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# Introduction

At the level of the human species as a whole, the most striking aspect of the period from 1400 to 1800 was the enormous extension of networks of communication and exchange that linked individuals and societies more and more tightly. Every region of the world became intricately connected to every other region, a development that we call the Great Global Convergence. Also in this era the world's population began to move dramatically upward, breaking through the ceilings of growth that had previously governed human affairs. Big Era Six saw striking changes in human history. Five key transformations mark the era.

First, human societies and the networks that connected them became much more complex. The most dramatic example of this is that for the first time in history, peoples of Afroeurasia began to interact on a large scale with peoples of the Americas (from the early sixteenth century) and Australasia (from the later eighteenth century).

A second major development was the Columbian exchange of plants, animals, and microorganisms between Afroeurasia and the Americas. It followed the success of European sea captains in permanently linking the two hemispheres. The ecological and demographic consequences of the Great Global Convergence were huge, especially the “Great Dying” of much of the indigenous population of the Americas. Europeans benefited from this disaster by peopling the Western Hemisphere with new immigrants, both free European settlers and African slaves. Europeans also gained access to important new sources of food and fiber. These included, among many others, maize (corn), tobacco, and the potato, which were American crops, and sugar and cotton, which came from Afroeurasia but thrived in American soil.

A third change was the emergence of a truly global economy. This was another consequence of the Great Global Convergence, which linked together all major regions, except Antarctica, in a single web of exchange. Silver was the great lubricator of global trade. In the 1550s, silver mined in the Americas became available to Spain, then to the rest of Western Europe, as well as to China directly by way of Spanish galleon voyages across the Pacific Ocean. Silver financed Europe's increasing involvement in the economy of maritime Asia and subsequently provided the basis of the emergence of an Atlantic-centered world economy by 1800.

The remarkable rise of European political and military power relative to the rest of the world was the fourth major change. This was a consequence of (1) the spread to western Europe of technological and cultural innovations that originated elsewhere in Afroeurasia, and (2) western Europe's response to the challenges of warfare in the new age of gunpowder weapons. A complete transformation of the way people fought and paid for wars occurred first in Europe, then around the world. Historians have named this development the military and fiscal revolution because it involved unprecedented advances in military technology and in the methods governments used to raise public money for wars.

The fifth great change was the development in western Europe of the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment and the subsequent diffusion of their ideas to other parts of the world, as women and men grappled with them in a variety of ways. These intellectual and cultural developments helped to establish rational science as a standard for measuring and explaining the natural world and human behavior. These developments greatly enhanced human ability to manipulate nature. Because they challenged long-established religious and philosophical perspectives, these developments raised profound questions about ultimate meaning in nature and society and about the sources of knowledge. These questions continue to concern us today.



## LESSON 1

# What Was Needed to Link Continents?

### *Introduction*

- Students can work on most activities and questions as a whole class, as individuals, or in groups. Results of individual and group work usually need to be shared with the whole class.
- Unless stated otherwise, “Document” means both the head note and the excerpt from an original source that follows the head note.
- Giving students the questions they are going to be asked to answer, and the activities they will be asked to do, before they read the documents on which the questions and the activities are based, helps their concentration, comprehension, and performance.
- Questions and activities typically start with the relatively simple and go on to probes of increasing complexity.
- Encourage students to keep notes of answers to discussion questions and results of activities because some subsequent questions build on these.
- Maps of the Indian and Atlantic oceans in the Appendix show the location of places that figure in the chapter as well as dates when Portuguese or Spanish, between 1400 and 1550, first formally claimed, conquered, or settled those locations.

### *Introductory Activities*

Ask students to respond to the following questions. If time is limited, each of the following questions (or parts of one) could be assigned to a different group, which would report its conclusions to the rest of the class.

1. If you were planning a long-distance sea voyage during the second half of the fifteenth century to little-known destinations along unknown routes, what problems with the physical environment would you expect to have to deal with during the voyage? What problems of human-to-human relations would you expect to have to deal with on board and on arrival at your destination?
  - a. What preparations might you make to avoid or minimize the problems you expect? What personal characteristics would most help you, and your crew, deal with these problems? What solutions to the problems might you try?

2. At the time of the long-distance sea voyages of 1400–1550, what else was going on in the world? Brainstorm happenings you know of during that time in Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas. Could any of these have helped, or hindered, venturing long-distance sea voyages? Which? How? (Ask students about those parts of the world with which they would likely be familiar.)
3. If American astronauts were to meet intelligent alien life-forms on Mars in the next few years, what information and what frames of reference about meeting and dealing with unfamiliar peoples or societies on Earth could they draw on to help them manage the extraterrestrial encounter? (Ask students to think about images from literature and mass media, history, and politics, as well as ideas about power, opportunity, diversity, gain, threat, cooperation, and conflict.)

