    » married couples lived with the wife’s family
    » women controlled agriculture
    » women selected and could depose officeholders
Herding Peoples

• Turkic warrior Timur (Tamerlane) tried to restore the Mongol Empire ca. 1400
  – his army devastated Russia, Persia, and India
  – Timur died in 1405, while preparing invasion of China
  – his successors kept control of the area between Persia and Afghanistan for a century
  – Timur’s conquest was the last great military success of Central Asian nomads

• in the following centuries, the steppe nomads’ homeland was swallowed up in expanding Russian and Chinese empires

• African pastoralists remained independent from established empires for several centuries longer (until late nineteenth century)

• example of the Fulbe (West Africa’s largest pastoral society)
  – gradual eastward migration after 1000 c.e.
  – usually lived in small communities among agriculturalists
  – gradually adopted Islam
  – some moved to towns and became noted religious leaders
  – series of jihads in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries created new states ruled by the Fulbe
Civilizations of the Fifteenth Century: Comparing China and Europe
Ming Dynasty China

- China had been badly disrupted by Mongol rule and the plague
- recovery under the Ming dynasty (1368–1644)
  - effort to eliminate all signs of foreign rule
  - promotion of Confucian learning
  - Emperor Yongle (r. 1402–1422) sponsored an 11,000-volume Encyclopedia summarizing all the wisdom of the past
- reestablished the civil service examination system
- created a highly centralized government
  - great power was given to court eunuchs
  - state restored land to cultivation, constructed waterworks, planted perhaps a billion trees
  - was perhaps the best-governed and most prosperous civilization of the fifteenth century
• maritime ventures
  – Chinese sailors and traders had become important in the South China Sea and in Southeast Asian ports in the eleventh century
  – Emperor Yongle commissioned a massive fleet; launched in 1405
    » twenty-eight years of maritime expeditions
    » Admiral Zheng He tried to enroll distant peoples in the Chinese tribute system
    » dozens of rulers took part
    » no intention of conquering new territories, establishing Chinese settlements, or spreading culture
  – Chinese government abruptly stopped the voyages in 1433
    » many had regarded them as waste of resources
    » and saw voyages as project of hated court eunuchs
  – Chinese merchants and craftsmen continued to settle and trade in Japan, Philippines, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia, but without government support
European Comparisons: State Building and Cultural Renewal

• a similar process of demographic recovery, consolidation, cultural flowering, and European expansion took place in Western Europe

• European population began to rise again ca. 1450

• state building, but fragmented, with many independent and competitive states
  – much of state building was driven by the needs of war, e.g., England and France in the Hundred Years’ War (1337–1453)
the Renaissance: reclamation of classical Greek traditions

- began in the commercial cities of Italy ca. 1350–1500
- “returning to the sources” as a cultural standard to imitate
- turn to greater naturalism in art (e.g., Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, Michelangelo)
- “humanist” scholars explored secular topics in addition to religious matters
  
  » Niccolò Machiavelli’s (1469–1527) *The Prince* laid out plans for political success
  
  » greater interest in the individual and in accurate depiction of the world
  
  » challenge to the otherworldliness of Christian culture
European Comparisons: Maritime Voyaging

- Portuguese voyages of discovery began in 1415
- 1492: Columbus reached the Americas
- 1497–1498: Vasco da Gama sailed around Africa to India
- European voyages were very small compared to Chinese ones
- Unlike the Chinese voyages, Europeans were seeking wealth, converts, allies in Crusades against Islam
- Europeans used violence to carve out empires
- Chinese voyages ended; European ones kept escalating
  - No overarching political authority in Europe to end the voyages
  - Rivalry between states encouraged more exploration
  - Much of European elite interested in overseas expansion
  - China had everything it needed; Europeans wanted the greater riches of the East
  - China’s food production could expand internally; European system expanded by acquiring new lands
Zheng He’s treasure ship v. Columbus’ *Santa Maria*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Portuguese seize Ceuta in Morocco</td>
<td>1415</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prince Henry the Navigator launches Portuguese exploration of the West African coast</td>
<td>1420</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portuguese settle the Azores</td>
<td>1430s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese fleets withdrawn from Indian Ocean</td>
<td>1433</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portuguese reach the Senegal River; beginning of Atlantic slave trade</td>
<td>1440s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portuguese contact with Kongo; royal family converts to Christianity</td>
<td>1480s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sugar production begins in Atlantic islands (Canaries, São Tomé)</td>
<td>1480s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishment of trading station at Elmina (in present-day Ghana)</td>
<td>1480s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First transatlantic voyage of Columbus</td>
<td>1492</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Cabot sails across North Atlantic to North America</td>
<td>1496</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vasco da Gama enters Indian Ocean and reaches India</td>
<td>1497-1498</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portuguese attacks on various Swahili cities; establishment of Fort Jesus at Mombasa; Portuguese contacts with Christian Ethiopia</td>
<td>1497-1520s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magellan’s voyage to Asia via the Americas; first circumnavigation of the globe</td>
<td>1520-1523</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Civilizations of the Fifteenth Century:
The Islamic World
The long-fragmented Islamic world crystallized into four major states or empires.

