

THE WORLD IN 1492

Victoria Schofield surveys the lands
Columbus did *not* visit and finds societies on
the move.

When Columbus embarked on his 'Enterprise of the Indies' in 1492 he was carrying letters from 'their most Catholic majesties Ferdinand and Isabella' addressed to the Great Khan of the Mongol Yuan dynasty in China; he also had letters of introduction to other Japanese and Indian princes. According to Marco Polo's thirteenth-century account, which Columbus had studied at length, great wealth was to be found in the Indies, as China, Japan, India and Indonesia were collectively known.

In particular, Columbus hoped to return with 'gold and spices in quantity': gold, because it was the true measure of wealth; spices, because pepper, cinammon and cloves had become essential ingredients on a fifteenth-century European dining table. But increasingly high prices, maintained by the Arabs and Venetians, who controlled the spice trade to Europe, had prompted both Portugal and Spain to seek a direct sea route to Asia. Whereas the Portuguese edged their way around Africa, the Spanish monarchs agreed to Columbus' bold plan to sail to Cathay by the uncharted western route.

Columbus also had a higher ideal. In the year that Granada had fallen and the Moors were expelled from Spain, he would be the first Christian to seek direct links with the Great Khan. With Christian Europe threatened by the rising power of the 'infidel' Ottoman Turks, the Great Khan might well be a useful ally, perhaps even a convert. Columbus of course never reached China, where the Mongol Khans had been driven out by a new dynasty – the 'glorious' Ming. Hung-chih, a devout Confucianist, was now Lord of the Middle Kingdom.

In 1492 the 'known world' of the Europeans, extending little further than the boundaries of the old Roman Empire, was regarded as the centre of

civilisation. Frederick III, Holy Roman Emperor, asserted that 'the house of Austria [Habsburg] is to govern the whole world'. But beyond their limited vision, covering no more than 25 per cent of the earth's surface, prospered peoples in Asia, Africa and the 'Americas' who had also reached a high level of development and activity. They too regarded their civilisations as supreme. The Mings believed their emperor was the only legitimate ruler for civilised mankind; the ruler of the Incas was revered as a 'living god' descendant of the sun. But illustrative of Europe's sense of superiority, when they began to realise the extent of the land beyond their 'known world', by the Line of Tordesillas the Pope demarcated the entire area between the small countries of Portugal and Spain.

In 1492 informal political and commercial alliances already bound together the components of the 'Indies' of Columbus' dreams, but the fear of conquest and assimilation kept them divided. The Silk road, which Marco Polo had traversed, was the most well-worn land route to China. By sea, Arabs from the Arabian peninsula had travelled widely in their dhows from the Red Sea and the Arabian Gulf, establishing lucrative alliances with the local rulers whose territories bordered the Indian Ocean, from the East African coast to the Indian sub-continent. The Arabs regularly visited modern Indonesia, which harboured the prized Spice Islands – the Moluccas.

Chinese junks had also travelled overseas. The Admiral of the Imperial fleet, Cheng Ho [Zheng He], set sail in 1405 commanding a fleet of 300 ships with 27,000 men – a far more impressive flotilla than the three caravels and eighty-nine men granted to Columbus for his hazardous voyage. On successive journeys, Cheng Ho reached southern India, the Arabian peninsula

