

## CENTRALIZATION UNDER THE MING

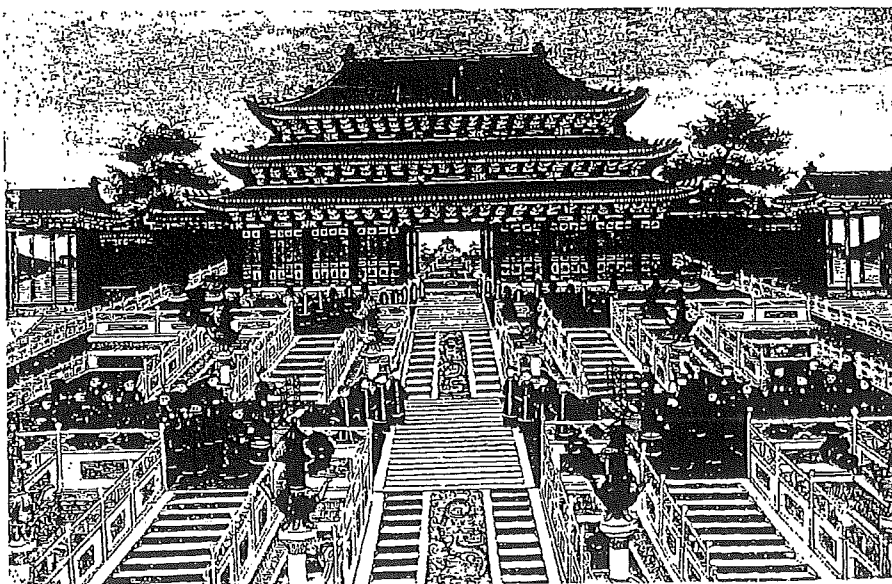
① Hongwu and successive Ming emperors had to rebuild a devastated society from the ground up. Although in the past China had experienced natural catastrophes, wars, and social dislocation, the plague's legacy was devastation on an unprecedented scale. It left the new rulers with the formidable challenge of rebuilding the great cities, restoring respect for ruling elites, and reconstructing the bureaucracy.

② **Imperial Grandeur and Kinship** The rebuilding began with the Hongwu Emperor, whose capital at Nanjing reflected imperial grandeur. When the dynasty's third emperor, the Yongle ("perpetual happiness") Emperor, relocated the capital to Beijing, he flaunted an even more grandiose style, employing around 100,000 artisans and 1 million laborers to build this new capital, including its Forbidden City. The city had three separate walled enclosures. Inside the outer city walls sprawled the imperial city; within its walls lay the palace city, the Forbidden City. Traffic within the walled sections navigated through broad boulevards leading to the different gates, above which imposing towers soared. The palace compound, where the imperial family resided, had more than 9,000 rooms. Anyone standing in the front courts, which measured more than 400 yards on a side and boasted marble terraces and carved railings, would gasp at the sense of awesome power. That was precisely the effect the Ming emperors wanted, just as the Ottoman sultans did in building Topkapi Palace.

③ Marriage and kinship buttressed the power of the Ming imperial household, much like the dynastic strategies of Europe. The Ming dynasty's founder married the adopted daughter of a leading Red Turban rebel (her father, according to legend, was a convicted murderer), thereby consolidating his power and eliminating a threat. Empress Ma, as she was known, became Hongwu's principal wife and was praised for her compassion. Emerging as the kinder face of the regime, she tempered the harsh and sometimes cruel disposition of her spouse. He had numerous other consorts as well, including Korean and Mongol women, who bore him twenty-six sons and sixteen daughters (similar to, although on smaller scale than, the sultan's harem at Ottoman Topkapi).

## COMPARISON

**COMPARE** the ways rulers rebuilt unified states and their levels of success in China, Islam, and Europe.



**The Forbidden City** The Yongle Emperor relocated the capital to Beijing, where he began the construction of the Forbidden City, or imperial palace, in the early fifteenth century. The palace was designed to inspire awe in all who saw it. In what ways do the partitions of space and the activities of people within that space appear to support imperial grandeur?

