

## West African Societies of the 1400s

Like North America, West Africa in the 1400s was home to a variety of long-established, sophisticated societies. From this region, especially from the coasts, originated most of the people who were enslaved and brought to the Americas in the centuries that followed. Their African traditions and beliefs played a major role in forming American history and culture. Notable among West African societies in the late 1400s were three powerful kingdoms: Songhai, Benin, and Kongo.

A desert caravan approaches the fabled Songhai city of Timbuktu.

**THE KINGDOM OF SONGHAI** From about 600 to 1600, a succession of empires—first Ghana, then Mali, and finally Songhai—gained power and wealth by controlling the trans-Saharan trade. The rulers of these empires grew rich by taxing the



goods that passed through their realms. In 1067 an Arab geographer in Spain, named Al Bakri, described the duties (import and export taxes) levied in Ghana.

### A PERSONAL VOICE AL BAKRI

“For every donkey loaded with salt that enters the country, the king takes a duty of one golden dinar [about one-eighth ounce of gold], and two dinars from every one that leaves. From a load of copper the duty due to the king is five mithquals [also about one-eighth ounce of gold], and from a load of merchandise ten mithquals. . . . The [gold] nuggets found in all the mines . . . are reserved for the king, only gold dust being left for the people.”

—quoted in *Africa in the Days of Exploration*


With such wealth, the rulers who controlled the north-south trade routes could raise large armies and conquer new territory. They could also build cities, administer laws, and support the arts and education.

**KINGDOMS OF BENIN AND KONGO** At its height in the 1500s, Songhai’s power extended across much of West Africa. However, it did not control the forest kingdoms along the southern coast. In the 1400s, one of these kingdoms, **Benin**, dominated a large region around the Niger Delta. Leading the expansion was a powerful oba, or ruler, named Ewuare, who developed Benin City.

Within another stretch of rain forest, in West Central Africa, the powerful kingdom of **Kongo** arose on the lower Congo (Zaire) River. In the late 1400s, Kongo consisted of a series of small kingdoms ruled by a single leader called the *manikongo*, who lived in what is today Angola.

**WEST AFRICAN CULTURE** Most West Africans lived in small villages, where life revolved around family, the community, and tradition. Bonds of kinship—that is, family ties—formed the basis of most aspects of life.

Political leaders claimed authority on the basis of religion. Although West Africans might worship a variety of gods and ancestral spirits, most believed in a single creator.


Throughout West Africa, people supported themselves by farming, herding, hunting, fishing, and by mining and trading. Almost all groups believed in collective ownership of land. Individuals farmed the land, but it reverted to family or village ownership when not in use. 

**TRADING PATTERNS WITH THE WIDER WORLD** By the 1400s, West Africa had long been connected to the wider world through trade. The city of Timbuktu was the hub of a well-established trading network that connected most of West Africa to the ports of North Africa, and through these ports to markets in Europe and Asia. Along trade routes across the Sahara Desert, merchants carried goods from Mediterranean cities and salt from Saharan mines to exchange for gold, ivory, and dyed cotton cloth.

Along with goods, traders from North Africa also brought across the Sahara the Islamic faith, which increasingly influenced West African cultures. **Islam** is a monotheistic religion—that is, one based on the belief in a single god. The religion of Islam was founded in Arabia in 622 by the prophet Muhammad and spread quickly across the Middle East and North Africa.

#### MAIN IDEA

#### Comparing

 What did the kingdoms of West Africa have in common?

### HISTORICAL SPOTLIGHT

#### ISLAM

Islam was founded by the prophet Muhammad (about A.D. 570–632), who worked as a merchant in Mecca, a trading city on the Arabian peninsula. When he was about 40, he believed the angel Gabriel appeared to him and told him to preach a new religion to the Arabs. This religion became known as Islam, which in Arabic means “surrender [to Allah].” (*Allah* is the Arabic word for God.) The followers of Islam are called Muslims, “those who submit to God’s will.”

