INTRODUCTION: THE HUMAN STORY FROM PREHISTORY TO 1500

About two and a half million years ago, on a medium-sized planet of a relatively insignificant star in one of fifty billion galaxies in the universe, our ancestral species, *Homo erectus*, made stone tools in Africa. About 200,000 years ago *Homo sapiens sapiens*, our species, emerged, also in Africa. Now, over 7 billion members of this species cover every spot on the globe, and a few of them have landed on the moon. This species shares the planet with millions of other species, thousands of which are disappearing every year, mostly because of human impact. This book tells the story of the human world, from the beginning to the present. It is an analytic narrative about the human processes that cross continents and order time on a global scale.

On the universal scale, we still don't matter much, but since this is our story, we care greatly about it. We respond more to the needs of other humans than to those of plants, animals, and insects. Likewise, we care more about our family and friends than about millions of other humans who live far away. And yet we are connected to them all. Every day, in the news, we hear much more about what affects our own country here and now than we do about long gone peoples of the past. But we are still immersed in the achievements of our distant ancestors. We need to know what they did for us in order to know where we are, and where we are going.

Narrowness can be dangerous. If we only focus on what seems to affect us personally, we miss the less obvious impulses that shape our lives, and we ignore the long-term trends that guide our fate. This history traces the expansion of humans' awareness of each other and of the world around them over time. As humans moved out of Africa to cover the rest of the globe, many groups kept in touch with each other, even over vast distances. A new idea – a better pot, a stronger axe, a more powerful god – caught on when others found it useful. Once humans began to speak, they told others about new ideas and things. Sooner or later, technological, cultural, and economic innovations covered the world. Global connections are the essence of the human story.

Since the years in which our species, *Homo sapiens sapiens*, spread from Africa to settle East Asia, human history has always been global history, but the pace and even direction of global change has not been constant. The human wave did not always advance; it sometimes contracted. The initial settlements of Britain by hominids, the biological family that includes humans and the great apes, may have begun as early as 200,000 years ago. But the rise and fall of temperatures, linked to the growth and contraction of glaciers, allowed human settlements to advance or forced them to retreat. For thousands of years hominids, including *Homo sapiens* and *Homo sapiens sapiens* (us), crossed the land bridges that periodically tied Ireland and Britain to the continent. The migrants from the continent who permanently settled Britain entered the country only 12,000 years ago. When temperatures again permitted human habitation, between 12,000 and 9,500 years ago, new human cultural groups, different from the original settlers, were there to take advantage.

Such an example reminds us that globalization has never been a one-way process. Globalization occurs when community life is affected by actions, events, and relations at an increasingly greater distance from the locality. The expansion of groups across territory, such as in continental migration to Britain, is an example of globalization. In pre-ice-age Britain, bands and tribes of peoples from the European continent entered an unoccupied land and spread across it, extending human linkages across a wide territory.

Contrary to some common usages, globalization does not mean that a process comprises the entire globe. It refers to the *expanding* of processes and movements across territory. Deglobalization is its opposite: It refers to the *shrinking* geographic influence of processes and movements.

In the case of the settlement of Britain and Ireland, at any given time and place globalization and deglobalization were usually happening simultaneously; small bands of hunter-gatherers left the old settlements on the continent to take advantage of new hunting grounds to the north, while a group of pilgrims returned to the south to participate in ancient ceremonies at traditional religious sites. It is the net balance that counts. Is the society globalizing *more* than it is deglobalizing? Is its territory expanding? Are important events or actions increasingly influenced by distant groups or happenings?

If somehow we could measure the geographic frequency and territorial consequences of all these decisions in any one period for a given region and add them up, we would be able to provide a definitive response to the question of whether globalization or deglobalization was occurring. Alas, we can seldom provide a precise answer to this question, but informed estimates of main trends are possible.

In the period covered by the first volume of this book, the years from the agricultural transformation to 1500, we argue that the world globalized more than it deglobalized. We do not argue that the global is good, the deglobal bad. Many of us have primary loyalties in small communities based on church, or kin, or family. Nor do we lament the fall of exploitative and oppressive global empires. We study an important phenomenon, one that entails both good and bad, that has both costs and benefits.