By the late fifteenth century, the scholars' position seemed unshakable, and the supremacy of Confucian values could not be challenged. Zhu Zhanji, the Hongxi emperor who took the throne in 1425, aspired to Confucian perfection. He ordered the slaughter or expulsion of court magicians and exiled 1,000 Buddhist and Daoist monks. He resumed a Confucian priority: study of the penal code, which previous Ming emperors had neglected. He reintroduced the palace lectures, during which Confucian professors instructed the emperor. He endowed a library alongside the Confucian temple at the sage's birthplace in Qufu (choo-foo). He patronized artists whose work radiated Confucian serenity. Wu Wei (woo way), the emperor's favorite painter, had Daoist patrons, too, but his representations of ascetics meditating in sketchy landscapes demonstrate the triumph of thought over nature and, therefore, by implication, of Confucianism over Daoism.

By the end of the fifteenth century, there was little chance the Chinese would resume a strategy of expanding the empire and no chance that they would expand by sea. For the rest of the Ming period (1368–1644), China did not cease to be a great imperial power, but frontier stability became far more important to the ruling elite than frontier expansion. The transfer of the imperial capital from the southern city of Nanjing to the northern city of Beijing under the Yongle emperor (r. 1402–1424) symbolized this concern. The state never resumed the active patronage of overseas expansion. The growth of trade and of Chinese colonization in southeast Asia was left to the private initiative of merchants and migrants. China, the empire best equipped for maritime imperialism, opted out. Consequently, lesser powers, including those of Europe were able to exploit opportunities in seas that Chinese power vacated.

## THE BEGINNINGS OF OCEANIC IMPERIALISM

Even under the Yongle emperor, China confined its seaward reach to the monsoonal seas of maritime Asia and the Indian Ocean—seas of terrible hazards and fabulous rewards. As we have seen, the Indian Ocean was relatively easy to cross but relatively hard to enter or exit. For most of history, therefore, it was the preserve of peoples whose homes bordered it or who traveled overland—like some European and Armenian traders—to become part of its world. Moreover, all the trade was internal. Merchants took no interest in venturing far beyond the monsoon system to reach other markets or supplies.

From Europe, however, access to the Indian Ocean was well worth seeking. Merchants craved a share of the richest trades and most prosperous markets in the world, especially the spices, drugs, and aromatics that were the specialties of producers in Sri Lanka, and parts of India and what is now Indonesia. These products, sold to rich buyers in China and southwest Asia, and, to a lesser extent, in Europe, were the most profitable in the world, in terms of price per unit of weight. Many Europeans sought to find out where they came from and to take part in the trades. But the journey was too long, laborious, and hazardous to

## The Early Ming Dynasty

1350s	Yangtze region dissolves into small warring states
1360–1363	Zhu Yuanzhang conquers his rivals
1368	Zhu Yuanzhang founds Ming dynasty
1405	Zheng He leads first naval expedition
1425	Hongxi emperor succeeds to throne; Zheng He's voyages cancelled
1487	Zhu Youtang succeeds to throne; Confucian values ascendant



Wu Wei was one of the most original and influential artists of late-fifteenth-century China. But his values were those of his patrons, the conventional scholar-elite of the imperial court. This painting is typical. The scholar staring thoughtfully into the distance is drawn in delicate and flattering contrast to the heavy, blotchy ink used to depict the tree.

Wu Wei, "Scholar Seated Under a Tree", China. Ink & traces of colour on silk. 14.7 x 8.25. Chinese and Japanese Special Fund. Photograph © 2007 Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

generate much profit. From the Mediterranean, merchants had either to travel up the Nile and proceed by camel caravan to a Red Sea port, or to negotiate a dangerous passage through the Ottoman Empire to the Persian Gulf. In either case, they obviously could not take ships with them. This was a potentially fatal limitation because Europeans had little to offer to people in the Indian Ocean basin except shipping services. For most of the fifteenth century, until the 1490s, there was much debate in Europe about whether it was possible to approach the Indian Ocean by sea at all.

