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Introduction

A page of drawings by the German artist Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) that captures many themes important to Renaissance culture. On the left, Dürer illustrates a dramatic point in the Greek myth of the rape of Europa, though he sets it in a landscape with sixteenth-century towns. On the right, he sketches a classically dressed archer, a sage contemplating a skull, and three views of a lion. Thus, on this one page, he brings together the importance of the classical past, the wisdom of the ancients, the fleeting nature of human life, the wonders of the natural world, and the lure of the exotic.

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The title of this book, and perhaps also of the course for which you are reading it, is *Early Modern Europe*. The dates in the title inform you about the chronological span covered (1450–1789), but they do not explain the designation "early modern." That term was developed in the twentieth century by historians seeking to refine an intellectual model first devised in the fifteenth century, when scholars began to divide European history into three parts: ancient (to the end of the Roman Empire in the West in the fifth century); medieval, a word that comes from *medium aevum*, Latin for middle age (from the fifth century to the fifteenth); and what they usually called "new" (*novum* in Latin, from the fifteenth century forward). What initially separated medieval from new, in their eyes, was the cultural shift of the Italian Renaissance. By the eighteenth century the era that had been called "new" was increasingly termed "modern," with its origins not only in the Renaissance but also in the first voyage of Columbus (1492), and the beginning of the Protestant Reformation (1517). These three developments (and others, depending on who was writing) were understood to usher in the modern world – or, at least, to *begin* the process of ushering it in. This three-part periodization became extremely influential, and in the twentieth century some historians began to divide it into "early modern" – from the Renaissance or Columbus to the late eighteenth century – and what we might call "truly modern": from the late eighteenth century to whenever they happened to be writing.

As with any intellectual model, however, the longer this tripartite division was used, the more problematic it seemed. The voyages of Columbus may have marked the beginning of European exploration and colonization, but there was plenty of earlier contact between Europeans and other cultures, and Columbus himself was motivated more by religious zeal – generally regarded as "medieval" – than by a "modern" desire to explore the unknown. The Protestant Reformation did bring a major break in western Christianity, but Martin Luther was seeking to reform the church, not split it, just like medieval reformers, of whom there were many. Other developments traditionally regarded as marks of modernity, such as the expansion of capitalism, the growth of the nation-state, or increasing interest in science and technology, were also brought into question as scholars found both earlier precedents and evidence that these changes were slow in coming. (Similar points were also made by scholars rethinking the ancient/medieval break, who argued that the end of the Roman Empire was not as momentous as it had earlier seemed.)

Debates have also revolved around the whole idea of modernity. As concepts, "modernity" and "modernization" are teleological and totalizing, implying that history developed on a single linear trajectory with a final act. Over the last fifty years, master narratives of all types, including a single path to modernity, have come into question. Scholars of the Middle Ages have sharply critiqued dichotomies that contrast modernity ("us") with premodernity ("them"), and scholars of places other than Europe have noted that "the very invocation of the word implicitly sets a 'modern Europe'

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against a 'yet-to-be modernized' non-Europe."[1] More philosophical issues also emerged: the thinkers who first thought of themselves as "modern" saw modernity as positive – and "medieval" as negative – but is modernity necessarily a good thing? And will it ever end? What comes afterward?

If "early modern" is not as clear as it seems, what about the other part of the title, "Europe"? What is "Europe"? The answer most of us learned in school – one of the world's seven continents – can easily be rejected simply by looking at a globe. If a continent is a "large land mass surrounded by water" (which we also learned in school), then surely the correct designation for what is conventionally called "Europe" is the western part of the continent of Eurasia. If we look very closely at the globe, in fact, Europe is a small northwestern part of the huge continent of Afroeurasia, a term increasingly used by geographers and world historians for what is the world's largest land mass.