This book claims that in respect to politics, commerce, and social life, the main course of human history has been a globalizing one. Globalization occurred not just at the beginning and end of our period but all along the way. Despite periods of deglobalization, including such major events as the breakup of the Roman empire, the collapse of the Han empire in China, the abandonment of the Mayan city of Copán, the world globalized with respect to politics, commerce, and social life more than it deglobalized. This is an enormous claim, one that we will spend a good part of the next five hundred pages explaining and defending. By the end we hope to have provided a convincing picture of the main trends at work.

Politics globalized in the years between the advent of the agricultural revolution and 1500 CE. City-states continued to be important, and large parts of the world, particularly in Africa, the Americas, and Southeast Asia, remained largely stateless, dominated by village associations and kin groups. But the salient characteristic of political change over the long haul between the Akkadian empire, discussed in Chapter 2, and the Ottoman empire, discussed in Chapter 14, was the rise in the size and power of empires and the extent to which they filled the available political space. Empires were heterogeneous political units linked to central power by indirect rule. The Achaemenid empire that occupied much of the territory of today's Iran contained kingdoms annexed in one fell swoop by conquest and governed directly by the emperor, as well as areas ruled by subordinate kings who paid tribute, as well as tribal societies that gave the merest nod to the emperor's authority. By 1500, particularly in Eurasia, we can talk about a world of empires. Containing diverse groups of people, they frequently abutted other empires, inciting inter-imperial competition and further extending imperial globalism.

At the very beginning of our period, city-states pursuing the course of empire lacked an adequate system of transportation and bureaucratic techniques for provisioning troops at home; early empires maintained powerful armies by annual plundering expeditions and prolonged stays in subject cities at municipal expense. Sargon of Akkad, one of the world's first empire builders, who ruled in Mesopotamia around 2500 BCE, used plundering and forced hospitality to maintain his army.

But the Akkadian empire ruled by Sargon, the very epitome of a powerful state in his era, would have been considered puny by his imperial successors in the Ottoman empire that controlled the territory of the old Akkadian empire in 1500. Sargon's army of 5,000–6,000 men struck contemporaries with awe but would not long have withstood an Ottoman army that could mobilize 250,000 in a single campaign. But for both Akkadians and Ottomans, to build a mighty empire required a countryside rich enough and agricultural classes sufficiently numerous to support large armies. It would have needed an administrative regime able to compute and levy taxes, and a military sufficiently large to defend these resources from rivals and to defeat and expropriate the wealth of rival empires. The increasing spread and diversity of agriculture in the Near East provided the agricultural resources. The development of written language and the growth of bureaucratic professions created a generalized technology – global technologies really – that allowed states to count and record everyone's resources based on uniform language understandable by tax collectors. Later imperial rulers developed techniques for provincial administration. Professional imperial administrators also perfected the techniques of rule across long distances. Provincial governors, road systems, and government granaries were all used by rulers in Persia, Han China and the Inka highlands to rule diverse groups of people. The invention of money also figured large: what invention was more global than money? It could circulate in areas where no one recognized the figure on the coin or the country of its origin.

Finally, empires depended on their ability to wage war. Like any aspirants for empire, Sargon's Akkadian empire was in the forefront of military technology. Unlike its poorer neighbors, the empire could field disciplined professional armies. Sargon was one of the pioneers of the composite bow in military affairs, a revolutionary new technology. The composite bow used specially reinforced materials to create greater tension and thus greater ability to penetrate the leather jackets worn in battle.

Empires were global in their ability to expand and to integrate disparate cultures. Being products of military conquest and political co-optation, empires could rise extremely rapidly, incorporating pre-existing political units and administrative bureaucracies. Imperial defenders lauded their diversity. In eleventh-century Hungary St. Stephen is said to have recommended "guest and foreign peoples" to his son and heir because "they are very useful, they bring varied values and customs, weapons and knowledge with them, all of which ornament the royal Court and make it splendid, while frightening the haughty foreigners. For weak and defenseless is a country which has but a single language and uniform customs."[1]

If St. Stephen's Hungary could find a place for many peoples, it could – and did – just as easily collapse with the same rapidity. Subordinate political units took advantage of regional discontent or military weakness and departed empire with the same territorial boundaries and subordinate rulers as they had entered it. When empires expanded incorporating disparate polities, the political world globalized; when they collapsed into their component parts, it deglobalized. No empire lived forever but some lasted much longer than others. Trying to understand why some empires were able to balance contending religions, ethnic groups, and political traditions and last for centuries while others proved unable to maintain such a balance and collapsed after decades is one of the central themes of this volume.