The words that Muhammad received from the angel were recorded by his followers in the Qur’an, the holy book of Islam. The Qur’an teaches that “there is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is His Prophet.” The Qur’an also sets forth certain duties for righteous Muslims, including a series of daily prayers, the giving of charity, and a pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca.

**THE PORTUGUESE** Mariners from Portugal made trading contacts along the West African coast starting in the 1440s. These early contacts with Portuguese traders had two significant consequences for West Africa and the Americas. First, direct trade between the Portuguese and the coastal people of West Africa bypassed the routes across the Sahara and pulled the coastal region into a closer relationship with Europe. Second, the Portuguese began the European trade in enslaved West Africans.

## European Societies of the 1400s

In the late 1400s, most Europeans, like most Native Americans and most Africans, lived in small villages, bound to the land and to rhythms of life that had been in place for centuries. For the majority of Europeans, change came slowly.

**THE SOCIAL HIERARCHY** European communities were based on social hierarchy, that is, they were organized according to rank. At the top of the hierarchy were monarchs and the aristocracy, the landowning elite, who held most of the wealth and power. Members of the clergy also ranked high in the social order. At the bottom were agricultural laborers, or peasants.

Few individuals rose above the social position of their birth. One group that did achieve mobility was the growing number of artisans and merchants, the people who created and traded goods for money. There were relatively few members of this group in the 1400s. However, the profit they earned from trade would eventually make them a valuable source of tax revenue to monarchs seeking to finance costly overseas exploration and expansion. **E**

**CHRISTIANITY SHAPES THE EUROPEAN OUTLOOK** The dominant religion in Western Europe was **Christianity**, a religion based on the life and teachings of Jesus. The leader of the church—the pope—and his bishops held great political as well as spiritual authority.

As the influence of Christianity and Islam spread, the two religions came into conflict. In 1096, Christian armies from all over Western Europe responded to the church's call to force the Muslims out of the Holy Land around Jerusalem. Over the next two centuries, Europeans launched the Crusades, a series of military expeditions to the Middle East in the name of Christianity.

In the end, these bloody Crusades failed to “rescue” the Holy Land, but they resulted in two consequences that encouraged European exploration and expansion. First, the Crusades opened up Asian trade routes, supplying Europeans with luxuries from the East, especially spices such as cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, and pepper. Second, the Crusades weakened the power of European nobles, many of whom lost their lives or fortunes in the wars. Monarchs eventually took advantage of the nobles' weakened ranks to consolidate their own power.

By the early 1500s, many church leaders and ordinary people were eager for reforms. This desire for change led to a movement called the **Reformation**, which criticized church practices and challenged the authority of the pope.

### KEY PLAYER



**“KING” ISABELLA  
1451–1504**

Queen Isabella, who played a central role in European exploration by sponsoring Christopher Columbus's voyages to the Americas, made her mark on the Old World as well. As co-ruler of Spain, Isabella actively participated in her country's religious and military affairs.

In championing Spain's Catholicism, the queen often fought openly with the pope to make sure that her candidates were appointed to positions in the Spanish church. In addition, Isabella had tasted battle far more than most rulers, either male or female. The queen rode among her troops in full armor, personally commanding them in Ferdinand's absence. Whenever Isabella appeared on a horse, her troops shouted, “Castile, Castile, for our King Isabella!”

### MAIN IDEA

#### Making Inferences

**E** Why were merchants able to achieve social mobility?

#### Background

Spices were important in the Middle Ages when European farmers preserved meat by packing it between layers of salt. Spices helped disguise the bad taste of the meat.



## JUNE, FROM LES TRÈS RICHES HEURES DU DUC DE BERRY

This miniature painting, representing the month of June, is a page from a prayer book calendar begun by the Limbourg brothers around the year 1412. The book was made for a younger son of the French king, and tells us a great deal about the aristocratic view of the European social order.

