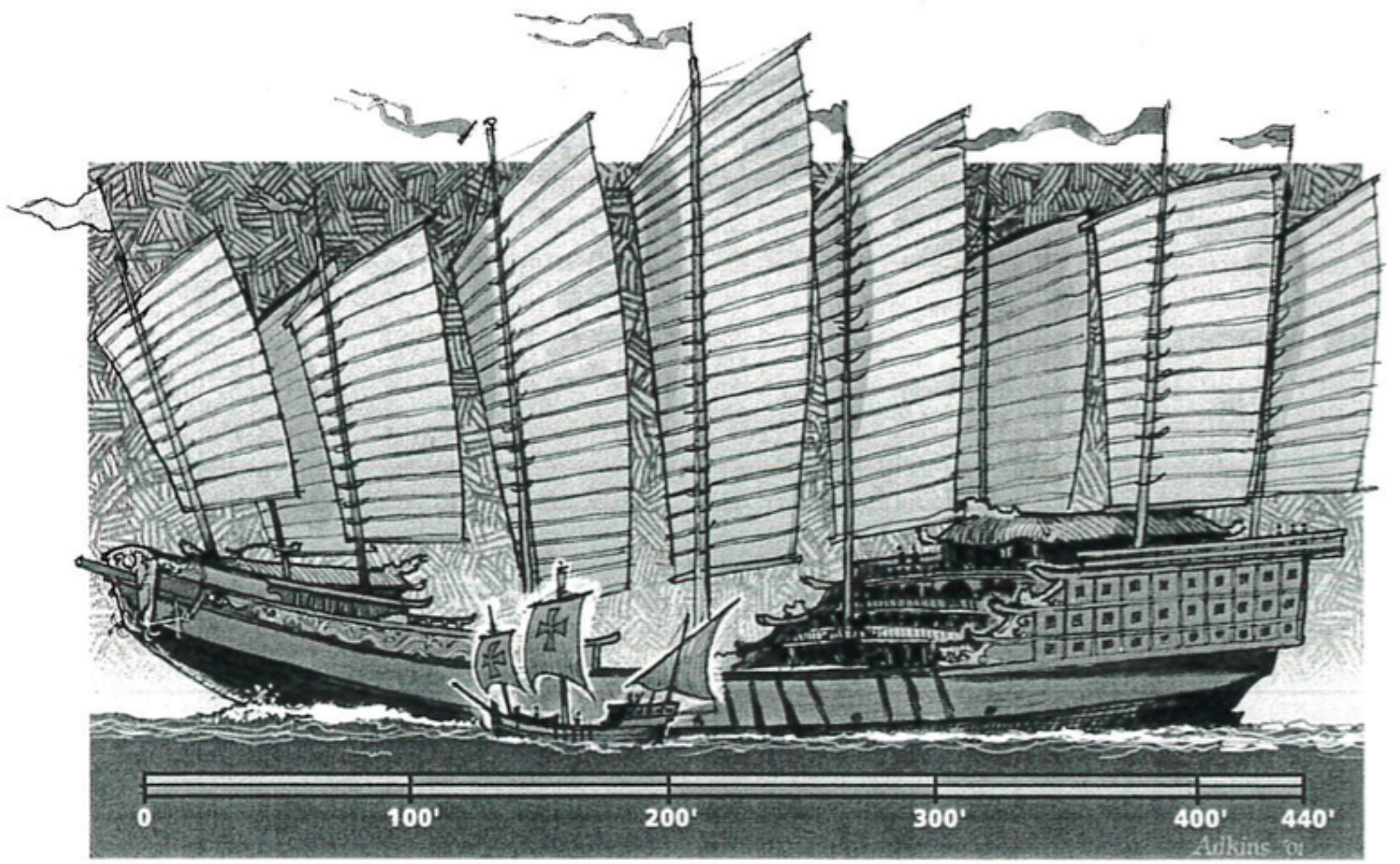
of a powerful bureaucracy. This enabled his successors to balance local sources of power with centralizing ambitions. It was, of course, imperfect. But, for the times, this was a very powerful dynasty.