While empires occupy the center of our attention, commercially oriented city-states were sometimes important political actors. City-states survived lacking agricultural hinterlands because they were centers of trade and had access to ready cash. They formed in the interstices between empires where they served as trade intermediaries across extensive borderlands. The extensive commercial connections of city-states, sometimes extending across vast areas, made them important global players. When an empire confronted military challenge it went to the countryside to recruit soldiers; city-states used their wealth to buy

mercenaries. In the third century CE, the strength of Palmyra (in modern Syria) was based on its nobles' role as desert tribesmen willing to protect the caravan routes, an openness to foreign merchants, and a strategic position on the Silk Road. City-states also acquired power as entrepôt towns; these were particularly important along the Indian coast where the monsoon season often required merchants to unload their cargoes and wait until the winds favored further transit. And Southeast Asian city-states such as Srivijaya in Sumatra acquired their power from their strategic riverine locations as port cities controlling the luxury goods produced in the hinterland and selling them to foreign nations.

Commerce also globalized in the years before 1500. The most striking example of long-distance trade in the pre-1500 period was undoubtedly the so called Silk Road, discussed in Chapter 8. It flourished for centuries, connecting Chinese silk and luxury goods with the eastern Mediterranean and all the regions along the way. The rise and fall of Central Asian kingdoms determined the state of the trade, as well as circumstances in the Chinese and western Mediterranean ports that were the end points of so much trade. When the road opened wide for merchants, Eurasian trade globalized; when it closed to them, Eurasian trade deglobalized.

Spanning continents, the Silk Road was the creation of commercial enterprise escorted by military forces. Merchants shepherded their precious commodities through vast spaces inhabited by bandits and hostile tribesmen, encountering floods and sandstorms and intermediary rulers who tried to impose confiscatory tolls. There was no real terminus or starting point to the Silk Road; sometime it was in the Black Sea ports, other times in Jordan, and at other times in Egypt, depending on local conditions and opportunities. Production too occurred at various sites along the road. Experts recognize dozens of silk products that originated in areas from Baghdad to Chang'an, Bukhara, and Kashgar.

From a global perspective, the Silk Road depended on governments farsighted enough to promote international trade and to recognize the need to treat foreign merchants fairly. The fall of strong Chinese dynasties such as that of the Han (206 BCE – 220 CE) and Tang (618–907) regimes and the ensuing chaos closed the road for a generation. At its high point during the Pax Mongolica (Mongol Peace, 1206–1368 CE), the trade flourished under the protection of rulers who imposed a strong government throughout the entire Eurasian Plain. The Mongols even contributed to production by settling communities of silk workers in East and Central Asia.

The growing involvement of Europeans in the silk commerce, making the Silk Road all the more global, is shown in the extraordinary efforts European monarchs and city-states made to reopen the road when it closed in the fifteenth century. Together the breakup of Mongol rule, the descent of Central Asia into political chaos, and the xenophobia of the Ming dynasty effectively interrupted Eurasian commerce. This was a classic example of deglobalization. In despair, European rulers financed expensive expeditions down the coast of Africa, searching for alternative routes. Eventually this search yielded another path to the east. One of its side benefits was the discovery of the Americas and the beginning of another global era.

But when the Silk Road was operating, it depended not only on governments but on diasporic, close-knit communities yet with transnational ties binding them together over enormous spaces. Global trade required that mercantile commitments made in one distant portion of the world be honored in another. Between Palmyra in modern-day Jordan and Chang'an in China there were many different currencies, laws, and customs. Even within empires, tolls and legal regulations varied. Local people were required to solve local problems but they had to be trustworthy in financial matters. These communities had to be large enough to thrive at crucial locations throughout Eurasia but small enough to vouch for the honor of all members and to punish them by exclusion if they violated their faith. The diasporic religious or ethnic community served these purposes.