The idea of "Europe" derived more from culture than geography. The word "Europe" was first used by Greek writers in the seventh century BCE to designate their side of the Mediterranean (the sea whose name means "middle of the world," which it was to the ancient Greeks) from the other side, "Asia," which to the Greeks originally included Africa. They derived the word from the myth of Europa, who was the daughter of Agenor, the king of Phoenicia, an area in southwest Asia on the east end of the Mediterranean (what is now Lebanon). In the myth, Europa was awakened by a dream in which two continents that had taken the shape of women argued over who should possess her: Asia said she had given birth to her and so owned her, but the other as yet unnamed continent asserted that Zeus would give Europa to her. Right on cue, Zeus fell in love with the beautiful Europa as she gathered flowers with her friends, transformed himself into a white bull, and abducted her. (This myth came to be termed the "rape of Europa.") He took her to Crete, a Greek island, where she bore him a number of sons and gave her name to the continent. In a tamer version of the myth, told by the ancient Greek historian Herodotus and repeated by later Christian writers, merchants from Crete carried Europa away from Phoenicia in a ship shaped like a bull to marry their king. Herodotus notes that the (Asian) Trojans later abducted Helen, wife of the Greek king Menelaus – an event that led to the Trojan War – in part to avenge Europa. In either version, the myth of Europa highlights both Greek debt to Asia and separation from it. The idea of "Europe" is thus much like the notion of "modern" – that is, a term used consciously by people to differentiate themselves from others, to create a boundary between "us" and "them."

Greek ideas about Europe – like Greek ideas about so many things – spread north and west, and changed over time. By the medieval period, Europe was increasingly understood as a Christian territory, in opposition to the Muslim and pagan "East." People defined themselves as inhabitants of "Christendom," an area with vague borders, but which needed defense and warranted expansion. Through the actions of kings, nobles, bishops, and missionaries, the boundaries of Christendom expanded

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north and west to the Atlantic and Baltic, and then beyond, to Scandinavia. Beginning in the eleventh century, the southwestern border of Christendom moved slowly across the Iberian Peninsula as Christian armies defeated Muslim ones in a process later called the *Reconquista*.

In the mid-fifteenth century, the expansion of the Ottoman Turks toward western Christendom led the humanist Pope Pius II (pontificate 1458–64) to call for a crusade, in which he called on Christian "Europeans" to oppose the "inferior" inhabitants of Asia. In the first half of the sixteenth century, other humanists began to use the terms "Europe" and "Europeans" more regularly, and map-makers began to print maps of Europe as a separate continent. Sometimes these maps showed Europe as a crowned queen (oriented with west at the top, so Spain is her head and Italy her right hand) dominating other continents, and they also sometimes depicted the Greek myth of the rape of Europa. Both Europe as the queen of continents and the rape of Europa were popular subjects in painting, sculpture, and public rituals in the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, with Europa's abduction portrayed as violent, but also as the triumphant founding of a new dynasty. Thus the idea of Europe and people's understanding of themselves as "Europeans" are products of the early modern period.

Europe's geographical indistinctness has allowed its boundaries to be disputed and changed over time. The western border seems relatively easy to define because it is marked by the Atlantic Ocean – but is it? Are the British Isles part of Europe? (This may seem self-evident, but then there is the commonly used phrase "Britain and Europe.") Is Iceland? Does Iceland become part of Europe once the Vikings get there? Does Greenland? The eastern boundaries are even more vague; various rivers were proposed as the dividing line, but none of them stretch the entire way from the Arctic to the Aegean Sea. In the eighteenth century, Swedish and Russian officials suggested that the Ural Mountains and the Ural River, which flows into the Caspian Sea, were the best boundary, in part because the Russians wanted to assert that the main cities of Russia were clearly European. This boundary is the one most commonly given today when discussing Europe geographically, but for historical discussions it often seems too far east. Is the story of Russia always part of European history? Is the story of Ukraine? During the period covered in this book – and until World War I – much of eastern Europe, including almost all of the area known to the ancient Greeks, was part of the Ottoman Empire, whose leaders were Muslim and Turkish, a people originating in central Asia. Thus, geographically, the Ottoman Empire was clearly part of Europe, but is its history "European" or not?