To understand why, until the late fifteenth century, Europeans were so backward in navigation compared with Indian Ocean peoples and unable to gain direct access to Asian markets and supplies, we must look at the wind map (see Map 15.7). For most of history, winds and currents have played a huge part in conditioning, and even determining, who and what went where in the world.

Europe's only effective access by sea to the rest of the world is along its western seaboard, into the Atlantic, which has a fixed-wind system. That is, instead of changing direction seasonally, as in monsoonal systems, the prevailing winds in the Atlantic are always the same. It took a long time to develop navigation with fixed-wind systems because, until navigators explored and decoded those winds' pathways, adventurers could not get home. Navigators either sailed into the wind—which usually resulted in their being blown back without discovering any useful new lands or routes—or they sailed with the wind, never to be heard of again.

The Norse explorers of the North Atlantic in the tenth and eleventh centuries (see Chapter 11) overcame these limitations by sailing west with the currents that cross the Atlantic below the Arctic, and then picking up the westerlies, which took them home. But this route led only to relatively poor and underpopulated regions. For the Atlantic to become Europe's highway to the rest of the world, explorers had to develop ways to exploit the rest of the fixed-wind system. They had to discover the winds that led to commercially important destinations. There were, first, the northeast trade winds, which led to the resource-rich, densely populated regions of the New World, far south of the lands the Norse reached. There was also the South Atlantic wind system, which led, by way of the southeast trade winds and the westerlies of the far south, to the Indian Ocean.

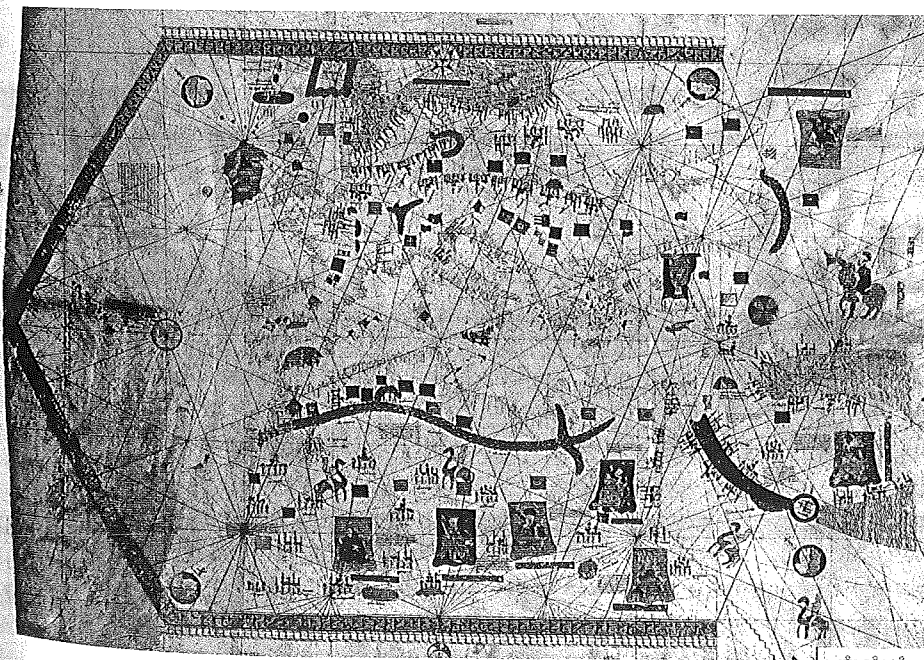
The technology to exploit the Atlantic's wind systems only gradually became available during a period of long, slow development in the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries. Like most technology, for most of history, it developed by trial and error. We know little about the process, because the work went undocumented. Humble craftsman labored to improve hull design and rigging—and therefore the maneuverability of ships—and to make water casks secure for the long voyages explorers had to undertake. Historians have traditionally emphasized the contribution of formal science in developing maritime charts and instruments for navigating by the stars. Now it seems that these innovations were irrelevant. No practical navigator of this period in Europe seems to have used them.