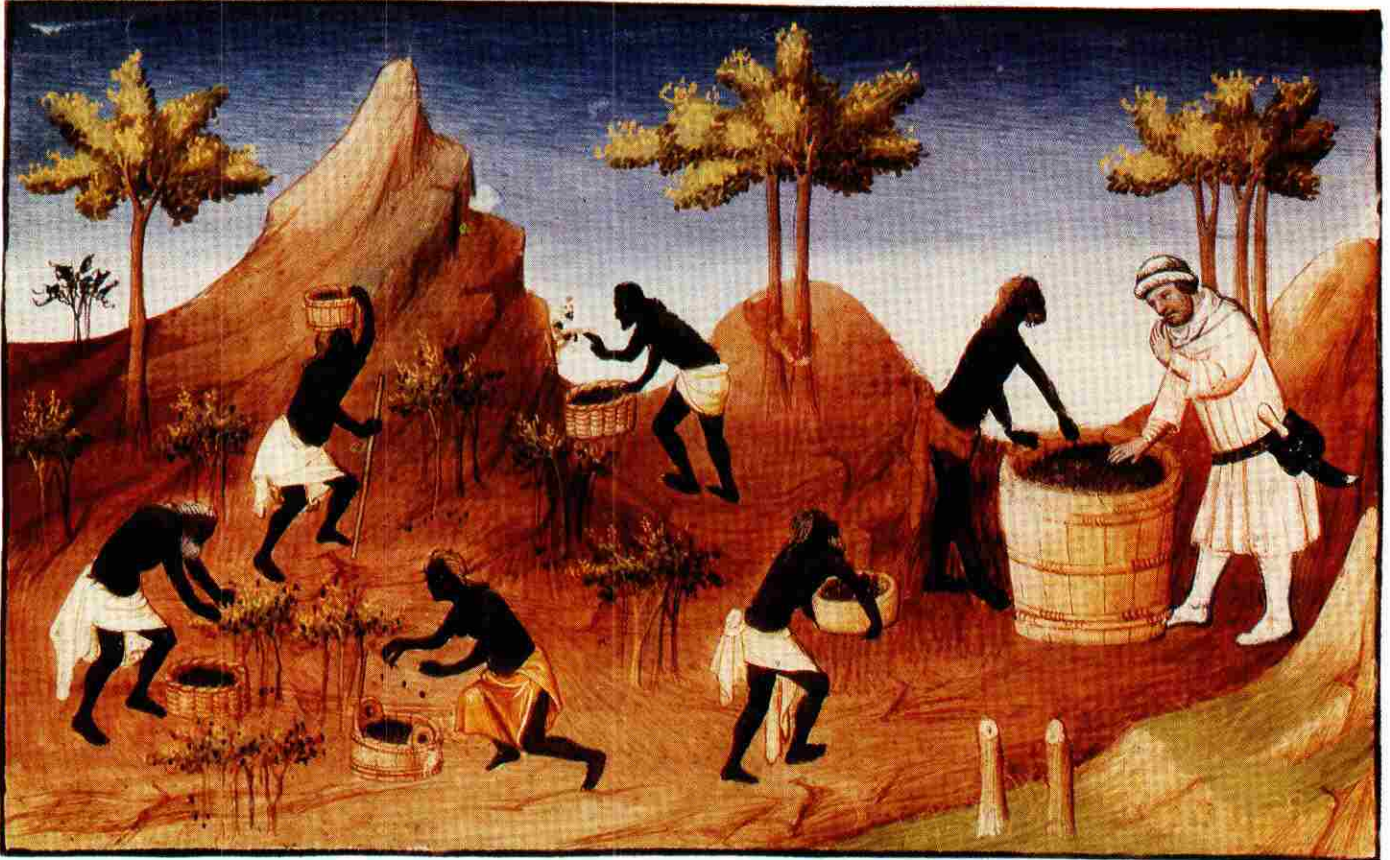
and the east coast of Africa. The Chinese returned home with exotic animals, lions, leopards, and giraffes as well as ivory. In return, African kings accepted Chinese silks and porcelain.

The kingdoms of Calicut, Cochin and Ceylon were all proclaimed as vassals of the Ming empire and Chinese troops even intervened to settle local disputes. Cheng Ho's voyages later inspired two important works: the *Treatise on the Barbarian Kingdoms of the Western Oceans* and *Marvels Discovered by the Boat Bound for the Galaxy*. Europe was however still beyond China's 'known world': 'Fulang chi is the name of a country [Portugal] not that of a cannon as generally assumed,' explained Ku Yin-hsiang, who was in charge of maritime affairs, when the Portuguese entered Canton harbour in 1517.

