



Era 5 Overview

By the early thirteenth century, the Afro-Eurasian trading system was stronger and larger than ever, with the Mongol Empire at its heart. Other networks existed in the Americas. That Eurasian system collapsed under the weight of diseases spread along the same routes as trade, but then recovered. However, with the Mongol state fractured, it was now harder for Europeans to get the goods they wanted Asia. Going in search of new routes, they encountered the Americas. This collision led to the first truly global network—the Columbian Exchange. American silver, valued in Asia and carried by Europeans, helped to permanently transform the world.



00:01

*Kim Lochner and Colby
Burnett
Kim Lochner*

*Animation of a society
first thriving, and then
collapsing – a man stands
in front of the darkened
ruins of his society*

You are not wearing that!

But this Era has the bubonic plague in it.

Kim! You'll be fine. (Kim inhales, holds breath)

I'm Kim Lochner, and along with Colby Burnett, we're introducing Era 5, the First Global Age. In the last era, we saw that human societies and the networks that connect them, can sometimes become strained and even collapse. But that collapse is rarely complete or permanent. Eventually, societies, states, and systems recover. But sometimes what we call "recovery" is more of a "transformation."

00:53

*Animated map shows the
trade routes and the cities
that popped up along them*

In the 13th century, for example, there was more trade along the Eurasian East-West axis than ever before. There were few memories of a time when the Han Dynasty China—and then the Roman Empire—collapsed. A string of cities spread from the Sea of Japan through the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea, the African and European Mediterranean, and the Atlantic coast of Europe. They traded goods, money, and ideas. An overland trade route, managed by the mighty Mongol Empire, ensured order over much of this network.

01:27

*Several artworks
depicting the bubonic
plague, some detailed
and realistic; others that
depicts the Black Death as
a vicious monster*

However, in 1347 this system collapsed as well. The immediate cause was the bubonic plague, a disease known as the Black Death. It brought devastation and death along the very trade routes that had maintained the system. Fortunately, Eurasian societies were able to recover from yet another collapse.

01:47

*Art depicts prosperous
trade towns by the sea*

By the late 15th century, trade among African, Asian, and European societies was again growing. But the new system was different. This time there was no great Mongol state, no stabilizing force in the middle. It was harder for Europeans to get the Asian luxury goods, like silk and ceramics that they craved. So, a small number of Europeans set off westward to try and find an alternative path to those goods. In the process, they reached the Americas, where they found another, smaller system of exchange already operating.

*Animated map shows the
connection between two
previously separate trade
networks*

The coming together of these two systems—one American, the other Eurasian and African—has been called a turning point of world history. Oceanic travel across the Atlantic and the Pacific connected these two separate networks to create the first truly global network— a world system.

02:46

*Detailed drawing of town
by the sea*

Often called the Columbian Exchange, it brought new economic challenges to different regions. Production and distribution shifted as the exchange integrated new areas into the world system. In response to the new connections, there were opportunities, needs, and challenges. People modified existing communities or established new ones. They formed trans-continental, oceanic empires that strived to control the trade and territory of the new world system.

But just how dramatic were these changes? What made this new era distinctive,

and in what ways did things remain the same? How did people in different regions of this world system experience these changes? We can look at specific examples to answer these questions.

03:41

*Colby Burnett
Modern photo of the
bustling, crowded city of
Manila; an animated map
shows a ship coming upon
the state of Tondo*

One important part of the Columbian Exchange was the city of Manila, in the Philippines. Today, Manila is a city of 13 million people—one of the largest in the world. But prior to the Columbian Exchange, only a small town existed in the spot that would become Manila. This town was the capital of the tiny state of Tondo. It was a trading society with a small community of Chinese merchants. They sold goods to local traders who traveled around the islands exchanging them for local products. The inhabitants of the town followed many religions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam.

Then, in the late 16th century, Spanish conquistadors captured the region from local authorities. The Spanish saw Manila as a convenient administrative center for ruling the surrounding islands. But, more importantly, they hoped it would become a hub for the most important trade of all. Through their oceanic travels, the Spanish had discovered the way to acquire the Asian luxury goods that were so desired in Europe. The route lay mainly across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas, and then through Spanish territories in what is now Mexico. Next, it went across the Pacific to Manila, where Chinese merchants would bring their silk and other goods for sale. Fortunately for them, the Spanish had found what they could give in return for those luxury goods—silver. In particular, silver mined in the Americas.