In the background, the walls of the city of Paris protect a palace and the royal chapel, buildings that represent the two most powerful institutions in medieval European society: church and aristocracy.

In the foreground, peasants mow the fields, in an orderly world of peace and tranquility. However, the image is a fantasy, an idealized vision painted to please the aristocracy. There is no hint of the peasants' grinding poverty or of the violence of the Hundred Years' War that was at that moment devastating northern France.

### SKILLBUILDER Interpreting Visual Sources

1. What does the painting tell you about the importance of gender in the division of labor during the 1400s?
2. Why might images of poverty have displeased the aristocracy?



SEE SKILLBUILDER HANDBOOK, PAGE R23.



### MAIN IDEA

#### Analyzing Causes

**F** How did religious events in Europe help spur exploration and settlement of new lands?

#### Vocabulary

**medieval:** of or during the Middle Ages, often dated from A.D. 476 to 1453

The Reformation led to a religious schism, or split, throughout Europe: those who supported the Reformation became known as Protestants because of their opposition to the established Catholic church. This split deepened the rivalries among European nations during the period of North American colonization a century later and sent some Protestants and some Catholics across the Atlantic to seek religious freedom. **F**

**EUROPEAN NATIONS TAKE SHAPE** During the 1400s, four major nations were taking shape in Europe: Portugal, Spain, France, and England. Ambitious monarchs extended their reach by collecting new taxes, raising professional armies, and forming stronger governments. Among their new allies were the merchants, who paid taxes in exchange for the protection and expansion of trade.

**THE RENAISSANCE** The 1400s also saw a cultural awakening in Europe, known as the **Renaissance** (rĕn'ī-sāns')—a term meaning “rebirth” of the kind of interest in the physical world that had characterized ancient Greece and Rome. In the arts, this meant rejecting the flat, two-dimensional images of medieval painting in favor of the deep perspectives and fully rounded forms of ancient sculpture and painting. Starting in Italy, a region stimulated by commercial contact with Asia and Africa, the Renaissance soon spread throughout Europe. Renaissance artists created works of lasting influence, while European scholars reexamined the texts of ancient philosophers, mathematicians, geographers, and scientists.

Although their themes were still often religious in nature, Renaissance artists portrayed their subjects more realistically than had medieval artists, using new

## THE CARAVEL

The caravel, the ship used by most early Portuguese and Spanish explorers, had many advantages over earlier vessels. It was lighter, swifter, and more maneuverable than other ships.

The lateen sails, an innovation borrowed from Muslim ships, allowed the caravel to sail against the wind. Rigged with triangular lateens, the ship could tack (sail on a zigzag course) more directly into the wind than could earlier European vessels.

The smaller deck at the stern provided protection from the rain.

The sternpost rudder allowed greater maneuverability.

The large hatch allowed goods to be stored below deck.

The shallow draft (the depth of the ship below the water line) made the ship ideal for coastal exploration.

techniques such as perspective. Leonardo da Vinci, investigating how things worked, kept notebooks in which he made detailed drawings of human anatomy and of his inventions, including a flying machine. This energetic spirit of inquiry infused the early explorers and adventurers who, like Christopher Columbus, grew up during the Renaissance.

The spread of the Renaissance was advanced by Johann Gutenberg's introduction of printing from movable type in the 1450s. This development made books easier and cheaper to produce, which aided the spread of ideas.

