



Frames in Era 5

Era 5 was a period of intensive changes, perhaps the most dramatic of which was the linking of Afro-Eurasia with the Americas. The result was change that can be interpreted through all three frames. Products were exchanged, new systems of production arose, and distribution routes expanded. Some existing communities were conquered or destroyed, and oceanic empires arose. Global networks connected people and transmitted ideas, beliefs, and philosophies.



00:01

*Bob Bain, PhD, University of Michigan
Animated map shows, at first, two distinct trade networks. We then see the two networks being connected thanks to the Columbian Exchange*

In this era, we look at two large-scale changes to the world's systems- one after the other—each of which was really important in creating the world in which we lived and now live.

The first change, in the mid 14th century, was to the network that connected Africa, Asia, and Europe—really, Afro-Eurasia. Separate from the regional networks in the Americas, the new Afro-Eurasian network broke down because of disease beginning in the 1340s. But then, later, it grew again. In the midst of this recovery, the second change occurred. People from the Afro-Eurasian system made contact with people in the Americas. What followed was the Columbian Exchange, a major change that brought the world's networks together.

00:56

We often hear that the Columbian Exchange is the world's first global system. Christopher Columbus was not the first person from Afro-Eurasia to make contact with societies in the Americas. But after his arrival, the Afro-Eurasian and American systems began a permanent, sustained relationship for the first time. That's a pretty big deal. But what really changed as a result? How can we understand these changes in the context of the frames?

01:25

*Painting of a war scene with many casualties
Examples of artwork from the Inca and Aztec peoples—sculpture, as well as parchment with drawings and text
Painting of a large fleet of ships*

Certainly, we can look at the Columbian Exchange in terms of changing ideas of community. The European entry to—and gradual conquest of—the Americas permanently put an end to many American communities. These communities—from loose confederations and small egalitarian communities to vast empires like those of the Inca and Aztec—never recovered. We still don't know a great deal about some of these societies and the way they were organized. At the same time, the Atlantic slave trade became a big part of the Columbian Exchange and severely damaged many African societies. During this era, vast new oceanic empires emerged based in Europe. Many of them were run as a partnerships between corporations and states like the Portuguese Company of the Indies and the Dutch East India Company.

02:17

Artwork depicting a plantation

Very detailed painting of two large ships on the sea.

These same historical processes also dramatically altered global patterns of production and distribution. The new European-based empires in the Americas created new methods to produce the goods

they wanted—the transatlantic slave trade and the plantation system. These allowed the European-based empires to mass-produce consumer goods like sugar and tobacco. The colonies in the Americas also produced more silver than the world had ever seen. Europeans used this silver to buy their way into the biggest markets of them all—the vast economies of China and South Asia. All these items—sugar and tobacco crossing the Atlantic to Europe, silver going to Asia, and fine silk and porcelain coming back—traveled on bigger and better ships and a wider system of distribution than ever before.

03:07

A painting shows men in fancy, expensive looking clothing

So, too, did people—not only traders and migrants, but also enslaved people. New banking and finance technologies were developed to pay for these trips. These new technologies—both physical and financial—moved goods and people.

*Text: People, things,
and ideas: moved along
expanded networks; mixed
to create new knowledge
systems*

04:00

They also carried ideas, philosophies, and religions, throughout the new global network. Visitors and migrants moved to new areas with their own ideas. These ideas mixed to create new concepts and belief systems. The Americas, in particular, became a meeting place for indigenous, African, and European faiths and philosophies. Travelers also brought experiences back from the places they visited. Europe benefited from experiences and learning gained by missionaries and traders who traveled abroad in Asia, the Pacific, Africa, and the Americas.

Of course, not everyone benefited equally from these new networks, new systems of production and distribution, or new communities. Understanding how and why peoples' places in these systems differed, and the long legacy of those differences can be one important way to use history to understand the present.