TRADE UNDER THE MING

In the fourteenth century, China began its economic recovery from the devastation of disease and political turmoil. Gradually, political stability allowed trade to revive. China and the new dynasty's merchants reestablished their preeminence in long-distance, commercial exchange. Chinese silk and cotton textiles, as well as fine porcelains, ranked among the most coveted luxuries in the world. Wealthy families from Lisbon to Kalabar wished to wash their hands in delicate Chinese bowls and to make fine wardrobes from bolts of Chinese dyed linens and smoothly spun silk. When a Chinese merchant ship sailed into port, local trading partners and onlookers gathered to watch the unloading of the precious cargoes. During the Ming period, Chinese maritime traders based in ports along the southern coast, in Hangzhou, QuanZhou, and Guangzhou (Canton), were as energetic as their Muslim counterparts in the Indian Ocean. These ports were home to many prosperous merchants and the point of convergence for vast sea lanes. Leaving the mainland ports, Chinese merchants carried their wares to offshore islands, the Pescadores, and Taiwan. From there, they extended their commercial activities to the ports of Kyūshū, the Ryūkyūs, Luzon, and maritime Southeast Asia. As entrepôts for global goods, East Asian ports flourished. Former fishing villages evolved into major urban centers.

The Ming dynasty viewed overseas expansion with suspicion, however, Hongwu feared that too much commerce and contact with the outside world would cause instability and undermine the authority of his rule. In fact, Hongwu banned private maritime commerce in 1371. But enforcement of this prohibition was lax, and by the late fifteenth century maritime trade along the coast once again surged. Because so much of the thriving business of the South China Sea ports was conducted in defiance of official edicts, it led to ongoing friction between government officials and maritime traders. Although the Ming government, Linder pressure from the mercantile communities, did relax its ban and agreed to issue licenses for overseas trade in the mid-sixteenth century, it continued to vacillate in its policies. To Ming officials, the sea ultimately represented problems of order and control rather than opportunities.



Zheng He's Ship. A testament to centuries of experience in shipbuilding and maritime activities, the largest ship in Zheng He's armada in the early fifteenth century was about five times the length of Columbus's *Santa Maria* (pictured next to Zheng's ship) and had nine times the capacity in terms of tonnage. It had nine staggered masts and twelve silk sails, all designed to demonstrate the grandeur of the Ming Empire.

The spectacular exception to the Ming government's general attitude to maritime trade was a well-known series of officially sponsored maritime expeditions in the early fifteenth century. It was the ambitious Yongle Emperor who took the initiative. One of his loyal followers was a Muslim captured by the Ming army when he was a boy. He was castrated (as a eunuch, he could not continue his family line and so theoretically owed sole allegiance to the emperor) and sent to serve at the court. The boy, Zheng He (1371—1433), grew up to be a powerful and important military leader, entrusted by the emperor in 1405 with venturing out to trade, collect tribute, and display China's power to the world. From 1405 to 1433, Zheng He commanded the world's greatest armada and led seven naval expeditions. His larger ships reached 400 feet long (compared to Columbus's puny *Santa Maria*, which was 85 feet long), carried many hundreds of sailors on four tiers of decks, and maneuvered with sophisticated balanced rudders, nine masts, and watertight compartments. The first expedition set sail with a flotilla of 62 large ships and over 200 lesser ones. There were 28,000 men aboard, pledged to promote the cause of Ming glory.