- process of conversion to Islam continued both within and beyond new states

In the Islamic Heartland: The Ottoman and Safavid Empires

- Ottoman Empire lasted from fourteenth to early twentieth century
  - huge territory: Anatolia, eastern Europe, much of Middle East, North African coast, lands around Black Sea
  - sultans claimed the title “caliph” and the legacy of the Abbasids
  - effort to bring new unity to the Islamic world
• Ottoman aggression toward Christian lands
  – fall of Constantinople in 1453
  – 1529 siege of Vienna
  – Europeans feared Turkish expansion
• Safavid Empire emerged in Persia from a Sufi religious order
  – empire was established shortly after 1500
  – imposed Shia Islam as the official religion of the state
• Sunni Ottoman Empire and Shia Safavid Empire fought periodically between 1534 and 1639
Ottoman Empire
Safavid Empire
On the Frontiers of Islam: The Songhay and Mughal Empires

- **Songhay Empire** rose in West Africa in the second half of the fifteenth century
  - Islam was limited largely to urban elites
  - Sonni Ali (r. 1465–1492) followed Muslim practices, but was also regarded as a magician with an invisibility charm
  - Songhay Empire was a major center of Islamic learning/trade

- **Mughal Empire in India** was created by Turkic group that invaded India in 1526
  - over the sixteenth century, Mughals gained control of most of India
  - effort to create a partnership between Hindus and Muslims
  - Hindu kingdom of Vijayanagara continued to flourish in the south
• **Mughal Empire in India** was created by Turkic group that invaded India in 1526
  
  – over the sixteenth century, Mughals gained control of most of India
  – effort to create a partnership between Hindus and Muslims
  – Hindu kingdom of Vijayanagara continued to flourish in the south
The age of these four great Muslim empires is sometimes called a “second flowering of Islam.”

- new age of energy, prosperity, and cultural brilliance
- spread of Islam to new areas, such as Southeast Asia
  - spread by traveling merchants, supported by Sufi holy men
- rise of Malacca as a sign of the times—became a major Muslim port city in the fifteenth century
  - Malaccan Islam blended with Hindu/Buddhist traditions
  - was a center for Islamic learning
Civilizations of the Fifteenth Century: The Americas

- Both the Aztec and the Inca empires were established by once-marginal peoples who took over and absorbed older cultures.
  - both empires were destroyed by the Spaniards and their diseases
The Aztec Empire

- The Mexica were a seminomadic people who migrated southward from northern Mexico
  - established themselves on an island in Lake Texcoco by 1325
  - built themselves up and established capital city of Tenochtitlán
- Triple Alliance (1428): Mexica and two other city-states united
  - launched a program of military conquest
  - conquered much of Mesoamerica in under a century
  - Aztec rulers claimed descent from earlier peoples
- Aztec Empire was a loosely structured, unstable conquest state
  - population of 5–6 million
  - conquered peoples paid regular tribute
  - Tenochtitlán had 150,000–200,000 people
    » center for large-scale trade
  - local and long-distance trade on a vast scale
    » professional merchants (pochteca) became rich
• trade included slaves, many intended for sacrifice
  – human sacrifice much more prominent in Aztec Empire than in earlier Mesoamerica
  – Tlacaelel is credited with crystallizing ideology of state giving human sacrifice such importance
    » the sun needs the life-giving force of human blood to help it fight the ever-encroaching darkness
    » gods shed their blood to create humankind, so payback is fair
    » Aztec Empire’s purpose is to maintain the cosmic order by supplying blood for the gods