Diasporic communities were vital to the operation of the Silk Road. Every member of the community had a vested interest in a reputation for integrity. Those who violated this trust were resolutely banished; exclusion from the community meant a degree of total isolation that few could endure. Historically language, religion, and ethnicity have been the bases for constructing community, but these identities were invariably reinforced by intermarriage of diaspora members and the adoption of common cultural characteristics. Armenians, Greeks, Gnostic Christians, Gujaratis, Jews, Lebanese, and Nestorian Christians are only a few of the diasporic traders who have played key roles in global trade. Social life and politics together with markets made the Silk Road work.

Finally, social life also globalized. The world's major religions emerged in this period. We define a major religion as one that attempted successfully to convert millions of followers, perhaps even entire societies. The major religions in today's world were all founded before 1500, although the distribution of believers would change significantly after that date. In the world before 1500, religion was more central to social life than for most people in the modern world. It was not simply a question of personal devotion, but religion and social institutions were more deeply intertwined than today. Religious identities entailed obligations of solidarity toward fellow believers but often they inspired distrust and suspicion of those outside the faith. In many societies a particular religion enjoyed a preferred position within the state and responsibility for providing basic education, alms, and shelter; non-believers were sometimes excluded from these services. The spread of major religions and the blending of religious faith with everyday social institutions that tightened connections was a globalizing phenomenon. On the other hand, minority religions excluded from state services that gave pride of place to members of state-sponsored religions failed to get the benefits of this globalization. Inclusion and exclusion went hand in hand.

If we recognize the globalism of the dissemination of religious ideas throughout whole societies, let us not forget the globalism of minority religious communities whose social relations encompassed huge spaces. The mercantile diaspora, discussed above, often originated in religious missions. Social life sometimes coincided with economic interest. Having been rejected by the dominant Christian orthodoxies, Nestorian Christianity spread east as missionaries followed the Silk Road looking for converts. But Nestorian Christians soon established a position for themselves as merchants and traders that further reinforced their presence on the road. Nestorian religious convictions gave them a distinctive identity, one that marked them off from others. This in turn gave small communities an internal solidarity and reputation for integrity. Theirs too was a globalizing experience.

Monarchs and religious hierarchs often espoused universal religions that attempted to convert or enforce obligations on all members of society. Emperors, shahs and kings believed that empire would be still stronger if everyone accepted the same beliefs. In their efforts to impose religious centralization, rulers and religious leaders met with resistance along pre-existing fault lines. The Roman pope and the Byzantine emperor disagreed over religious practices, but their differences emerged against a background of political and social antagonism. Roman Catholics and Greek Orthodox religious leaders represented not just religious differences but very different geographic and political constituencies, as political ties between Rome and Constantinople weakened. Orthodox efforts to impose doctrine on Egyptian Christians created new divisions but also recalled long-held ill will based on previous bitter controversies over religious jurisdiction and intolerance. As Byzantine emperors increased taxes to build armies to repel their foes, the hard-pressed taxpayers of Egypt and the Near East found emperors' efforts to impose religious orthodoxy all the more intolerable. Their resistance would significantly weaken the empire's ability to respond to the Islamic challenge. Thus the globalizing efforts of empires produced deglobalizing local revolts. At the end of the day politics, commerce, and social life came together to produce new social identities.

Besides politics, commerce, and social life, two other central themes join with the three outlined above: technology and gender relations. Technology is the use of human, natural, and mechanical power over the non-human world, for human ends. Humans have always had to get their food, clothing, and shelter from the natural world, and they have constantly tried to improve the conditions under which they live. Superior productive power created goods that were profitable for trade, and often (in the form of weaponry) superior in war. How people gain their living from nature defines a significant portion of their culture, uniting them around a common mode of existence and separating them from others. The oldest division of this kind is that between the nomadic pastoralist, who moves constantly with his herds, and the settled agriculturalist. The use of technology thus shapes relations of power, exchange, and community, without totally determining them. Although the environment has strongly affected how humans live, we should avoid assuming that natural changes directly determine their development: human social decisions have always inflected the way in which the natural world's processes make an impact on the collective whole.

