CHAPTER 17

The Maritime Revolution, to 1550

I. Global Maritime Expansion Before 1450
   A. The Pacific Ocean
      1. Over a period of several thousand years, peoples originally from the Malay
         Peninsula crossed the water to settle the islands of the East Indies, New Guinea,
         the Melanesian and Polynesian islands, the Marquesas, New Zealand, and other
         Pacific islands out to Hawaii.
      2. Polynesian expansion was the result of planned voyages undertaken with the
         intention of establishing colonies. Polynesian mariners navigated by the stars and
         by their observations of ocean currents and evidence of land.
   B. The Indian Ocean
      1. Malayo-Indonesians colonized the island of Madagascar in a series of voyages
         that continued through the fifteenth century.
      2. Arab seafarers used the regular pattern of the monsoon winds to establish trade
         routes in the Indian Ocean. These trade routes flourished when the rise of Islam
         created new markets and new networks of Muslim traders.
      3. The Chinese Ming dynasty sponsored a series of voyages to the Indian Ocean
         between 1405 and 1433. The Ming voyages were carried out on a grand scale,
         involving fleets of over sixty large “treasure ships” and hundreds of smaller
         support vessels.
      4. The treasure ships carried out trade in luxury goods including silk and precious
         metals as well as stimulating diplomatic relations with various African and Asian
         states. The voyages, which were not profitable and inspired opposition in court,
         were ended in 1433.
   C. The Atlantic Ocean
      1. During the relatively warm centuries of the early Middle Ages, the Vikings,
         navigating by the stars and the seas, explored and settled Iceland, Greenland, and
         Newfoundland (Vinland). When a colder climate returned after 1200, the
         northern settlements in Greenland and the settlement in Newfoundland were
         abandoned.
      2. A few southern Europeans and Africans attempted to explore the Atlantic in the
         thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Voyagers from Genoa in 1291 and from Mali
         in the 1300s set out into the Atlantic but did not return. Genoese and Portuguese
         explorers discovered and settled the Madeiras, the Azores, and the Canaries in
         the fourteenth century.
      3. In the Americas the Arawak from South America had colonized the Lesser and
         Greater Antilles by the year 1000. The Carib followed, first taking over Arawak
         settlements in the Lesser Antilles and then, in the late fifteenth century, raiding
         the Greater Antilles.

II. European Expansion, 1400–1550
   A. Motives for Exploration
      1. The Iberian kingdoms sponsored voyages of exploration for a number of reasons,
         including both the adventurous personalities of their leaders and long-term trends
         in European historical development: the revival of trade, the struggle with Islam
         for control of the Mediterranean, curiosity about the outside world, and the
         alliances between rulers and merchants.
2. The city-states of northern Italy had no incentive to explore Atlantic trade routes because they had established a system of alliances and trade with the Muslims that gave them a monopoly on access to Asian goods. Also, Italian ships were designed for the calm waters of the Mediterranean and could not stand up to the violent weather of the Atlantic.

3. The Iberian kingdoms had a history of centuries of warfare with Muslims. They had no significant share in the Mediterranean trade, but had advanced shipbuilding and cannon technology. They were open to new geographical knowledge, and had exceptional leaders.

B. Portuguese Voyages

1. The Portuguese gained more knowledge of the sources of gold and slaves south of the Sahara when their forces, led by Prince Henry, captured the North African caravan city of Ceuta. Prince Henry (“the Navigator”) then sponsored a research and navigation institute at Sagres in order to collect information about and send expeditions to the African lands south of North Africa.

2. The staff of Prince Henry’s research institute in Sagres studied and improved navigational instruments including the compass and the astrolabe. They also designed a new vessel, the caravel, whose small size, shallow draft, combination of square and lateen sails, and cannon made it well suited for the task of exploration.

3. Portuguese explorers cautiously explored the African coast, reaching Cape Verde in 1444 and learning how to return to Portugal faster by sailing northwest into the Atlantic in order to pick up the prevailing westerly winds that would blow them back to Portugal.

4. The Portuguese voyages were initially financed by income from the properties held by Prince Henry’s Order of Christ. In the 1440s, the voyages began to produce a financial return, first from trade in slaves, and then from the gold trade.

5. Beginning in 1469 the process of exploration picked up speed as private commercial enterprises began to get involved. The Lisbon merchant Fernao Gomes sent expeditions that discovered and developed the island of Sao Tome and explored the Gold Coast. Bartolomeu Dias and Vasco da Gama rounded the tip of Africa and established contact with India, thus laying the basis for Portugal’s maritime trading empire.

C. Spanish Voyages

1. When Christopher Columbus approached the Spanish crown with his project of finding a new route to Asia, the Portuguese had already established their route to the Indian Ocean. The King and Queen of Spain agreed to fund a modest voyage of discovery, and Columbus set out in 1492 with letters of introduction to Asian rulers and an Arabic interpreter.