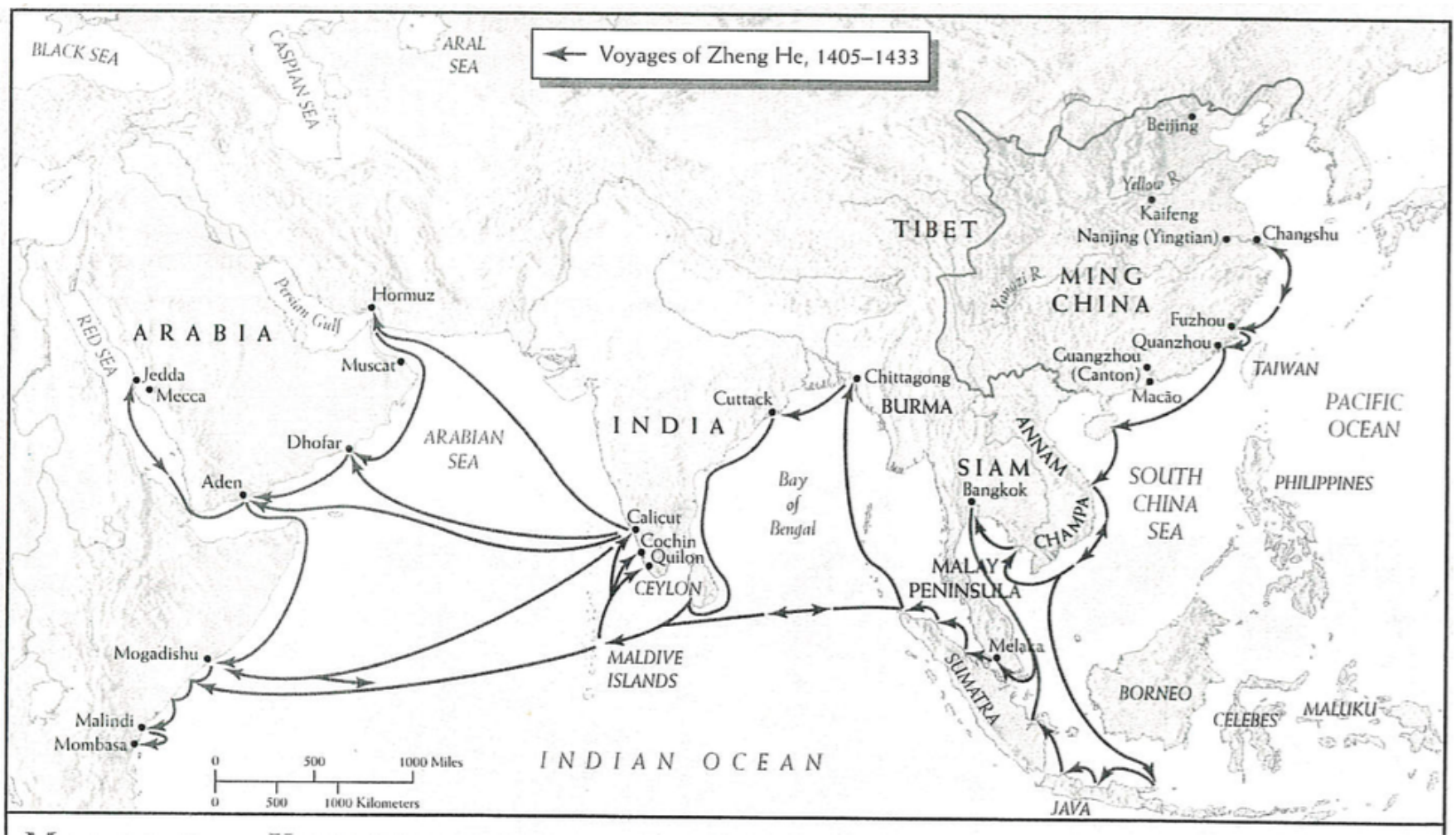
Zheng He and his entourage aimed to establish tributary relations with far-flung territories—from Southeast Asia to the Indian Ocean ports, to the Persian Gulf, and to the east coast of Africa (see Map 11-7). A central goal of these expeditions was not territorial expansion but rather control of trade and tribute. Zheng traded for ivory, spices, ointments, exotic woods, and even some wildlife, including giraffes, zebras, and ostriches. He also used his considerable force to intervene in local affairs, exhibiting the might of China in the process. If a community refused to pay tribute to the emperor, Zheng's fleet would attack it. Rulers or envoys from Southeast Asia, India, Southwest Asia, and Africa were encouraged to visit China. When local rulers proved to be uncooperative, Zheng might seize them and drag them all the way to China to face the emperor, as he did the rulers of Sumatra and Ceylon.

Although many of the items gathered on the voyages delighted the court, most were not the stuff of everyday commerce. The expeditions were, in short, glamorous but very expensive, and they came to a rather abrupt halt in 1433. Never again did the Ming undertake such large-scale maritime ventures. In fact, as early as 1424, when the Yongle Emperor died, the official expeditions had already lost their most important and enthusiastic patron. Moreover, by the mid-fifteenth century, there was a revival of military threats from the north. In 1449, the Ming court was shocked to discover that during a tour of the frontiers, the emperor had been captured and held hostage by the Mongols. Mindful of how the maritime-oriented Song dynasty had been eventually overrun by invaders from the north, officials withdrew imperial support for maritime ventures and instead devoted their energies to overland ventures and defense,