In addition to gradually developing technology, gradually improving knowledge of winds and currents prepared Europeans to explore maritime routes to the rest of the world. The European discovery of the Atlantic was launched from deep in the Mediterranean, chiefly by navigators from Genoa and the island of Majorca. They forced their way through the Strait of Gibraltar, where the strength of the adverse current seemed to stopper their sea, in the

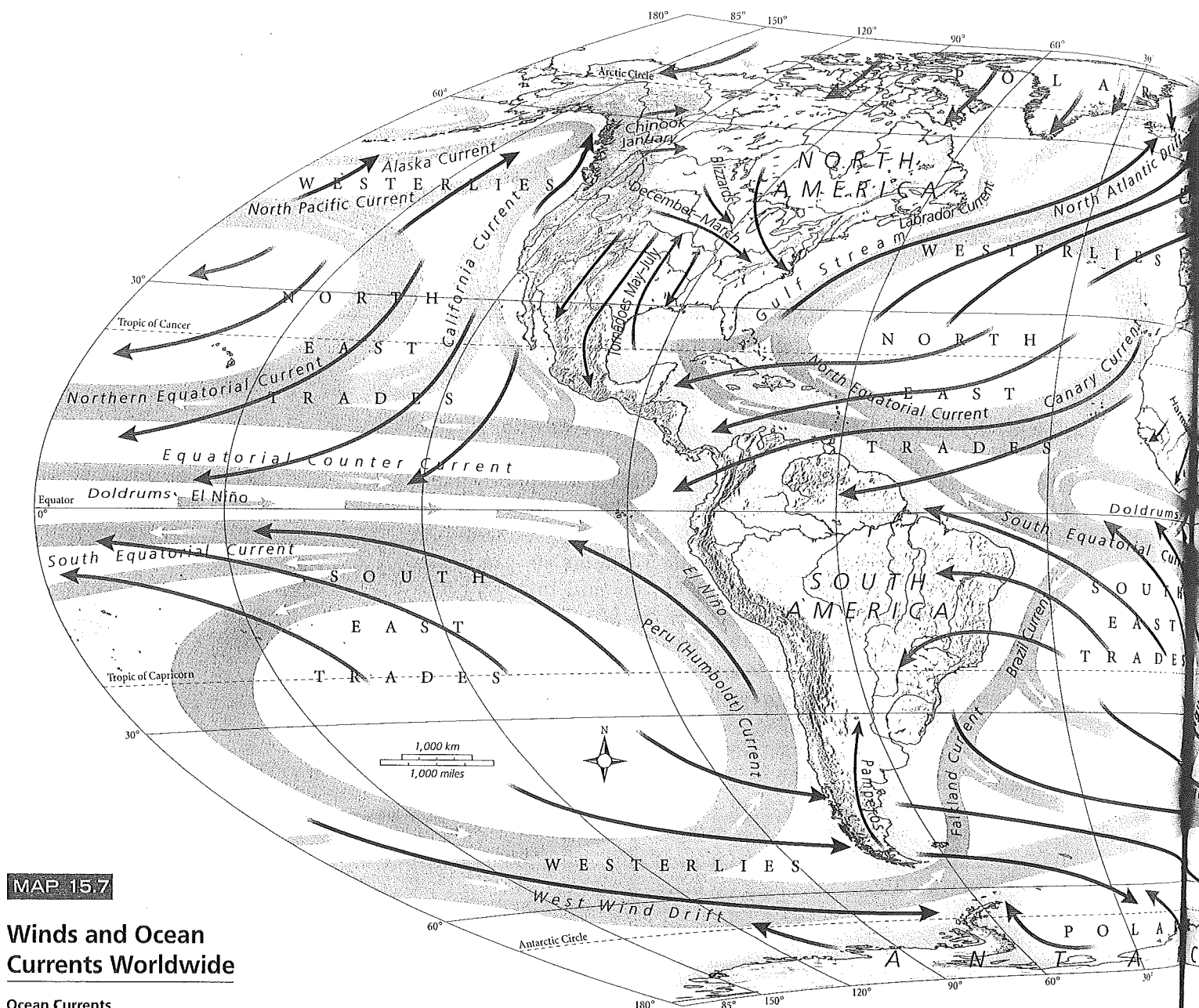
thirteenth century. From there, some turned north to the familiar European Atlantic. Others turned south into waters unsailed, as far as we know, for centuries, toward the Madeira and Canary Islands and the African Atlantic. Early efforts were long and laborious because explorers' vision was limited to the small patches of the ocean before them, with their apparently unremitting winds. Navigators were like code breakers deprived of information to work with. Moreover, the Black Death and the economic downturn of the mid-fourteenth century interrupted the effort, or at least slowed it down.