2. After three voyages, Columbus was still certain that he had found Asia, but other Europeans realized that he had discovered entirely new lands. These new discoveries led the Spanish and the Portuguese to sign the Treaty of Tordesillas, in which they divided the world between them along a line drawn down the center of the North Atlantic.

3. Ferdinand Magellan’s voyage across the Pacific confirmed Portugal’s claim to the Molucca Islands and established the Spanish claim to the Philippines.
III. Encounters With Europe, 1450–1550

A. Western Africa
   1. During the fifteenth century many Africans welcomed the Portuguese and profited from their trade, in which they often held the upper hand. In return for their gold, Africans received from the Portuguese merchants a variety of Asian, African, and European goods including firearms. Interaction between the Portuguese and African rulers varied from place to place.
   2. The oba (king) of the powerful kingdom of Benin sent an ambassador to Portugal and established a royal monopoly on trade with the Portuguese. Benin exported a number of goods, including some slaves, and its rulers showed a mild interest in Christianity. After 1538, Benin purposely limited its contact with the Portuguese, declining to receive missionaries and closing the market in male slaves.
   3. The kingdom of Kongo had fewer goods to export and consequently relied more on the slave trade. When the Christian King Afonso I lost his monopoly over the slave trade his power was weakened and some of his subjects rose in revolt.

B. Eastern Africa
   1. In Eastern Africa, some Muslim states were suspicious of the Portuguese, while others welcomed the Portuguese as allies in their struggles against their neighbors. On the Swahili Coast, Malindi befriended the Portuguese and was spared when the Portuguese attacked and looted many of the other Swahili city-states in 1505.
   2. Christian Ethiopia sought and gained Portuguese support in its war against the Muslim forces of Adal. The Muslims were defeated, but Ethiopia was unable to make a long-term alliance with the Portuguese because the Ethiopians refused to transfer their religious loyalty from the patriarch of Alexandria to the Roman pope.

C. Indian Ocean States
   1. When Vasco da Gama arrived in Calicut in 1498 he made a very poor impression with his simple gifts. Nonetheless, the Portuguese were determined to control the Indian Ocean trade, and their superior ships and firepower gave them the ability to do so.
   2. In order to assert their control, the Portuguese bombarded the Swahili city-states in 1505, captured the Indian port of Goa in 1510, and took Hormuz in 1515. Extending their reach eastward, Portuguese forces captured Malacca in 1511 and set up a trading post at Macao in southern China in 1557.
   3. The Portuguese used their control over the major ports to require that all spices be carried in Portuguese ships and that all other ships purchase Portuguese passports and pay customs duties to the Portuguese.
   4. Reactions to this Portuguese aggression varied. The Mughal emperors took no action, while the Ottomans resisted and were able at least to maintain superiority in the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. Some smaller states cooperated with the Portuguese; others tried evasion and resistance.
   5. The Portuguese never gained complete control of the Indian Ocean trade, but they did dominate it enough to bring themselves considerable profit and to break the Italian city-states’ monopoly on pepper.

D. The Americas
   1. While the Portuguese built a maritime trading empire in Africa and Asia, the Spanish built a territorial empire in the Americas. The reasons for the difference are to be found in the isolation of Amerindian communities and their lack of resistance to Old World diseases.
2. The Arawak were an agricultural people who mined and worked gold but did not trade it over long distances and had no iron. Spanish wars killed tens of thousands of Arawaks and undermined their economy; by 1502, the remaining Arawak of Hispaniola were forced to serve as laborers for the Spanish.

3. What the Spanish did in the Antilles was an extension of Spanish actions against the Muslims in the previous centuries: defeating non-Christians and putting them and their land under Christian control. The actions of conquistadors in other parts of the Caribbean followed the same pattern.

4. On the mainland, Hernan Cortes relied on native allies, cavalry charges, steel swords, and cannon to defeat the forces of the Aztec Empire and capture the Tenochtitlan. The conquest was also aided by the spread of smallpox among the Aztecs. Similarly, Francisco Pizarro’s conquest of the Inca Empire was made possible by the prior spread of smallpox among the Inca population, the dissatisfaction of the Inca Empire’s recently conquered peoples, and by Spanish cannon and steel swords.

E. Patterns of Dominance
1. Three factors contributed to Spain’s ability to establish a vast land empire in the Americas: (1) Amerindians’ lack of resistance to diseases brought from the Eastern Hemisphere; (2) Spanish superior military technology (swords, armor, horses, and some firearms), combined with aggressive fighting techniques and local allies; and (3) Spain’s ability to apply the pattern of conquest, forced labor, and forced conversion—a pattern developed during the re-conquest of the Iberian Peninsula—to the Americas.

2. In the Eastern Hemisphere, Africans and Asians shared the same diseases as the Europeans and had enough numbers to resist European forces when necessary. Furthermore, the Portuguese and the Spanish were able to gain profit by engaging in already existing trade networks, which meant that they could gain wealth without conquering territory.