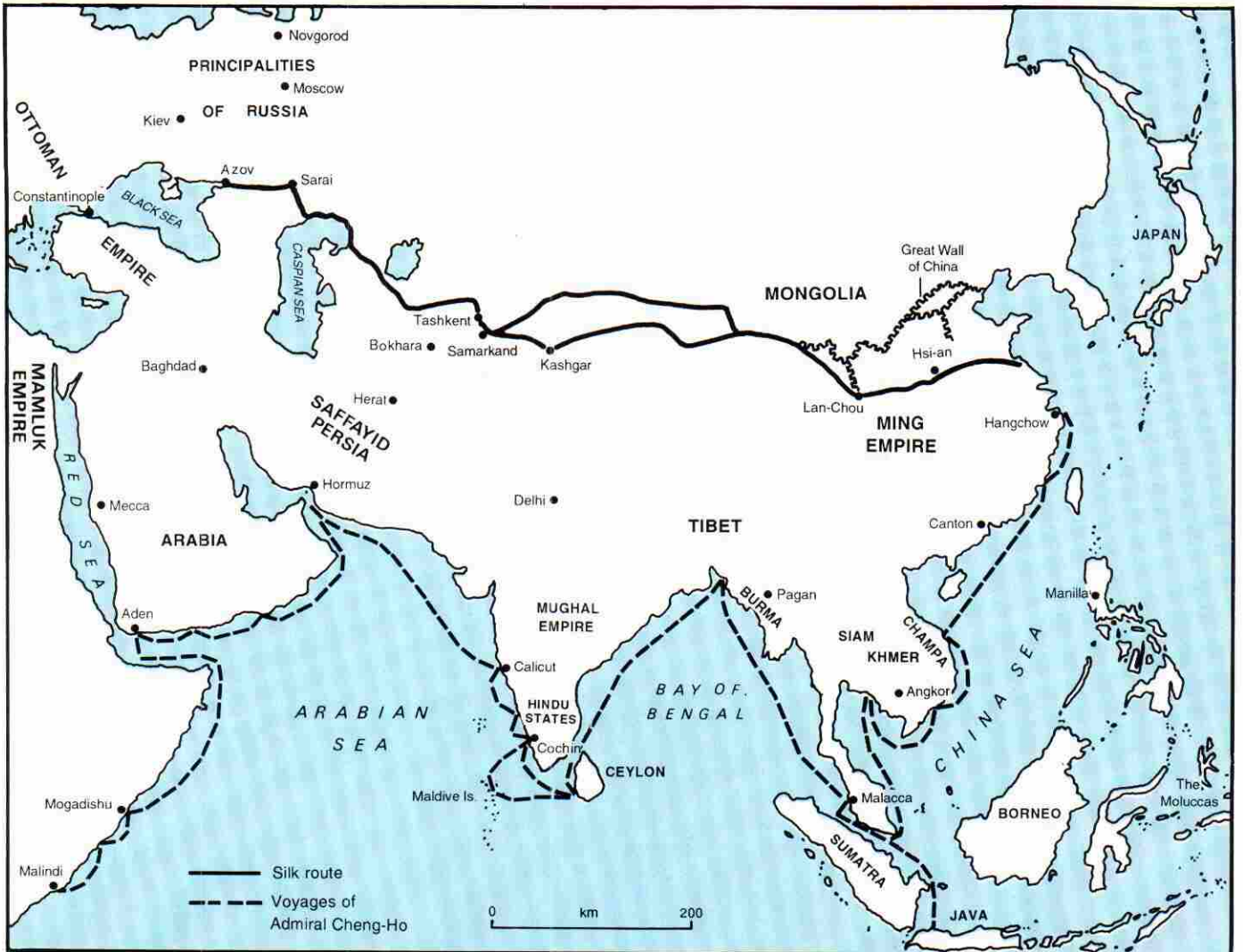
But Cheng Ho's voyages were not continued because, in common with the rest of Asia, China was still preoccupied with the threat of Mongol resurgence. Mongol rule, under Genghis Khan, had united both west and eastern Asia, spanning more land than any empire before or since. Persistent attacks from the Mongols on their northern frontier focused Chinese attention on the reconstruction and extension of the Great Wall which dated from the third century BC. In 1482, a large attack was repelled. 'When the raiders made their incursion', writes a later historian, 'they were trapped by walls and trenches and could not escape. Consequently the raiders were decimated'. However, fear of Mongol invasion dominated Chinese thinking well into the sixteenth century and the Great Wall remained the mainstay of their defence.

The Chinese also turned inwards, directing their attention towards revitalising their indigenous artistic traditions, ignored by the Mongols. The 11,095-volume encyclopaedia, produced in the early fifteenth century, typified the Chinese fascination with literature, history and geography.

China and her neighbours were not, therefore, greatly concerned by what lay beyond the western oceans. All the lands of the southern ocean – Indo-China – shared a need to consolidate their cultural and political identity. Annam, meaning 'pacified south', an area comprising most of central Vietnam, at one time invaded by Mongols and Chinese, was now an independent monarchy. In the Kingdom of Champa to the south, the sea-faring people had links with India and had adopted Indian culture and religion. They too had rejected Chinese attempts to subjugate them, but in 1471 they had lost their



Nutmeg and ginger, cinnamon and cloves. Scene from the 15th-century *Livre de Merveilles*, an account of Marco Polo's travels to the court of the Great Khan, which first revealed to a wondering Europe the magnificence of the Eastern world. (Below) The ruling dynasties of the East at the beginning of the 16th century.



independence to Annam.