If Chinese maritime commerce continued without official patronage, the decision to abandon imperial support for oceanic exploration led to the decline of Chinese naval power and opened the way for newcomers and rivals. Southeast Asians took advantage by constructing large oceangoing vessels, known as "jong," which plied the regional trade routes from the fifteenth century to the early sixteenth century. These ships weighed an average of 350 to 500 tons, but they could be as big as 1,000 tons, with 1,000 men on board. They carried cargoes and passengers not only to Southern China, but also to the Indian Ocean as far west as Calicut and the Red Sea. Muslims also occupied the vacuum left by the Chinese, sailing from ports like Calicut across the Indian Ocean west to Mombassa and Mogadishu, and east to Melaka (Malacca). In addition, Japanese pirates took over some of the trade and made the work of Chinese overseas merchants that much more difficult. The Chinese decision after 1450 to focus on internal trade and defending northern borders just at the time others began to look outward and overseas was, in its way as monumental as that of Mehmed to take Constantinople, or that of an obscure Genoese voyager, Christopher Columbus, to attempt a perilous westward voyage across "the Ocean Sea."

CONCLUSION

Comparisons help us to understand complex institutions and historical events like those that took place in Afro-Eurasia in the two centuries after the Black Death. The ascent of new dynasties, except for the Mughals, stemmed, in the first instance, from the impact of the Mongol invasions and the Black Death. These states were shaped by varying local conditions—the ambition of a Ming warlord, the military expansionism of Turkish households on the edge of the Christian empire of Byzantium, the unifying vision of Mughal rulers in the northern part of India, and the desire of a variety of rulers to consolidate power in smaller states within Europe. But interactions between peoples also mattered. An eagerness to reestablish and expand trade networks following the Mongol invasions and the Black Death and the desire to convert unbelievers to "the true faith" set many of the peoples of the world in motion.



Map 11-7 Voyages of Zheng He, 1405 — 1433 Compare the voyages of Zheng He with the travels of Ibn Battuta and Marco Polo and with the voyages of the European explorers. What were the goals of these voyages? Did Zheng He travel across routes that were familiar to others at this time? Why did Chinese expeditions not have the same impact as European voyages of exploration toward the end of the fifteenth century?

The great dynasties that came to the fore in this period all had to deal with a common set of problems. They had to create legitimacy for themselves, had to ensure smooth procedures of succession to the throne when a monarch died, had to come to terms with religious groups, and had to establish working relationships with the nongovernmental elements in society, especially nobles, townspeople, merchants, and peasants. Yet, the states developed distinctive traits. The new AfroEurasian polities were a combination of outright political innovation, the use of well-known ways of ruling handed down within their own communities, and avid borrowing from nearby polities. The monarchies of Europe were in the process of achieving a high degree of internal unity, although this unity was often brought about through warfare with neighbors and in the context of a burgeoning cultural Renaissance. The Ottoman rulers perfected techniques for ruling a far-flung and ethnically and religiously diverse empire. They were able to move military forces swiftly, to allow local communities a degree of autonomy and at the same time to train a civil and military bureaucracy dedicated to the Ottoman and Sunni Islamic way of life. The Ming fashioned an imperial system based on a Confucian-trained bureaucracy and intense subordination, if not loyalty, to the emperor so that it could cope with the mammoth task of ruling over 200 million subjects. The rising monarchies of Europe, the Shiite regime of the Safavids in Persia, and the Ottoman state were all fired by religious fervor and sought to eradicate or subordinate the beliefs of other groups.

Afro-Eurasian societies and states recovered from the Mongols and the Black Death with greater political and economic powers than before. The Islamic states, the Ming Empire, and the emerging monarchies in Europe were all founded on military prowess and keen to ensure stable hierarchies and secure borders and, if possible, to expand their domains. Each recognized the importance of vigorous commercial activity. Each used dynastic marriage and succession, religion, and administrative bureaucracies to legitimize its rule. By the sixteenth century, societies across Afro-Eurasia were seeking to expand trade with their neighbors or to conquer them. The Islamic regimes especially, and their far-flung traders, increasingly engaged in long-distance commerce, and, by conquest and conversion, extended and strengthened their holdings, especially in the eastern Mediterranean.