What reactions by the astronauts to such a meeting do you think would be most likely, based on their frames of reference and on the notions they have about the “Other”? Would they draw on a different set of notions, and react differently, if the Martians had turned up at the Kennedy Space Center, instead of Earth astronauts appearing on their turf? If so, what would be the difference? Why?

4. Brainstorm a list of characteristics that you think define an “empire.” Take a few minutes to try them out on empires you know something about. How well do the characteristics you have hypothesized fit? Ask students to arrive at a class consensus on the characteristics that you agree define an empire. Can America today be described as an empire? Why or why not?
5. If a student asked you how to go about deciding whether a historical document could be accepted as reliable evidence, what advice would you give him or her? Would your advice work equally well to assess the reliability of information on the Internet, in advertisements, political speeches, and news articles as well? Why or why not? If you think additional or different ways of assessing the reliability of these would be needed, what might such ways be?

### *Activities and Discussion Questions*

Ask students to respond to the following:

1. Check the answers to the first Introductory Activity in your notes. For which of the environmental and human problems you had expected as a long-distance mariner in the fifteenth century was there evidence in Student Handout 1.1.1? Which problems described had you not anticipated? For what problems that you had expected was there no evidence in Student Handout 1.1.1? If you had been a long-distance mariner at that time, which of the problems would have troubled you most? Why?
2. Brainstorm the personality traits you think would have been helpful to the long-distance mariners of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and explain in what way(s) they would have been helpful. Why might “guts” (courage, determination) be singled out as

something needed to make successful long-distance sea voyages at that time? How, if at all, do the personality traits that would be helpful to today's long-distance traveler by airplane or by car differ from those you have just brainstormed for mariners of the earlier time?

3. If you could have constructed the ideal ship in which to cross the Atlantic in the late fifteenth century, and knew the information from Student Handout 1.1.1, which features from those of European, Muslim, and Chinese designs at the time would you have included in the design of your ship? Explain your reasons for doing so. Which of the features you would have included were missing from the ships actually in use in Europe at the time? What might account for this?
4. On each of the nine maps of Student Handout 1.1.2, find places you know. Note their size, shape, location relative to other places, and the ways they differ from, or are approximately the same as, the maps you are used to seeing. (A comparison with the modern maps in the Appendix will help with this.)
  - What would you infer, and how, about the purpose or intended use(s) of each map in Student Handout 1.1.2?
  - Arrange the maps in Student Handout 1.1.2, regardless of their date, into two groups based on what you consider to be their common characteristics. What reason(s) could you come up with for the difference(s) between your two groups?
  - What influence did the historical context at the time, and the background of the map's creator, have on the maps? Give examples. (Contemporary examples might be a map produced by an Internet search engine that shows the location of Internet cafes, or a city map by an oil company showing gas stations.)
  - What, if anything, surprised you about your findings? Why?
5. Judging by the maps in Student Handout 1.1.2, what do you consider the most important changes in European ideas of what the world was like? Why? On what did you base your assessment of importance? Which map features, during any period, could have influenced, either favorably or unfavorably, the undertaking or success of long-distance maritime voyages? Explain your argument.
6. Debate the accuracy of this statement: "It was adopting and adapting the ideas and technologies of earlier times and other peoples, rather than anything they came up with on their own, that made possible the long distance voyages of Iberian mariners in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries." Support your arguments, for and against, with evidence from Lesson 1. How, if at all, would you want to change the statement in light of the evidence?
7. **This activity may serve as an assessment.** What knowledge available to Western Europeans in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries would have encouraged them, and what discouraged them, in trying to find an all-sea route to the eastern sources

of spices during the 1400–1550 period? Explain your argument, and support it with evidence from the student handouts.

8. **This activity may serve as an assessment.** Rank the following in order of importance as enablers of Columbus’s crossing the Atlantic and returning, and da Gama’s reaching India from Portugal by an all-sea route around Africa’s tip and returning. Give reasons for your ranking.
- Technological changes in European ship design after about 1400.
  - The existence of reasonably reliable, mostly east-west and west-east wind systems.
  - Changes in the representation of the world on European maps after about 1400.
  - Europeans’ learning to use heavenly bodies to locate themselves accurately in terms of their distance from the equator by establishing their latitude.
  - Having guns available on shipboard.
  - Personal characteristics of those undertaking the voyages.
  - Other—if you think of something else.

### *Extension Activity*

A prerequisite for answering this question is having studied the European Renaissance and the centralizing tendencies of rulers about that time.

Imagine that you are an investigative reporter in the early sixteenth century. Write a brief article about how new values about the individual and the natural world, and new interests of rulers, might have contributed to the long-distance Iberian maritime expeditions of the time.