The Kingdom of Khmer (Cambodia), once a powerful and wealthy state, was plagued by invasions from its neighbours, especially Siam (Thailand). In 1431, the Siamese had captured Angkor, Cambodia's capital and one of the world's largest cities. The Cambodian court had retreated south to Phnom Penh, never to return.

1492 marked the death of the great Burmese leader, Dhammazedi, a former Buddhist monk who had given stability to Burma for twenty years. The invasions of the Mongols, who captured Pagan, had left the country divided: the Shans dominated the north, while the Mons ruled the lower region, which prospered because of increased trade with the Indian sub-continent.

Japan had escaped the upheaval caused by Mongol domination. But if Columbus had reached Japan – Cipan-

gu – as he believed, he would not have found the roofs of gold, which Marco Polo described, but a country undergoing 'Sengoku Jidia' – the Age of the Country at War.

Unlike China's emperor, whose rule was absolute, the Japanese Mikados were 'Phantom' emperors. The Shogun exercised the real power. But even his authority was being undermined by civil wars between the 'daimyos' – feudal families – who in 1493 expelled Shogun Yoshitane. Lacking sufficient arable land on their mountainous islands, competition for the available resources was fierce. Out of this unrest, however, came Sesshu, one of the greatest landscape painters Japan has ever produced.

In 1492, the reigning Sultan of Delhi was Ibrahim Lodi; reputed to be one of the most honest rulers known to India. 'A new sort of life obtained,' we are

told, 'for people, high and low, were polite, and self-respect, integrity and devotion to religion prevailed, as had never been in former reigns'.

Lodi rule however was to be short-lived. Zahurrudin Mohammed Babur was only a boy when Columbus set sail for the Indies. But, claiming descent from the Mongol ruler, Tamerlane, who had invaded India in the previous century, he soon turned his attention away from his heritage in Samarkand towards India for 'it was always in my heart to possess Hindustan' he later wrote. As the Spaniards in the Indies discovered the gold Columbus had failed to find, Babur was conquering the real India, finally defeating the Lodis at the Battle of Panipat in 1526. A convert to Islam, Babur's conquests spread the Muslim faith into the sub-continent. His successors, Akbar and Aurangzeb, consolidated the Mogul dynasty and the development of a spectacular civilisation.

It was, after all, the riches of India which the Europeans were really seeking. While Columbus was undertaking his third expedition across the Atlantic, in 1498 the Portuguese fulfilled his ambitions, by reaching India from the east. Vasco da Gama, not Columbus, introduced himself to the rajahs of Cochin and Calicut.

Calicut was the outlet for trade in cinammon from Ceylon, cloves, ginger, pepper, pearls and precious stones from south India. In return the 'Perumal' (emperor) expected gold, silver, coral and scarlet. Most of the inhabitants were Hindu Brahmins, but the Muslim Arab traders enjoyed religious freedom. The Portuguese noted the wealth of the Arabs, who 'came with large fleets of many ships with much trade of valuable goods from Mecca and took back pepper, drugs and other merchandise'.

In comparison with such wealth, the Portuguese had little to offer. Their proposed goods for exchange – hand basins and textiles – were ridiculed by the local dealers. Yet superior weapons enabled the Portuguese to displace the Arab traders within less than twenty years of their arrival. Moving on to Malacca on the Malayan peninsula and the Moluccan Islands, the western takeover of the spice trade was completed by 1516. China came next. The reality of Columbus' dream to reach the Indies was permanent disruption of the established trading links of the Indian Ocean. Overland routes like the Silk road fell into disuse.

Traditionally Asia met Europe at the Ural mountains, beyond which lay the principalities of Russia; for 300 years they had endured the political domi-

Crimean delegates at the court of Bajazet II, whose Ottoman empire dominated the Balkans and much of Asia Minor.