Of all the ways of acting on nature that humans use for their benefit, communication and transportation technology deserve special attention. The movement of messages and goods between peoples separated by large distances is the key theme of this story of interconnections. Whether by speech, smoke signals, writing, the telegraph, or the internet, people have always sent information to each other in order to co-ordinate their activities for mutual gain, to warn their enemies, or just to express their love for each other. How fast the messages travel, how far, how often, and in what medium (oral or visual, handwritten or printed) certainly affect the density and quality of communication, but all express the underlying, irrepressible urge to tie one person to another. Contrary to what you might have heard, global communication did not begin with the internet; networks of trade and information have covered the globe since the human story began. Likewise, the movement of commodities over distances short and long, on human backs, on animals, on carts, railroads, or airplanes, serves the goals of commerce and community. All things have social lives.

Gender relations have shaped the human story in ways both public and private. Humans, like other mammals, belong genetically to two biological sexes, but gender, which means the social expression of biological sex, has varied greatly over time and space. Men and women have taken on highly diverse roles depending on their relationship to hierarchies of power, relationships of exchange, and social structure. Still, in general, men have dominated power hierarchies through all of human history, as they still do. Male dominance originated in physical strength, but ideologies of rule that justified male supremacy through reference to divine power, and the fact that men wrote nearly all the histories, kept domination going over the long term. In commercial relations, women had more nearly equal positions. Although they did not become the richest people in a society, they often controlled small-scale trade, and as artisans or textile producers they took on important economic roles within the household. In small communities like the family, women usually held subordinate but vital positions: they did the cooking, the housekeeping, and childrearing that made it possible for human social life to continue. Sometimes powerful women emerged in the historical records at the top of their societies, as wives or mothers of rulers; then we can tell their stories in more detail. Until recent times, most individual women have remained nearly invisible, but they were an essential part of the processes that enable humans to survive. We can tell their collective story even if we cannot find out much about their individual lives.

This is a world history, but it is also a regional history. Although common processes spanned the entire world, they did not have equal strength or develop at the same rate everywhere. To tell the global story coherently, we must divide the world into regions. Regions are large geographic divisions of the globe, considered as intense fields of political,

economic, and cultural interaction. Sometimes these regions have sharp geologically defined boundaries, like oceans and high mountains, but usually they do not. For centuries, humans have found ways to cross deserts, climb mountains, and sail on all the world's oceans. Geological barriers have slowed down their movements, but never stopped them entirely. Sometimes these regions coincided fairly closely with large empires or civilizations, but often they spanned several political or cultural units. Eurasia, Africa, and the Americas are the largest of these regional units, but we often refer to smaller units like Central Eurasia, the Middle East, East Asia, Southeast Asia, Europe, or South America.

In this story, we explicitly compare political institutions, production and exchange, and social groups within and across regions; we focus on how contacts and connections constructed (and destroyed) relationships among these societies; and we look at large-scale processes of structural change that shaped the shifting regional divisions. Bear in mind, however, that few of these regions have a very sharp natural boundary: where does Europe stop and Asia begin, for example? Regions are only useful ways to think about the geographic concentration of certain cultural and economic processes in certain times.