Only the long accumulation of information and experience could make a breakthrough possible. Navigators had no means to keep track of their longitude as they beat their way home against the wind. They made increasingly huge deep-sea detours to find westerlies that would take them home. Those detours led to the discovery of the Azores, a mid-ocean string of islands more than 700 miles west of Portugal. Marine charts made not later than the 1380s show all but two islands of the group. Much longer open-sea voyages now became common. From the 1430s, the Portuguese established way stations, sown with wheat or stocked with wild sheep, on the Azores.

Several attempts were made during the fifteenth century to explore Atlantic space, but most doomed themselves to failure by setting out in the belt of westerly winds. Presumably explorers chose this route because they wanted to be sure that they would be able to get home. We can still follow the tiny gains in the slowly unfolding record on rare maps and stray documents. In 1427, a Portuguese pilot called Diogo de Silves established for the first time the approximate relationship of the islands of the Azores to one another. Shortly after 1450, the westernmost islands of the Azores were reached. Over the next three decades, the Portuguese crown often commissioned voyages of exploration farther into the Atlantic, but none is known to have made any further progress. Perhaps they failed because they departed from the Azores, where the westerlies beat them back to base.



**The Azores.** The Atlantic voyage of Diogo de Silves of 1427 was unrecorded, except on this map, made in Majorca in 1439. The Azores, which Silves sailed around, can be seen on the extreme left, alongside the traces of a stain made when the famous French novelist, George Sand, spilled an ink pot when examining the map while on a vacation on Majorca with her lover, the composer Frédéric Chopin, in 1838–1839.



