CHAPTER 15

The West and the Changing Balance of World Power

The Decline of the Old Order

- The Byzantine Empire and the Islamic Caliphate continued to dominate the Middle East into the 13th century. However, by the mid-15th century, the Ottoman Turks had taken Constantinople.
- Cultural change came to the Middle East with political change. The popularity of the Sufi accompanied a general shift toward mysticism and away from the sciences. A widespread decline in agriculture meant the reduction of many peasants to serfdom.
- Fragmentation of the Islamic world continued under the Ottoman Empire. The Mongols had taken advantage of the fragmentation, but their decline again left a power vacuum.
- The new Ming Dynasty emerged in 1368, pushing out the Mongols. Ming emperors began a series of trading voyages to India in 1405, led by admiral Zhenghe. The expeditions were stopped in 1433, and this line of development was not pursued. Instead, the emperors turned to strengthening their position in China, pursuing traditional policies.

The Rise of the West

- The 15th century was a period of profound change in the West. The aristocracy was losing its place as the defenders and leaders, turning to jousting and court ritual. Famine and the Black Death had deeply changed European culture and society. One-third of the population had died in 30 years.
- The medieval monarchies retained their vigor. The European economy revived, after a period of decline, along with increasing urbanization.
- The expansion of the Mongol Empire had brought the west into more contact with the east. A variety of innovations made their way to Europe: the compass, paper, gunpowder. The great demand for eastern luxury goods led to a gold drain to the east. This demand, added to the threat of the Ottoman Empire, impelled Europeans to seek new routes to the east.
- The Italian Renaissance, a cultural and political movement that looked to the antique past, began to take shape in the 14th century. The individual was central to the Renaissance.
- Florence was preeminent in the Renaissance, extolled by men such as the poet Francesco Petrarch. The painter Giotto began to move painting away from
medieval canons, aiming at more realism. Italian trade continued to flourish, providing the funding for these cultural developments.

- The Iberian peninsula was another area of dynamism in the 15th century. The Reconquista, the conquest of the peninsula under Christian monarchs, was completed by the end of the century under the united monarchy of Castile and Aragon.

**Western Expansion: The Experimental Phase**

- One of the earliest Atlantic voyages was undertaken by the Vivaldi brothers. The Vivaldis never returned, but subsequent ventures took Europeans to the Canary Islands, the Madeiras, the Azores, and down the western coast of Africa. The compass and the astrolabe made venturing into open seas possible.

- Prince Henry of Portugal—Prince Henry the Navigator—was particularly important in supporting the sciences necessary for trans-Atlantic voyages. He also began the process of colonization, starting with the Azores. A pattern was established: cash crops grown on large estates, and the use of slaves to work the plantations.

**Outside the World Network**

- Outside the Asia-Africa-European sphere, the Americas and Polynesia developed in relative isolation. Changes in the two areas were making some societies vulnerable to attack.

- The Aztec and Inca empires were fragmented, their central governments controlling their vast territories with difficulty.

- In Polynesia, the period 700 to 1400 saw expansion and migration to the Society Islands. During the same period, Hawaii was part of this greater Polynesian world, but it was cut off from about 1400. Hawaii was divided into small kingdoms, and organized hierarchically.

- Perhaps as early as the 8th century, Polynesians began to settle New Zealand. As in Hawaii the Maori became isolated after 1400, and were particularly vulnerable to western colonizers.

- Patterns perceived around the world can mask independent developments. While some elements, such as technology, were hard links between world regions, other developments were indigenous. Moreover, although increasing ties between regions had an important role, native cultural traditions overwhelmingly survived.