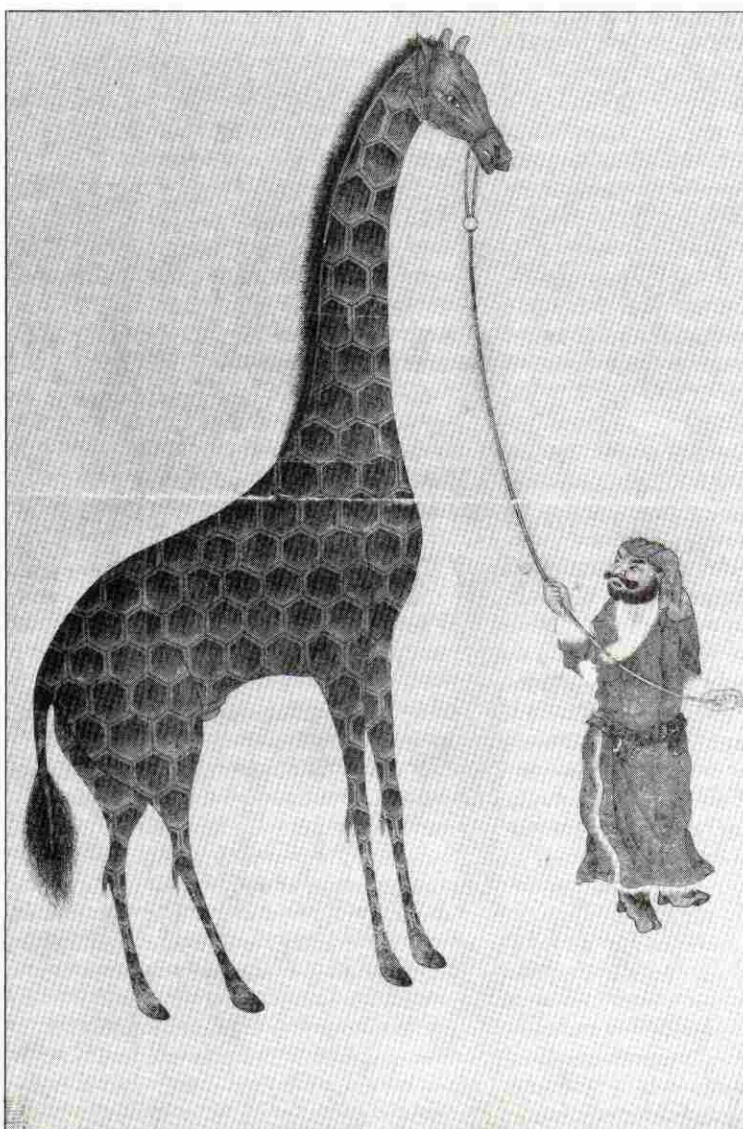
nance of the Mongols under the rule of the Golden Horde, based at Sarai, near the Caspian Sea. But in 1480, by refusing to pay the annual tribute, Ivan Vasilievich, Grand duke of Muscovy, had renounced allegiance to the Khans. Absorbing rival states like Rostov, Novgorod and Tver, he established a single rule over most of Kievan Russia. In 1493 Ivan, known as 'the Great', assumed the title of 'gosudar' – Sovereign of all Russia.

Ivan had also strengthened his position by marrying Sophia Paleologue, the niece of the last Byzantine emperor, adopting the double-headed eagle to lend authority to his rule. Russia did not however share the Europeans' obsession with finding a sea route to India. Russian traders journeyed overland to the Black and Caspian Seas, where furs, amber and honey were exchanged for spices, perfumes and gems. Trade was also directed towards Europe. Flax, hemp, tallow, and wax were exchanged for European cloth, fruits, wine and salt, for which there was great demand. In 1493 Muscovites were in Milan requesting architects to come to Moscow to advise on the construction of a large scale palace, the Kremlin.

To the west Ivan came up against lands controlled by Casimir IV, King of Poland and Duke of Lithuania. In 1492 Casimir died, and the two kingdoms were separated between his sons: John Albert became King of Poland and Alexander Duke of Lithuania. But when John Albert died in 1501 Poland and Lithuania were re-united under Alexander. Although married to Ivan's daughter, Helen, Russia and Lithuania were constantly at war. Trade, however, flourished; Polish grain, timber from the Baltic, and oxen reared throughout eastern Europe all found their way west.

The Persians had been subjected to Mongol and Turkoman domination; their future leader Ismail was eleven years old in 1492; ten years later, he overthrew the Turkomans and founded the Saffavid dynasty. At this time, the Persians generated great architectural and artistic achievements; the miniature paintings of Bihzad, head of the academy of painting and calligraphy in Herat, were unparalleled by his European Renaissance counterparts, who in 1492 were mourning the death of their patron, Lorenzo de Medici.