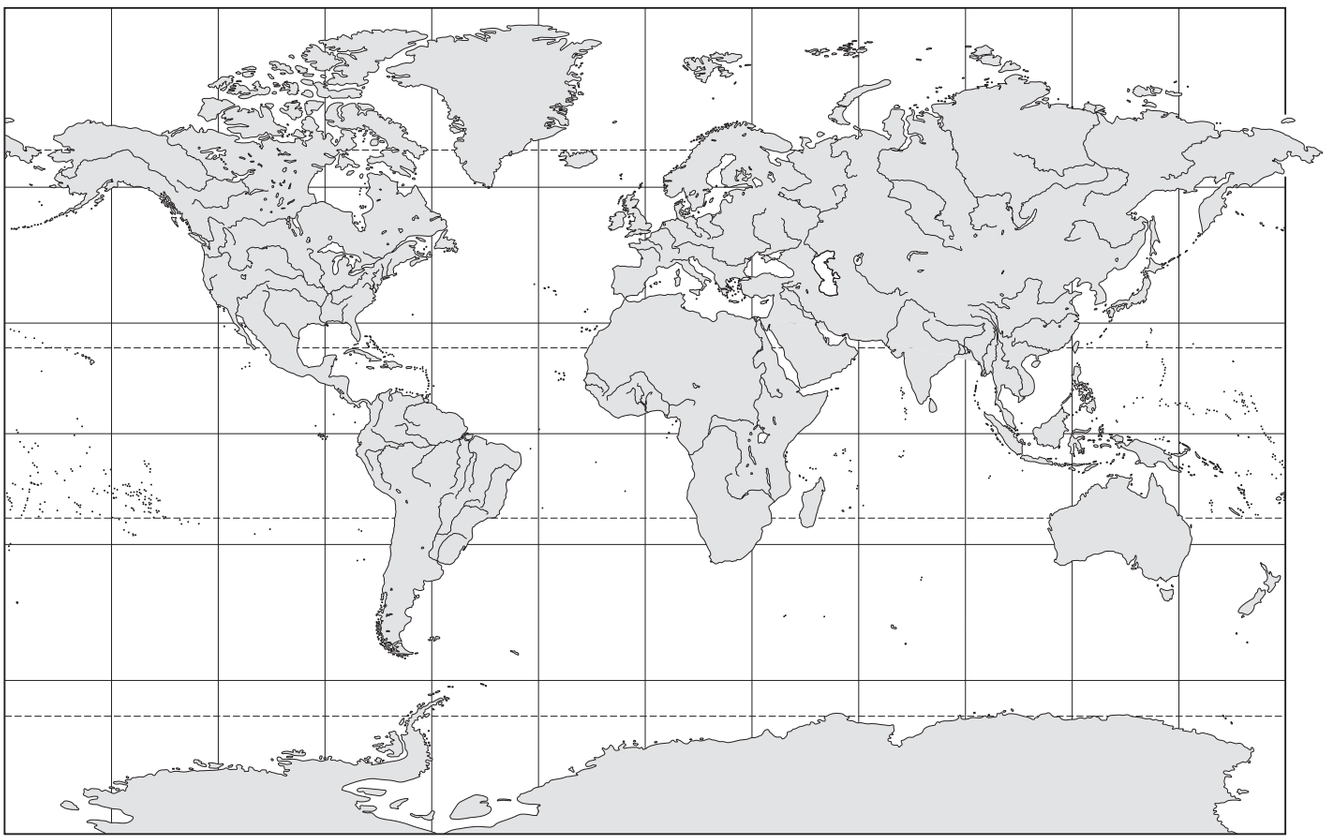
For every period and major geographic region, within the limits of available sources, we will describe basic settlement patterns, political and military organizations, how people produced and exchanged goods, and social relations (including gender, family, and religious communities). After reading our story of political events, the emergence of religious beliefs, and socio-cultural practices, you should be able to discuss subjects like forms of military organization or marriage rituals and to compare them across regions and over time.

Modern-day historians no longer rely exclusively on written sources. Collaboration with archaeologists has allowed them to extend their knowledge more deeply into the past to learn about ancient social practices and power structures. For many of these subjects, especially the lives of poor people, women, or mobile peoples, we have far fewer sources than for the settled, male, wealthy power-holders. If we have less to say about these people it is not because they mattered less; it is because we have much less information. In our story, we will discuss the sources historians use to obtain reliable information about the past.