MAP 15.7

## Winds and Ocean Currents Worldwide

### Ocean Currents

- warm
- cold

### Prevailing Winds

- warm
- cold

### Local Winds

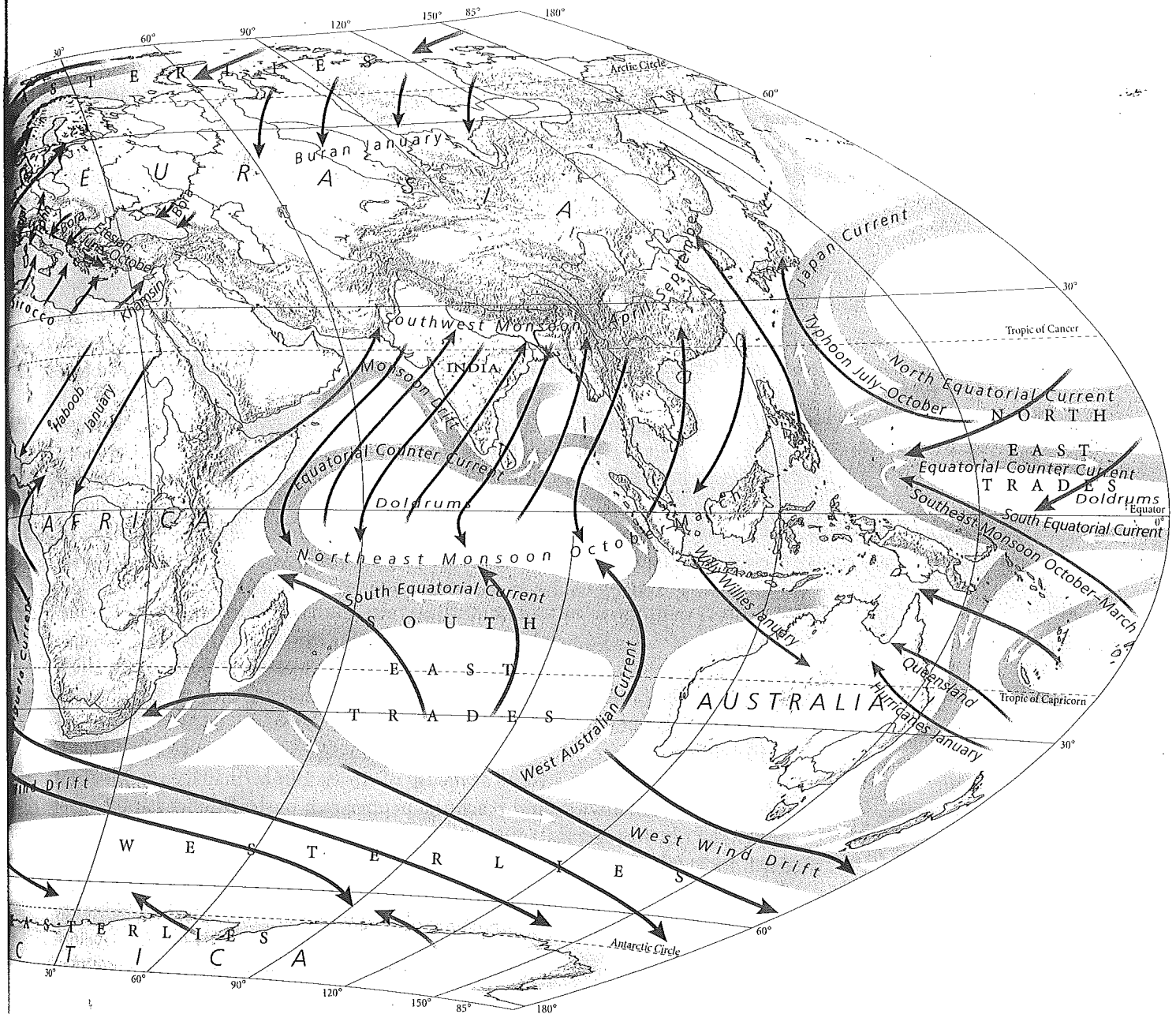
- warm
- cold

## MAP EXPLORATION

[www.prenhall.com/armesto\\_maps](http://www.prenhall.com/armesto_maps)

Not only was exploitation of the Atlantic slow, it yielded, at first, few returns. One exception was Madeira, which paid enormous taxes to the Portuguese crown thanks to sugar planting in the mid-fifteenth century. The explorers' hope of establishing direct contact with the sources of West African gold proved false, though they were able to get gold at relatively low prices through trade with West African kingdoms. This trade also produced something saleable in European markets. From 1440, Portuguese desperadoes obtained increasing numbers of slaves through trading and raiding. But markets for slaves were limited because great slave-staffed plantations, of the sort later





familiar in the southern United States, hardly existed in Europe, where most slaves were still in domestic service. The Canary Islands attracted investment because they produced large amounts of natural dyestuffs and seemed potentially exploitable for sugar. But their inhabitants fiercely resisted Europeans, and the conquest was long and costly.

