PART FOUR

The Early Modern World

1450–1750

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THE BIG PICTURE

Debating the Character of an Era

For the sake of clarity and coherence, historians often characterize a particular period of time in a brief phrase—the age of First Civilizations, the classical era, the age of empires, the era of revolutions, and so on. Though useful and even necessary, such capsule descriptions leave a lot out and vastly oversimplify what actually happened. Historical reality is always more messy, more complicated, and more uncertain than any shorthand label can convey. Such is surely the case when we examine the three centuries spanning the years from roughly 1450 to 1750.

An Early Modern Era?

Those three centuries, which are addressed in Chapters 14 through 16, are conventionally labeled as “the early modern era.” In using this term, historians are suggesting that during these three centuries we can find signs or markers of the modern era, such as those described at the end of Chapter 13: the beginnings of genuine globalization, elements of distinctly modern societies, and a growing European presence in world affairs.

The most obvious expression of globalization, of course, lay in the oceanic journeys of European explorers and the European conquest and colonial settlement of the Americas. The Atlantic slave trade linked Africa permanently to the Western Hemisphere, while the global silver trade allowed Europeans to use New World precious metals to buy their way into ancient Asian trade routes. The massive transfer of plants, animals, diseases, and people, known to scholars as the Columbian exchange, created wholly new networks of interaction across both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, with enormous global implications. Missionaries carried Christianity far beyond Europe, allowing it to become a genuinely world religion, with a presence in the Americas, China, Japan, the Philippines, and south-central Africa. Other threads in the emerging global web were also woven as Russians marched across Siberia to the Pacific, as China expanded deep into Inner Asia, and as the Ottoman Empire encompassed much of the Middle East, North Africa, and southeastern Europe (see Chapter 14).

Scattered signs of what later generations thought of as “modernity” appeared in various places around the world. China, Japan, India, and Europe experienced the beginnings of modern population growth as the foods of the Americas—corn and potatoes, for example—provided nutrition to support larger numbers. World population more than doubled between 1400 and 1800 (from about 374 million to 968 million), even as the globalization of disease produced a demographic catastrophe in the
Americas and the slave trade limited African population growth. More highly commercialized economies centered in large cities developed in various parts of Eurasia and the Americas. By the early eighteenth century, for example, Japan was one of the most urbanized societies in the world, with Edo (Tokyo) housing more than a million inhabitants and ranking as the world’s largest city. In China, Southeast Asia, India, and across the Atlantic basin, more and more people found themselves, sometimes willingly and at other times involuntarily, producing for distant markets rather than for the use of their local communities.

Stronger and more cohesive states also emerged in various places, incorporating many local societies into larger units that were both able and willing to actively promote trade, manufacturing, and a common culture within their borders. France, the Dutch Republic, Russia, Morocco, the Mughal Empire, Vietnam, Burma, Siam, and Japan all represent this kind of state. Their military power likewise soared as the “gunpowder revolution” kicked in around the world. Large-scale empires proliferated, and various European powers carved out new domains in the Americas. The most obviously modern cultural development took place in Europe, where the Scientific Revolution transformed, at least for members of a small educated elite, their view of the world, their approach to knowledge, and their understanding of traditional Christianity.

A Late Agrarian Era?

All of these developments give some validity to the notion of an early modern era. But this is far from the whole story, and it may be misleading if it suggests that European world domination and more fully modern societies were a sure thing, an inevitable outgrowth of early modern developments. In fact, that future was far from clear in 1750.

Although Europeans ruled the Americas and controlled the world’s sea routes, their political and military power in mainland Asia and Africa was very limited. Eighteenth-century China and Japan strictly controlled the European missionaries and merchants who operated in their societies, and African authorities frequently set the terms under which the slave trade was conducted. Islam, not Christianity, was the most rapidly spreading faith in much of Asia and Africa, and in 1750 Europe, India, and China were roughly comparable in their manufacturing output. In short, it was not obvious that Europeans would soon dominate the planet. Moreover, populations and economies had surged at various points in the past, only to fall back again in a cyclical pattern. Nothing guaranteed that the early modern surge would be any more lasting than the others.