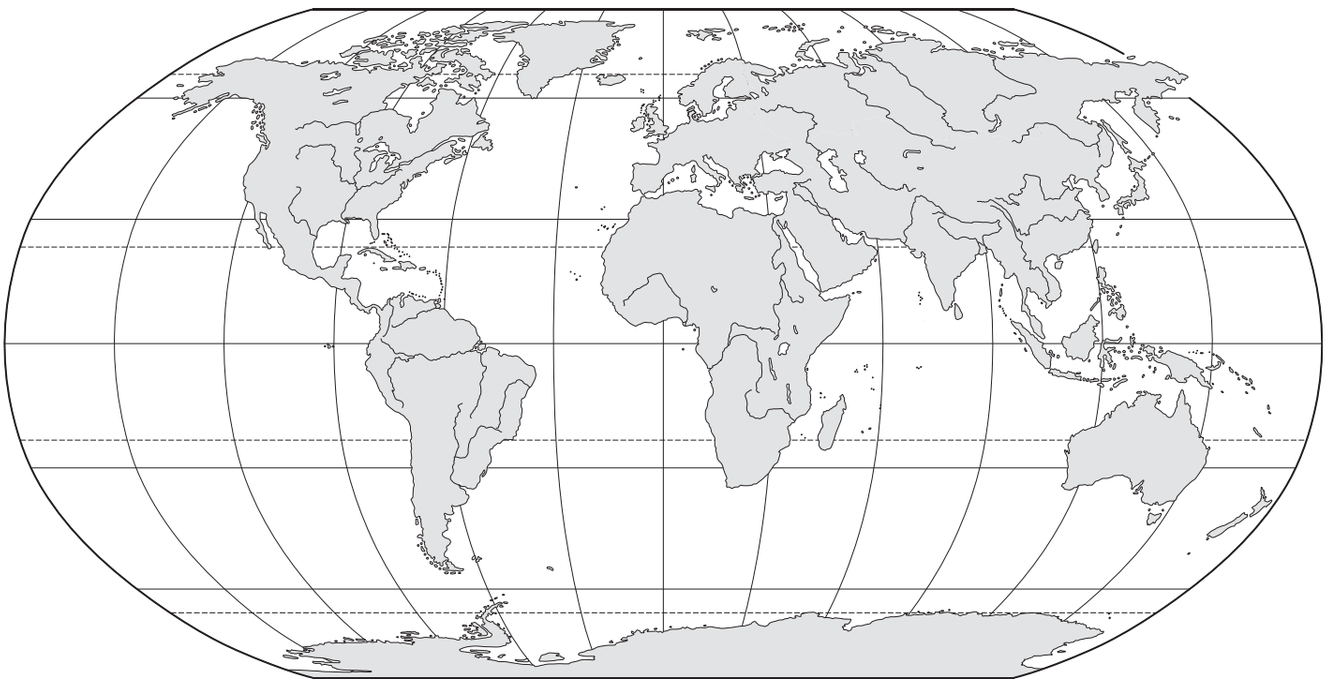
Yet even a few basic facts can support important comparisons. Often the only thing we know about many people in the past is when they were born, when they died, when they married, if they did, and how many children they had. These basic demographic facts still help us to imagine what it meant to live in a world in which people had far more children, many of whom died in infancy, and much shorter life spans than today.

For examining interactions between regions, we also must use indirect evidence. Only a few traders, pilgrims, or spies left direct accounts of their travels, but we still know about transmission routes of many goods and organisms. Some, like gunpowder, taken from China to Europe by Muslim and Mongol warriors, were brought intentionally from one place to another; others were unwanted hitchhikers. For example, in the fourteenth century CE, as trade grew, bubonic plague spread along land and sea trade routes from Eastern Eurasia into the Mediterranean and Europe, taking millions of lives. On the other hand, inter-regional contact could also yield health benefits. Mediterranean authorities discovered that quarantining ships from plague-struck areas was an effective way of limiting the spread of plague and soon the practice was adopted by most ports. Foods, germs, and weapons all moved long distances because other people brought them along on their travels, whether they wanted to or not.

The globalization of the years before 1500 culminated in the discovery of the Americas and the conquest of the Aztec and Inka empires. After that, a river of silver, caravans of sailing ships, and hordes of armies moved across both the Old and New Worlds, inextricably



Map 0.1 World map, Mercator projection



Map 0.2 World map, equal area projection

connecting them together. For the first time since they had left Africa years ago, all the major populations of the human race were in contact with one another. At a terrible cost in disease, death, murder, war, and exploitation, the year 1500 would provide the basis for a new kind of global history.

Note

1 John A. Armstrong, *Nations before Nationalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), p. 114.

World map: prehistory and agriculture