04:55

*A drawing of a mining
town; another drawing
depicts people holding
candles climbing a rickety
ladder into a mine*

Photo of silver coins

American silver revolutionized global trading in the era of the Columbian Exchange. Much of the world was soon drawn into this system, in which American silver bought Asian luxury goods for a growing European consumer class. In this era, most of the silver in the world came from mines in Latin America. These mines were owned by the Spanish and worked mainly by indigenous Americans and enslaved Africans. In the 16th century, these mines produced 17,000 tons of silver. In the 17th century, it had more than doubled to 37,000 tons. In the 18th century, it doubled again to 75,000 tons. Most of this silver found its way to China. A lot of it came through Europe, especially early in the era. By the 18th century, much of it was going directly from Latin America to Manila, and from there to China.

05:43

*Drawings of idyllic mining
towns in many parts of the
world; another drawing
depicts the meeting of
travelers and indigenous
peoples*

In the midst of all this, Manila changed a lot—and fast. Although it was already a commercial city and had been for hundreds of years, its population now grew rapidly. New communities—made up of Europeans—joined the Chinese, Malay, and other local groups. Christianity joined Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism in the city. For many people, daily life hardly changed, but others came under new laws, religious rules, and economic systems. These kinds of transformations happened in many parts of the world in the First Global Age. The cumulative effects of the Columbian Exchange brought great prosperity to some regions and devastated others. Some of these big changes can be seen in the demographic, or population, shifts between 1200 and 1750.

06:30

A graph shows a general increase in population

Black Death estimated death toll: 75-100 million people; artwork depicts people suffering from disease

07:18

Great Dying estimated death toll: 20 million people; artwork shows Europeans arriving in the Americas, another drawing depicts a woman in bed with sores covering her body

Atlantic Slaving System – estimated enslaved and taken from Africa: 12 million people. Death toll is unknown. Drawings depict the tied up and enslaved Africans

08:00

Colby Burnett

Animated map shows the spread of crops such as potatoes and wheat

08:56

Kim Lochner

In general, world population rose in this era, from about 400 million people to almost 800 million. But looking more closely at this growth, we can see variation in how and where it happened. While the world population was doubling, there were also three massive demographic events resulting in decreased populations during the 550 years of this era.

The first of these I mentioned earlier, the Black Death, which ravaged Eurasia and North Africa in the 14th century. The plague killed somewhere between 75 and 100 million people as it spread from east to west. Populations recovered slowly in the years that followed.

The second massive demographic event was the Great Dying. Europeans, arriving in the Americas, brought with them diseases common to Eurasia and Africa, but not to the Americas. People of the Americas had little resistance to these diseases. The evidence is uncertain, but perhaps as many as 20 million people died from these epidemics.

The third demographic event was the Atlantic slaving system. 12 million Africans were enslaved and forcibly moved in the four centuries after about 1440. The populations of some African regions significantly declined.

Yet these demographic events, while devastating, did not reverse global population growth overall. To some degree, this was because the Columbian Exchange drove migration into areas where population had declined. The settlement of the Americas by Europeans and enslaved Africans is one example. But more important to population growth was how the Columbian Exchange brought together the food systems of the world to make more nutrition available. Peruvian potatoes became a staple crop in Ireland, and sweet potatoes spread rapidly in China. Eurasian crops like wheat spread fast in the Americas.

But to people living in each of these regions, these massive transformations were less important than their own individual experiences. Bound together for the first time in a world system, to what degree did they have similar experiences? Did some places change more than others? Did some people experience greater benefits, or more harm, from these connections? These are the questions that you will encounter in the lessons ahead.

Historian J.H. Hexter once described other historians as either “lumpers” or “splitters.” Historians lump when they group events into large time periods and large processes, such as this course’s seven eras, or our narrative frames.

0:01

Duis aute irure dolor

And they split when they focus on separate events, processes, or years—such as the discussion we just had about the Black Death, the Great Dying, and the African slaving system.

We believe that historians have an obligation to both lump and split. As you study the events in this era, be mindful of when we, and you, are grouping events together and what is gained and what is lost by lumping. Be aware of when we, and you, are treating events as separate and distinctive, and what is gained and lost by such splitting. And, finally, keep in mind what is gained and lost moving between the large general pictures of the past and the more specific pictures of the past.

*Kim Lochner and Colby
Burnett in conversation;
Lochner wears a bird
mask;
Burnett hands her some
hand sanitizer*

I'm going to be honest, this era is a lot to process.

(muffled): This plague stuff actually is creeping me out.

Here.

Oh, it-it's... it's expired.