This questioning of terminology may seem both paralyzing and pedantic; don't we all basically know what "modern" and "Europe" mean? In fact, even historians who emphasize that these terms are problematic continue to use them, because they are convenient and meaningful. Thus this book is still titled *Early Modern Europe*, though its chronology and geography are somewhat flexible. Concern with terminology is key to new ways in which history is being studied, researched, and presented, however. As they

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Map 1 Geographic map of Europe.

have for thousands of years, historians continue to ask "What can we learn about the past?" but they put greater emphasis on *why* we know what we do, and on the way that people in the past understood and recorded their own situation. Why did certain things get written down and preserved, so that they became the historical sources on which our understanding of the past is based? Who did the writing, and what was their point of view? How and why did people shape their own memories and create their own history? What was left out, or intentionally or unintentionally distorted? How were both the lived experience and stories about that experience different for different types of people – men and women, poor and wealthy, common and elite, rural and urban? How does our understanding of the past change if we include information from non-written sources, such as art, material objects, oral traditions, or biological and chemical remains?

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As they paid greater attention to the perspective of their sources, so historians also paid greater attention to the ways in which their own point of view shaped the story they were telling. It was no accident that the history of peasants and working people received greater attention after World War II, when the students attending colleges and universities – some of whom majored in history and eventually became historians – came more often from working-class families than they had earlier. It is not surprising that interest in women's history surged during the 1970s, when more women began to attend college and the feminist movement encouraged them to analyze their own situation. It is similarly not surprising that an interest in cultural diversity, historical encounters between different groups, and world history developed in the 1990s, along with new patterns of migration, economic globalization, and an increasingly transnational intellectual community. In reference to the issues discussed at the beginning of this chapter, it is not surprising that doubts about "modern" and "Europe" emerged at a point when people were discussing the negative consequences of modern processes such as industrialism and globalization, and debating the adoption of the euro as a currency, the proper role of Europe in a postcolonial world, and the merits of various countries' membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union.

All historians, like all people, approach the past from their own perspective, which shapes the subjects they find interesting, the methods they use to find information, and the language they use to describe their findings. A point of view is sometimes described as "bias," but that word carries a negative charge, and implies there can be history that is "unbiased" – that is, simply a recounting of the facts of the past. Because the gathering of those facts is done by human beings, however, and the sources that reveal those facts were also made largely by human beings, every story is only partial, and every one has a perspective.

This recognition of the subjectivity of all history has occurred at the very same time that our knowledge of the past has widened dramatically, as peasants, workers, women, and various types of minority groups have been added to the picture of every region and era. Thus historians, particularly those wishing to examine a broad geographic era over a long time frame, are faced with two challenges: capturing the diversity of people's experiences while still outlining key developments, and paying attention to individual perspectives – their subjects' and their own – while still telling a story of the past that makes sense.

Structure of the book

This book is designed to cover more than three hundred years of European history, viewing Europe as both larger and more connected to the rest of the world than it

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often has been. Thus it definitely faces the challenges just noted, which emerge first as decisions about how best to structure the story. Any arrangement is an intellectual scheme imposed by an author on a group of events, developments, individuals, and groups. Some books arrange material over a fairly long period topically, which allows readers to see continuities and long-term changes, and better understand aspects of life that change fairly slowly, such as social structures, economic systems, family forms, or ideas about gender. Some books arrange material more or less chronologically, which works better for things that involve dramatic change, such as epidemics, wars, and revolutions.

This book splits the difference. It is arranged in two parts, one covering roughly 1450 to 1600 and the other roughly 1600 to 1789. The midpoint of 1600 is flexible and somewhat arbitrary, but there were significant breaks in many realms of life around that time: the French Wars of Religion ended, the Tudor dynasty in England gave way to the Stuart, serfs in Russia were completely tied to the land, the Dutch established the United East India Company and began trading ventures in Asia, and Galileo used the recently invented telescope to see the movement of the heavens, beginning a new era in astronomy. Within each part there are five topical chapters, each with a chapter summary and discussion questions: “Individuals in society”; “Politics and power”; “Cultural and intellectual life”; “Religious developments”; “Economics and the environment.”