The Renaissance encouraged people to think of themselves as individuals, to have confidence in their capabilities, and to look forward to the fame their achievements might bring. This attitude prompted many to seek glory through adventure, discovery, and conquest. **G**

**EUROPE ENTERS A NEW AGE OF EXPANSION** The European interest in overseas expansion probably began in the 1200s with the journey of Marco Polo to China. Later, the publication in 1477 of the first printed edition of Polo's vivid—and sometimes exaggerated—account caused renewed interest in the East. Like other merchants, Polo traveled to Asia by land. The expense and peril involved in such journeys led Europeans to seek alternative routes. In the 1400s, Europeans used the work of Ptolemy, a second-century scholar, along with the work of Arab and

### MAIN IDEA

#### Developing Historical Perspective

**G** How did Renaissance attitudes encourage the European age of exploration?



### Vocabulary

#### bureaucracies:

government departments staffed with nonelected officials

### MAIN IDEA

### Summarizing

**H** What military advantages did Europeans have over Africans and Native Americans?

Jewish scholars, to revive the art of cartography, or mapmaking. Although imperfect, the new maps inspired Europeans to start exploring for water routes to Asia.

European monarchs had powerful motives to finance the search for new lands and trading routes: they needed money to maintain their growing armies and administrative bureaucracies. By the mid-1400s, Europe's gold and silver mines were running low. So the monarchs of Portugal, Spain, France, and England began looking overseas for wealth.

Beginning in the 1300s, monarchs invested some of their tax revenues in new weapons—such as longbows and cannons—which they used to limit the power of the independent nobles. These new weapons, along with the hand-held firearms that were developed in the 1400s, also gave them military advantages over the Africans and Native Americans whom they later encountered. **H**

**SAILING TECHNOLOGY IMPROVES** European ship captains in the 1400s experimented with new sailing vessels such as the caravel and navigating tools such as the compass and the astrolabe, which helped sailors plot direction at sea. They also took advantage of sailing innovations, like those that allowed caravels to sail against the wind.

One leader in developing and employing these innovations was Prince Henry the Navigator of Portugal, who gathered mariners, geographers, and navigators to his court. According to a contemporary chronicler, Gomes Eanes de Zurara, the prince's driving motivation was the need to know.

For almost 40 years, Prince Henry sent his captains sailing south along the west coast of Africa. Exploration continued after the prince's death. In 1488, Portuguese sailor Bartolomeu Dias rounded the southern tip of Africa; fellow Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama reached India ten years later. By sailing around Africa to eastern Asia via the Indian Ocean, Portuguese traders were able to cut their costs and increase their profits.

As cartographers redrew their maps to show this eastern route to Asia, an Italian sea captain named Christopher Columbus believed there was an even shorter route—one that headed west across the Atlantic.

*"The best ships that sailed the seas . . ."*

ALVISE DA CADAMOSTO, OF THE CARAVEL



## ASSESSMENT

### 1. TERMS & NAMES

For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- nomadic
- Aztec
- Anasazi

- Pueblo
- Iroquois
- Benin

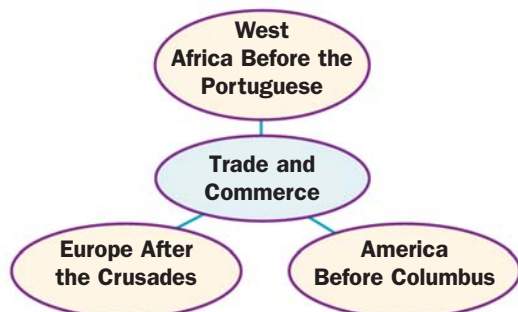
- Kongo
- Islam
- Christianity

- Reformation
- Renaissance

### MAIN IDEA

#### 2. TAKING NOTES

For each region and time period shown, write two or three sentences to describe how it was affected by trade and commerce.



### CRITICAL THINKING

#### 3. MAKING INFERENCES

Why do you think other European nations lagged behind Portugal in overseas exploration? Support your reasons with details from the text.

**Think About:**

- the geography of Portugal
- the power of monarchs in the 1400s
- the economic and political situation of European nations during this time

#### 4. ANALYZING CAUSES

What factors do you think contributed to the thriving trade system that flourished in West Africa? Use evidence from the text to support your response.

#### 5. ANALYZING EFFECTS

What effects did Portuguese trade have on West Africa?