

CHAPTER ONE

THE MATERIAL AND TRADING WORLDS, CIRCA 1400

The purpose of this chapter is to describe, in very general terms, what the world was like around 1400 C.E. The author analyzes that world in two terms: the material world, and the trading world. By the "material world," the author means the circumstances under which nearly all of the 350 million people alive on Earth in 1400 sustained their lives, while the "trading world" refers to the long-distance trade that linked much of the pre-modern world into trading circuits. A concluding section on the Black Death describes how those two "worlds" interacted in the mid-1300s to tens of millions of people across the Eurasian continent.

The key concept in the section on the material world is "the biological old regime," or "biological *ancien regime*" (*ancien regime* being French for "old regime"). Since about 90 percent of the people in the world in 1400 gained their livelihood directly from agriculture, and even what industry there was also was based on materials from agriculture or the forest, the entire world was dependent on annual flows of solar energy (food and industrial plants grow by sunlight). Until about 1800, virtually everyone in the world lived within this "biological old regime," that is, the one dependent on capturing annual flows of solar energy.

Even though the world in 1400 was quite limited by the available sources of energy, there was a surprising amount of trade among the various regions of the world (with the exception of the New World and Oceania). Indeed, what is striking about the trading world is both how extensive it was and how important Asia was in it. In fact, the engines pumping the trading world ca. 1400 were China, India, and the Muslim Middle East.

Key Terms/Vocabulary

structures
biological old regime
trading networks
material world
Black Death
civilizations
cities
agricultural revolution
peasants

ruling elite
the first globalization
population dynamics
global climate change
Eurasia
agricultural revolution
agricultural surplus
nomads
steppe

desiccated
wildlife
species extinction
life expectancy
famine
dearth
taxes
rent
subsistence level

peasant revolt
epidemic disease
macro-parasites
micro-parasites

virus
bacterium
Mongolian empire
core

periphery
world system
bubonic plague
biological *ancien* regime

Study Questions for Chapter One

A. The big questions for Chapter One are these:

1. What was the world like in 1400? Why is it important to gain some understanding of that world?
2. What was "the material world" and what were its dynamics? Why is that important to know?
3. Why was regional trade important in 1400? Why is it important to know that Asia was the center of this trading world?
4. How does the Black Death affect both the material and trading worlds? Why is that important to know about the world ca. 1400?

B. The following questions build up to and inform the big questions:

1. What was "the agricultural revolution?" When and where did it occur? How did it change human societies?
2. What is a "civilization?" How are the agricultural revolution, cities, writing, and social class differentiation connected?
3. How many people were there on Earth in 1400? Where were those numbers concentrated? Why?
4. What are nomads, and why are they important?
5. How are famine and peasant revolt connected to population changes and social class differences?
6. What are "macro-" and "micro-parasites"?

7. Describe the trading circuits of the world around 1300. In what sense was this world "poly-centric"?

Map exercise: Map out the route taken by the spread of the Black Death from China to Europe, including Russia. Make sure to note by what means the plague was carried along its journey, whether it was on horseback, foot, or by boat. Also locate places where the plague had major political consequences as well in addition to the obvious social conditions.

Additional Web Sites to Explore

global population data:

<http://patzek.berkeley.edu/E11/WorldPopulationE11.htm>

<http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/worldhis.html>

<http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/worldpop.html>