Nor was there much to suggest that anything approaching modern industrial society was on the horizon. Animal and human muscles, wind, and water still provided almost all of the energy that powered human economies. Handicraft techniques of manufacturing had nowhere been displaced by factory-based production or steam power. Long-established elites, not middle-class upstarts, everywhere pro-
vided leadership and enjoyed the greatest privileges, while rural peasants, not urban workers, represented the primary social group in the lower classes. Kings and nobles, not parliaments and parties, governed. Male dominance was assumed to be natural almost everywhere. Modern society, with its promise of liberation from ancient inequalities and the end of poverty for most, hardly seemed around the corner.

Most of the world’s peoples, in fact, continued to live in long-established ways, and their societies operated according to traditional principles. Kings ruled most of Europe, and landowning aristocrats remained at the top of the social hierarchy. Another change in ruling dynasties occurred in China, while that huge country affirmed Confucian values and a social structure that privileged landowning and officeholding elites. Most Indians practiced some form of Hinduism and owed their most fundamental loyalty to local castes, even as South Asia continued its centuries-long incorporation into the Islamic world. The realm of Islam maintained its central role in the Eastern Hemisphere as the Ottoman Empire revived the political fortunes of Islam and the religion sustained its long-term expansion into Africa and Southeast Asia.

In short, for the majority of humankind, the three centuries between 1450 and 1750 marked less an entry into the modern era than the continuing development of older agrarian societies. It was as much a late agrarian era as an early modern age. Persistent patterns rooted in the past characterized that period, along with new departures and sprouts of modernity. Nor was change always in the direction of what we now regard as “modern.” In European, Islamic, and Chinese societies alike, some people urged a return to earlier ways of living and thinking rather than embracing what was new and untried. Although Europeans were increasingly prominent on the world stage, they certainly did not hold all of the leading roles in the global drama of these three centuries.

From this mixture of what was new and what was old during the early modern era, the three chapters that follow highlight the changes. Chapter 14 turns the spotlight on the new empires of those three centuries—European, Middle Eastern, and Asian. New global patterns of long-distance trade in spices, sugar, silver, fur, and slaves represent the themes of Chapter 15. New cultural trends—both within the major religious traditions of the world and in the emergence of modern science—come together in Chapter 16. With the benefit of hindsight, we may see many of these developments as harbingers of a modern world to come, but from the viewpoint of 1700 or so, the future was open and uncertain, as it almost always is.
# Landmarks in the Early Modern Era, 1450–1750

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### Europe
- **1492**: Columbus's first voyage to the Americas
- **1543**: Copernicus publishes heliocentric view of the universe

### 1400–1600 Renaissance
- **1517**: Beginnings of Protestant Reformation

### Africa
- **1494**: Treaty of Tordesillas divides New World between Spain and Portugal
- **1505**: Portuguese attacks on Swahili cities
- **1516**: Benin begins to restrict slave trade
- **1506–1542**: Reign of King Afonso (Kongo)
- **1500–1530**: Christian-Muslim conflict in Ethiopia

### The Americas
- **1453**: Ottoman conquest of Constantinople
- **1501–1722**: Safavid Empire in Persia
- **1534–1639**: Conflict between Ottoman and Safavid empires
- **1526–1707**: Flourishing of Mughal Empire
- **1556–1605**: Reign of Mughal emperor Akbar
- **1520–1566**: Reign of Ottoman emperor Suleiman
- **1529**: Ottoman siege of Vienna

### Islamic World
- **1498**: Vasco da Gama arrives in India
- **1550**: Russian expansion across Siberia begins
- **1582**: Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci arrives in China
- **1565**: Spanish takeover of Philippines begins

### Asia
- **1433**: Withdrawal of Chinese fleet from Indian Ocean