At the beginning of Part I and at the end of each part is a chapter titled “Europe in the world”; these look at the relationships between Europe and the rest of the world in 1450, the period from 1450 to 1600, and the period from 1600 to 1789 in terms of travel, trade, exploration, colonization, and other types of contacts. Historians increasingly emphasize that a number of political, economic, and social phenomena cut across borders, both within Europe and beyond, and that no one region or country should be studied in isolation. They focus on connections, exchanges, intercrossings, movements, and mixtures, an approach that for the modern period is often termed “transnational.” The concept “transnational” may not apply very well to the early modern period, as most national boundaries were not yet firmly fixed, but these chapters include insights from transnational history, as well as world, global, comparative, and postcolonial history. Chapter 1 also provides an overview of European society in 1450 in each of the five topical areas, setting the stage for the rest of the book. Chapter 7 ends with a summary of Part I that brings together the major developments from all realms of life for the period from 1450 to 1600, and following Chapter 13 is an epilogue reflecting changes and continuities across the entire period from 1450 to 1789.

The book covers the basic events long identified with this period – the Renaissance, the Reformation, the rise of capitalism, the voyages of discovery, the growth of the nation-state, the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment – but also highlights ways in which historians see these as problematic, in the same way that they have interrogated

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"early modern" and "Europe." Most chapters discuss a historiographical debate or two – that is, disagreements between scholars about the ways in which material should be interpreted, processes analyzed, or causation ascribed – or they highlight a particular methodological or theoretical approach. Such debates are not new in history, and the discussions here include both long-standing debates in historiography, such as those about the origins of capitalism, and very recent disputes, such as those about the origins of cross-dressing in English theater. Each chapter also presents several primary sources, and there are many more primary sources available in the online resources for this book, which are listed at the end of each chapter and can be downloaded as pdfs.

Questions about the concept "early modern" have made it clear that any beginning date is relatively arbitrary; some of the processes understood as modern began in the Middle Ages, if not in antiquity. But developments in the field of history over the past several decades have made 1450 seem a better starting point than 1500. Why? The focus on the ways in which the past gets recorded has led to greater interest in the mechanisms of recording as both cultural and technological phenomena. Around 1450 printing with movable metal type was invented in Germany by artisans – Johann Gutenberg and others – who adapted existing techniques from metallurgy, wood-block printing, wine pressing, fabric stamping, and paper-making. (Artisans in Korea developed a similar technology somewhat earlier, but there is no evidence that this spread from Korea to Germany.) Although the number of people who could read and write, and who were thus immediately influenced by this new technology, was quite small, the ultimate impact of printing as a vehicle of social change was enormous. In 2000, in fact, Gutenberg was ranked as the "most influential person of the millennium" by a cable television network.

In addition to printing, by the 1450s Portuguese ships were sailing regularly back and forth to Cape Verde in west Africa, bringing back gold and slaves through contacts with the Mali Empire and laying the groundwork for Portugal's later colonial empire. In 1453 the Ottoman Turks under Mehmed II conquered Constantinople, and began to establish themselves firmly as a European power. Both of these developments are significant in a European history that pays more attention to Europe's place in the world, and together they dramatically influenced Columbus, who was trying to find an alternative route to the east to challenge both the Portuguese and the Muslim Turks.

The year 1453 also marked the end of the Hundred Years' War between England and France, a war whose last battles, like the siege of Constantinople, involved the use of artillery, which some military historians view as the beginning of modern warfare. It is hard to imagine any development that has had more impact on the lives of all types of people – not simply soldiers and their generals – than modern warfare. Thus we can continue to debate the problematic notion of "modernity," but still find some (imperfect) markers in the 1450s.

The same is true for the point at which "early modern" became "modern." The beginning of the French Revolution in 1789 is the conventional breaking point, though

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historians have long recognized that using this date privileges the political history of western Europe. The late eighteenth century did bring significant developments in other areas and realms of life, however. During the 1780s, Edmund Cartwright invented the steam-powered loom, opening a spinning and weaving factory that used his new machines and represented a new type of workplace. In 1787, the first fleet of convicts set sail from Britain to Australia, carrying about a thousand people to a new colony on what was not yet designated a continent (that would come about a hundred years later). In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft published *The Vindication of the Rights of Women*, the first explicit call for political rights to be extended to the female half of the population. In the early 1790s, Prussia, Austria, and Russia completed their carving up of Poland, which disappeared from the map until the end of World War I. The years around 1789 therefore saw changes in economic structures, the process of colonization, political theory, and international relations, though the French Revolution has not lost its role as a major turning point.