The Mongol sweep into Persia had also driven Turkoman nomads westwards to settle in Anatolia. Their leader, Othman the Leg-breaker, gave his name to the Ottoman dynasty which came to dominate much of Asia Minor, the Balkans and north Africa. The capture of Constantinople marked the end of the old Byzantine empire. By 1492, the



(Above) The ever-present threat: a Mongol archer painted by a 15th-century Chinese artist. (Left) Fabulous beasts: painting by Shen Tu of the giraffe brought to China from Malindi in 1416 by Cheng-Ho's fleet.

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Turks, ruled by Bajazet II, were attacking the eastern borders of the Holy Roman Empire in the Danube valley.

The menacing presence of the Ottoman Turks had contributed to the Europeans' determination to reach Asia by sea. But the uncharted continent of Africa had to be circumnavigated. Three times the size of Europe, its northern coastline and the Barbary states – named after the Berbers who lived there – were well known to Europeans since Roman times. 'Africa' and 'Aegyptus' had once been dioceses of the Roman Empire. But the remaining expanse of the continent was shrouded in mythical 'darkness'.

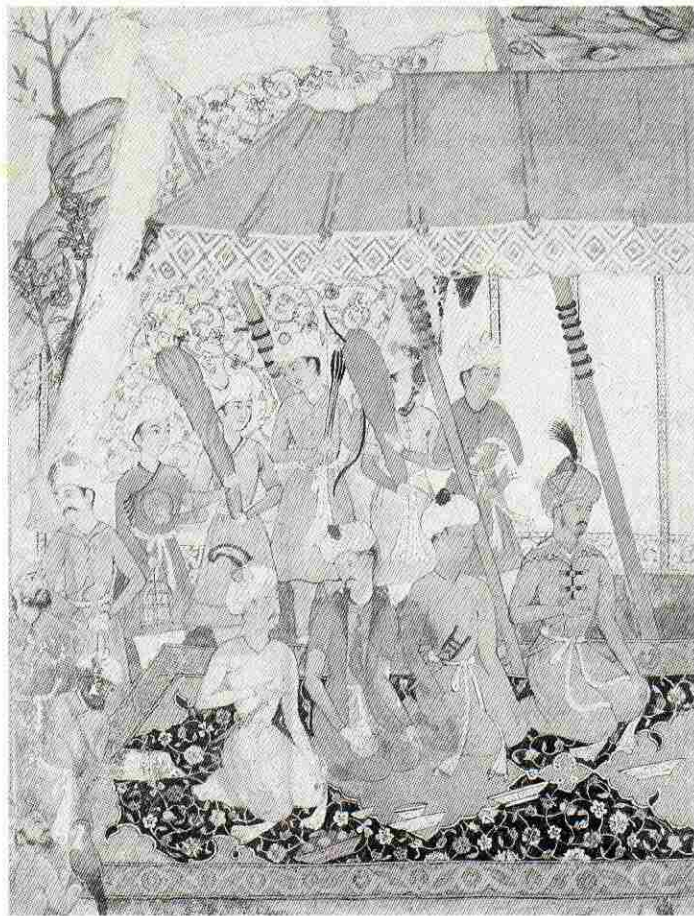
Africa, however, was by no means the uninhabited country of European imagination. Once again the Arabs had created a network of political and trading relationships, infusing the society with their culture and religion. Egypt was ruled by the Mamluke Turkish slave kings and in 1492 Kaithey was Sultan; but the depostic rule of the Mamlukes was soon to be overlaid by that of the Ottoman Turks, who invaded north Africa in 1517.

Berber nomads had learnt long ago to cross the great Sahara desert by oxen, horse drawn chariot and finally by camel – 'the ship of the desert'. They discovered the oases and dug wells promoting a profitable trans-Saharan trade. Silks, beads, mirrors, swords and horses, introduced by the Arabs, were exchanged for gold, ivory and slaves. Salt from the north was so valuable to the sub-Saharan peoples that they often exchanged it on an equal basis for gold.

The Arabs' trading outlets in Calicut and Cochin in India were mirrored by those at Malindi, Mombasa, Zanzibar, Kilwa and Sofala on the east coast of Africa. Together with Islam, they brought a system of standardised weights, currency and credit.

Throughout Africa, a constant infusion of nomadic influence combined with the indigenous tribes to form kingdoms and empires. But invariably the control of absolute kings was nominal. One of the great African empires was that of the Songhoi in the western Sudan, ruled by Sunni Ali, who consolidated Songhoi power by overrunning the whole Niger country as far west as Jenne, blotting out the eastern half of the Mali state and raiding deep into the homeland of the Mossi in the Upper Volta.