• created an important philosophical/poetic tradition focused on the fragility of human life
The Inca Empire

- Quechua speakers established the Inca Empire along the length of the Andes
  - empire was 2,500 miles long
  - around 10 million subjects
- Inca Empire was more bureaucratic, centralized than the Aztecs
  - emperor was an absolute ruler regarded as divine
  - state theoretically owned all land and resources
  - around 80 provinces, each with an Inca governor
  - subjects grouped into hierarchical units of people (10, 50, 100, 500, etc.), at least in the central regions
  - inspectors checked up on provincial officials
  - population data was recorded on *quipus* (knotted cords)
  - massive resettlement program moved much of the population
• Incas attempted cultural integration
  – leaders of conquered peoples had to learn Quechua
  – sons were taken to Cuzco (the capital) for acculturation
  – subjects had to acknowledge major Inca deities
    » but then could carry on their own religious traditions
    » human sacrifice, but on much smaller scale than Aztecs
  – almost everyone had to perform labor service (*mita*) for the Inca state
    » work on state farms, herding, mining, military service, state construction
    » also production of goods for the state
• most well known were the “chosen women”: removed from their homes and trained to make corn beer and cloth
  » state provided elaborate feasts in return
  – the state played a large role in distribution of goods
Both the Inca and Aztec civilizations practiced “gender parallelism.”

- Women and men operated in “separate but equivalent spheres”
- Parallel religious cults for women and men
- Parallel hierarchies of female and male political officials (especially among Incas)
- Women’s household tasks were not regarded as inferior
  - For Aztecs, sweeping was a powerful, sacred act
- Still, men had top positions in political and religious life
- Glorification of the military probably undermined gender parallelism
- Inca ruler and his wife governed jointly, were descended from sun and moon, respectively
Webs of Connection
- Large-scale political systems brought together culturally different people.
  - efforts to integrate diverse peoples, e.g., in Ottoman, Mughal, and Inca empires

- Religion both united and divided far-flung peoples.
  - common religious culture of Christendom, but divided into Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy
  - Buddhism linked people in China, Korea, Tibet, Japan, and parts of Southeast Asia
  - Islam was particularly good at bringing together its people
    - the annual hajj
    - yet conflict within the umma persisted

- Patterns of trade were very evident in the fifteenth century
  - trade was going on almost everywhere
  - the balance of Afro-Eurasian trade was changing
    - the Silk Road network was contracting
    - ocean trade in the west Atlantic/Indian Ocean picked up
A Preview of Coming Attractions: Looking Ahead to the Modern Era (1500–2000)
No fifteenth-century connections were truly global.

- those came only with European expansion in the sixteenth century
- 1500–2000: inextricable linking of the worlds of Afro-Eurasia, the Americas, and Pacific Oceania

“Modern” human society emerged first in Europe in the nineteenth century and then throughout the world.

- core feature: industrialization
- accompanied by massive population increase
- societies favored holders of urban wealth over rural landowning elites
- states became more powerful and intrusive
- opening up of public and political life to more of the population
- self-conscious departure from tradition
- the modernity revolution was as important as the Agricultural Revolution
  - introduced new divisions and conflicts, new economic inequalities
  - destruction of older patterns of human life
The prominence of European peoples on the global stage grew over the last 500 years.

- after 1500, Western Europe became the most innovative, prosperous, powerful, imitated part of the world
- spread of European languages and Christian religion throughout the world
- initiated the Scientific Revolution and the Industrial Revolution
- origin of modern -isms: liberalism, nationalism, feminism, socialism
- rest of the world was confronted by powerful, intrusive Europeans

– Might history have been shaped, at least at certain points, by coincidence, chance, or the decisions of a few?

• What if Ogodei Khan hadn’t died in 1241 and the Mongols had continued their advance into Europe?
• What if China had continued maritime exploration after 1433?
• What if the Ottomans had taken Vienna in 1529?