In the 1480s, however, the situation changed, and Atlantic exploration began to pay off. In the North Atlantic, customs records of the English port of Bristol indicate that quantities of whaling products, salt fish, and walrus ivory from the ocean increased dramatically after a lull in the previous decade. In

## Beginnings of European Oceanic Imperialism

Tenth and eleventh centuries	Norse explore North Atlantic
Thirteenth and fifteenth centuries	Europeans make advances in maritime technology and knowledge
1430s	Portuguese establish way stations in Azores
1440s	Portuguese begin to obtain West African slaves
1450–1480	Portuguese crown commissions voyages of exploration of the Atlantic
1482	Portuguese found trading station of São Jorge da Mina on West African coast
1484	Sugar production begins in Canary Islands
1492–1493	First voyage of Christopher Columbus
1496	John Cabot discovers direct route across North Atlantic
1497–1498	Vasco da Gama rounds Cape of Good Hope
1500	Vasco da Gama reaches India

West Africa, in 1482, Portuguese traders opened a new post at São Jorge da Mina, near the mouth of the Benya River. This was close to gold fields in the Volta River valley, and large amounts of gold now began to reach European hands. In 1484, sugar production at last began in the Canary Islands. In the same decade, Portuguese made contact with the Kingdom of Kongo. Although voyages toward and around the southernmost tip of Africa encountered unrelentingly adverse currents, they also showed that the far south of the Atlantic had westerly winds that might at last lead to the Indian Ocean. By the end of the decade, it was apparent that Atlantic investment could yield dividends.

As a result of gains made in the 1480s, the 1490s were a breakthrough-decade in Europe's efforts to reach out across the ocean to the rest of the world (see Map 15.8). In 1492–1493, Christopher Columbus, in voyages a group of Italian bankers financed and with backing from the Spanish monarchs, discovered fast, reliable routes across the Atlantic that linked the Mediterranean and the Caribbean Sea. In 1496, John Cabot, another Italian adventurer, backed by merchants in Bristol and the English crown, discovered a direct route across the North Atlantic, using variable springtime winds to get across and the westerlies to get back. His route, however, was not reliable and, for over 100 years, was mainly used to reach the cod fisheries of Newfoundland.

Meanwhile, Portuguese missions sought to determine whether the Indian Ocean was genuinely landlocked. In 1497–1498, a Portuguese trading venture, commissioned by the crown and probably financed by Italian bankers, attempted to use the westerlies of the South Atlantic to reach the Indian Ocean. Its leader, Vasco da Gama, turned east too early and had to struggle around the Cape of Good Hope at the tip of Africa. But he managed to get across the Indian Ocean anyway and reach the pepper-rich port of Calicut at the tip of India. The next voyage, in 1500, managed to avoid the Cape of Good Hope and to reach India without a serious hitch.

The breakthroughs of the 1490s opened direct, long-range routes of maritime trade across the world between Europe, Asia, and Africa. Success may seem sudden, but not if we view it against the background of slow developments in European chronology and knowledge and the accelerating benefits of Atlantic exploration in the previous decade. Was there more to it than that? Was there something special about European culture that would explain why Europeans discovered the world-girdling routes, linking the Old World to the New and the Indian Ocean to the Atlantic, rather than explorers from other cultures? Some European historians have argued just that—that Europeans had something others lacked.

Such a suggestion, however, seems ill conceived. Compared to the peoples of maritime Asia, Europeans were special mainly in being slow to launch long-range voyages. The Atlantic, the ocean they bordered, really was special, however, because its wind system inhibited exploration for centuries but rewarded it spectacularly once it was launched. Moreover, the breakthrough explorations were not the work of “Europe” but of people from a few communities on the Atlantic seaboard and in the Mediterranean. What distinguishes them is not that they set off with the right kind of culture, but that they set off from the right place.