But in 1492 Sunni Ali died and Muhammed Turre, one of his governors from the Hombori mountains usurped the throne, establishing the Askia dynasty. His subsequent invasions of the neighbouring Mali empire gave him control over territory compa-



'It was always in my heart to possess Hindustan'. Babur, founder of the Mogul dynasty that ruled northern India for three centuries, portrayed with his courtiers in a miniature in the *Baburnama*.

nable in size to western Europe. A Muslim, Askia Muhammed – as he became known – loved splendour and travelled twice to Mecca on pilgrimage carrying sackfuls of gold. He encouraged Islamic scholars in Timbuktu. Well located on the Niger River, Timbuktu also flourished as a trading centre. People haggled in the markets for sugar and sorghum, kola nuts and spices, glass beads and copper.

Powerful empires emerged as successive rulers used military strength to enforce dominion of one tribe over another. East of the Songhoi, Ali Ghaji revived the Karnem-Bornu empire centred on Lake Chad by attacking his neighbours on all fronts. In central Africa in the area between Upper Kasai and Lake Tanganyika, Chief Kongolo forged together a conglomerate of small chiefdoms into the Luba empire.

The Monomotapa empire founded by King Mutota, and consolidated by his son Matope, stretched from the Zambezi river to the Kalahari desert and from the Indian Ocean to the Limpopo river. Named after Mutota's honorary title 'Mwena Mutapa' meaning Master Pillager, its wealth was based on gold, mined inland and transported to the coastal outlets at Kilwa and Sofala.

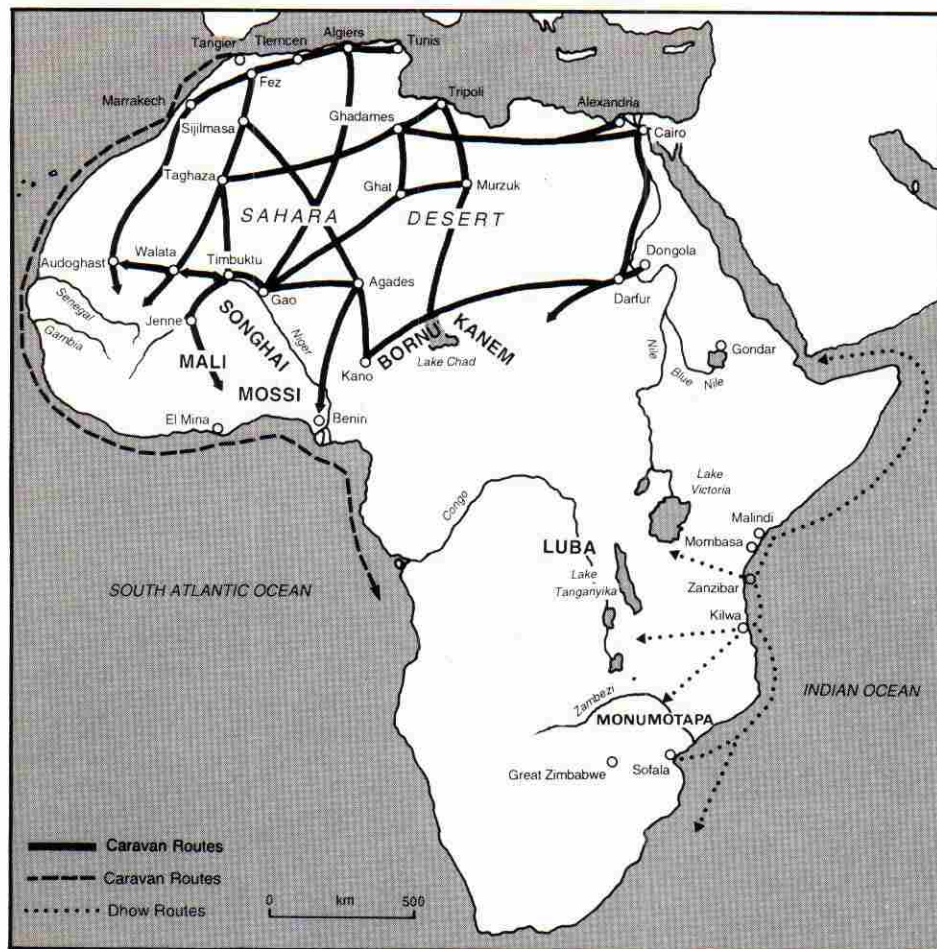
Before 1492 the existing patterns of trade in west Africa were already being disturbed by the imperial designs of Portugal. By 1460 Portuguese caravels

doing so in the wake of the Phoenicians from Lebanon who, by way of the Red Sea, had circumnavigated the continent 2,000 years previously.