Sources for early modern history

Everything we can learn about the past is, ultimately, based on original sources – that is, on documents and objects from the period we are investigating. Paying greater attention to the perspective of our sources and to our own perspective in evaluating them has not changed this. But what sources exist for early modern Europe? The easiest to access are printed materials, which became steadily more numerous as the technology of the printing press spread out from Germany after 1450. By 1500 over 200 cities and towns in Europe had presses, and scholars estimate that there were somewhere between eight and twenty million *incunables*. (Books printed in the first fifty years after the printing press was invented are called *incunables* or *incunabula*, from the Latin words meaning "in the cradle," because they come from the infancy of printing.) This vastly exceeds the number of books produced in all of Western history up to that point, and the amounts were so fantastic that some people saw printing as an invention of the devil. This opinion did not halt the spread of printing, however, and by 1600 about 200,000 different books or editions had been printed, in press runs that averaged about 1,000 copies each. The book was thus among the first modern mass-produced commodities.

Printers were not in the business for charity, and they printed anything that would sell: books for lawyers, such as classical legal codes like that of the Roman Emperor Justinian, collections of customary laws, and legal commentaries, all bound in fancy leather bindings in matching sets; books for doctors, surgeons, pharmacists, and midwives, such as herbals, books of instruction, and classical medical treatises; books for students, such as manuals of language instruction, grammars, dictionaries, cheap

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editions of the classics, often bound in paper in smaller formats so that students could easily carry them to class; books and other printed materials for members of the clergy, such as hymnals, Latin missals, breviaries, and psalters. All of these survive in far greater numbers than manuscript examples of the same types of texts.

Printed materials for what we might term the "general reader" are still more common, though it is important to recognize that even by 1789 most people in Europe could not read. Those who could were overwhelmingly urban, middle- or upper-class, and male. Their tastes in reading thus shaped the printed sources that are available to historians. What did literate people want to read? Until about 1700, they wanted to read religious materials; the best-selling authors, particularly after the Reformation in the 1520s but even before then, were religious. This was *both* because people were very interested in religion in general and in their own salvation and because religious works were cheap, lively, illustrated, and gory. There were plenty of extremely expensive whole Bibles, but things like Luther's sermons or those of popular Catholic preachers such as Bernard of Siena were published in very small paperback editions of one, two, or three sermons, putting them well within the reach of most literate buyers. In terms of their tone, they were much more like a modern political debate – the sort of thing that occurs now on television or online – than a complicated theological treatise. Particularly after the Reformation, religious opponents were often harsh in their invective, with lots of name-calling and scandal-mongering. Here, for example, is Luther: "Next one should take the pope, cardinals, and whatever servants there are of his idolatry and papal holiness, and rip out their tongues at the roots as blasphemers of God and nail them on the gallows, although all this is insignificant punishment in relation to their blasphemy and idolatry."[2] The illustrations in religious pamphlets were often just as dramatic, with woodcuts or engravings of Luther as the Anti-Christ or the pope as the Whore of Babylon. The pamphlet from which the quotation above comes has a woodcut illustration by Lucas Cranach showing four cardinals hanging on a scaffold with their tongues tacked up beside them. Books of saints' lives described not only their good deeds and acts worthy of emulation but also their violent and tragic deaths. The Reformation produced religious martyrs on all sides, and books describing their deaths were very popular; the best-selling book in English for many years was John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, which describes in great detail the deaths of many Protestants during the reign of Mary Tudor. It is clear that people got not only religious inspiration but what we might also call religious titillation from these best-sellers.

People did not spend all their time reading religious materials, however, and printers recognized very early that there was a market for other types of books and pamphlets. They printed historical romances, such as those of King Arthur and Tristan and Isolde, and by the seventeenth century novels that told of the triumphs and tragedies of contemporary fictional characters. They printed biographies of historical and contemporary figures, the more scandalous the better, and chronicles

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