Although 'America' was cut off from the continents of Europe, the inhabitants did not feel their isolation. South America was already integrated under the rule of the Incas. Bound together by a remarkable system of roads, including the world's first known suspension bridges, Inca Topa Yupanqui ruled over territory which compared in size only with the Mings at the time. Centuries before, earlier inhabitants may



Ivan III, the Great, (1440-1505), ended Mongol dominance and consolidated the Russian principalities.



Africa was by no means the uninhabited country of European imagination.

have travelled across the Pacific to Easter Island, where they erected gigantic statues.

1492 was the last year of Inca Topa Yupanqui's reign; the following year he was succeeded by his son Huayna Capac who extended the northern frontiers of Inca power still further.

In Mexico, the Aztecs dominated the basin of fertile volcanic soil, fusing the twin cities of Teochtitlan and Tlatelolco into one, a city four times the size of Tudor London. In 1492 the Aztec empire, spanning central Mexico to the Guatemalan border, was at the peak of its power. The emperor, Moctezuma I had just dedicated a temple pyramid to Huitzilohchtli, the god of war, with the sacrifice of 20,000 prisoners.

Trade too formed a key element of Aztec existence. When the Europeans later introduced horses, sheep, cattle, wheat, tools and sugar to the Americas, they took back tobacco, turkeys, corn, potatoes, yams, tomatoes, melons, vanilla and cocoa, all of which were unknown in Europe before 1492.

Descendants of the Mayas lived in small city-states extending throughout Central America and the Yucatan peninsula. Lacking technological innovations such as the practical use of the wheel, with no iron, and little if any, bronze, the Spaniards regarded the Mayas as being no further advanced

than the Stone Age. But achievements in art, writing, architecture, astronomy and mathematics rivalled ancient Egypt and Classical Europe. Thousands of Mayan books in hieroglyphics were burnt by the Spaniards. One which survives contains astronomical information on Venus and other planets. 'Who can say what has been lost?' asks Ronald Wright in *Stolen Continents*.

To the north, seafarers across the Atlantic had undoubtedly reached the shores of 'North America' long before 1492. But there was no continuity in these voyages and like the tribes to the south, the northern tribes had lived in isolation, ever since their predecessors had crossed the Bering Straits from Asia to Alaska around 20,000 years ago.

Before 1492, several hundred tribes populated the North American continent, and several million people. But as the Europeans travelled north after their initial contacts in central and South America, their numbers were drastically reduced by European diseases such as smallpox, cholera, measles. Whereas some tribes, like the Iroquois and Cherokee, survived to champion their rights in later centuries, others have totally disappeared, leaving little or no records.

Even before the first inhabitants reached America, people had begun to migrate to the 'terra australis nondum

cognita' – the southern land not yet discovered – which the Greeks and Romans had suspected might exist as a balance to the north; they thought however that the torrid zone made it impossible to reach. Mythical stories described palaces of gold, fabulous birds of prey, a kingdom of women or dwarfs. In 1492 it is likely the Chinese and Arab sea captains had some knowledge of a land below Java, where, until the arrival of the Europeans, the Aborigines lived a semi-nomadic existence. As hunter-gatherers in a predominantly arid continent, their lives were peaceful compared to the warlike existence of the peoples of the Pacific islands.

Apologists of fifteenth-century European history have often depicted their ancestors as the ones on the move, while their contemporaries in other continents were static. As E.H. Carr states in *What is History?*, 'Even countries with a well-documented history like Persia or China' were of interest only in terms of 'what happened when the Europeans attempted to take them over'. The Spaniards regarded the peoples of America as a 'blank page' on which could be imprinted European ideas and religion. This perception, however, ignores the tremendous activity taking place throughout the world, in the fields of art, science, architecture and literature which often excelled that of the Europeans.

There is no doubt that Columbus' incidental landing on the islands of America in 1492 brought tremendous changes for the entire world. But it was clearly not a world waiting to be 'discovered'. As Columbus journeyed across the Atlantic to visit the Great Khan, the Chinese were busy rebuilding the Great Wall, Askia Muhammed was founding his dynasty in Africa and the young Babur was dreaming of India; the Aztecs engaged in large scale human sacrifice to propitiate the gods since they feared, prophetically, that their world was about to end.

FOR FURTHER READING:

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