Chapter 6

Europe in the Mongol Era

Figure 6.1

Having experienced many close calls with the weather during his years at sea, St. Godric was troubled on stormy nights for the rest of his life, thinking of the peril of sailors. He is best remembered for his extraordinary affinity for wild animals. He protected hunted animals and is said to have allowed snakes to warm themselves at his fire.

British Library, MS Cotton Faustina B, VI part ii, folio 16v (see entry for Godric in the Oxford Dictionary of Saints).

Contents and Learning Objectives

After reading each section, you should be able to answer these questions:

6.1 Eastern Europe

How and why was the Byzantine Empire in decline?

6.2 Eastern Europe under Mongol Attack

What was the impact of the Mongols on Eastern Europe?

6.3 Western Europe

What were some of the key changes in Western European politics and culture during the later Middle Ages (1200–1450)? Did the region have a distinctive political and cultural style?

6.4 Economy and Society

What were the main challenges and limitations in Western Europe's social and economic structure between 1200 and 1450?

Sometimes an individual life displays the complexities of a larger society. Godric—ultimately, Saint Godric—was a twelfth-century Englishman. His father was an ordinary farmer, but he soon developed greater ambition. Godric started as a peddler and, according to his biographer, quickly learned how to turn a profit on cheap items. He was physically strong and a hard worker—necessary qualities for a life of trade and travel. He soon turned to urban commerce, which was beginning to increase rapidly during the 1100s. He participated in seagoing trade with other ports of Britain and with the European continent, and he clearly made a good living, acquiring a number of ships.

But he was not entirely at peace with himself. His biographer, a clergyman named Reginald of Durham, is eager to emphasize Godric's consistent Christianity. He portrays Godric as content, with a simple life even amid his riches, and quickly attracted to the saints and a life of God. He argues that Godric's sea voyages, which were undoubtedly risky, helped the future saint realize the importance of divine aid—and surely religion did often provide a sense of security to venturesome merchants. Finally, however, a purely material life did not seem sufficient.

Godric began visiting saints' shrines with increasing frequency. He began to be disturbed by the high living—feasting and drinking—of some of his merchant colleagues. He also found that some of them stole outright. He attempted to correct them but was rebuffed. Ashamed of his own materialism (and possibly of some misdeeds of his own), he went on a pilgrimage to Rome. After that, with his parents' blessing, he decided to give himself entirely to a religious life. He sold all of his goods, gave the proceeds to the poor, and spent the rest of his life wandering as a religious hermit.

Few Europeans lived lives as polarized as that of Godric, but many, particularly in growing cities, felt some tension between commercial change and religious commitment (Figure 6.1). Could someone interested in making money keep a primary devotion to God? Some, as Godric discovered, would choose commerce. Others opted for religion. Still others worked for some combination. While few made Godric's dramatic ultimate choice, many merchants gave abundantly to the splendid churches of the cities, and not a few made deathbed renunciations of their commercial pasts.

Europe in 1200 was already divided in principle between an eastern zone of Orthodox Christianity and western Catholicism, though the boundary line between the two regions was fuzzy. Besides religion, the leading trade routes of the period had oriented both sections of Europe to north-south patterns (seeking to reach Constantinople and the Mediterranean), rather than mutual east-west links. During the Mongol period east-west divisions increased yet again, quite simply because much of Eastern Europe was taken over directly by the Mongols, while Western Europe, free from invasion, began to benefit significantly from the contacts the Mongol network facilitated.

1200 C.E.	1300 C.E.	1450–1480 C.E.
1203–1204 Fourth Crusade, Westerners sack Constantinople 1215 Magna Carta 1226–1270 Louis IX of France 1237–1241 Mongols (Tatars) capture Russia 1265 First Parliament in England	1303 Seizure of papacy by French king 1338–1453 Hundred Years' War 1348–1380 Black Death (bubonic plague)	1453 Ottoman Turks capture Constantinople; end of Byzantine Empire 1469 Formation of single Spanish monarchy 1480 Expulsion of Tatars from Russia

Far more occurred in this period than different kinds of interaction with the Mongols, of course. Several societies in Eastern Europe encountered new difficulties even before the arrival of the Mongols. For Western Europe, long recovering from the fall of the western Roman Empire, these centuries saw important innovations in a number of domains, from family to new kinds of intellectual initiatives. Political structures remained relatively weak and decentralized, but here too there were signs of change.

In 1204 a crusader force from the west, in theory on the way to bolster the Christian territory around Jerusalem, changed course and attacked and looted the great Byzantine city of Constantinople—though it was a Christian center. This followed a Byzantine attack on Catholic Christians living in the city, and it both reflected and contributed to the growing weakness of the Byzantine state. The episode—technically called the Fourth Crusade—severely worsened relationships between eastern and western Christians. Some argue that relations have been improved only recently, for the attack featured great brutality. While the Byzantine Empire was restored a few decades later, it never really recovered. For Western Europe the episode marked a reduction of the kind of religious fervor that had inspired the early crusades, in favor of growing interests in commercial advance and political rivalry. Europe was changing in many ways.

6.1 Eastern Europe

How and why was the Byzantine Empire in decline?

The decline of the great Byzantine Empire had begun well before the violence of the Fourth Crusade, after centuries in which the empire had fostered careful military and political organization while serving as the center for Orthodox Christianity and a major trade hub as well (Figure 6.2). Some important cultural activities continued, in both art and philosophy, but the Byzantine economy and political apparatus clearly deteriorated. As the empire weakened, Turkish migrants gained ground in many parts of the Northern Middle East, forming a kingdom east of Constantinople in the fourteenth century. These Turkish peoples, ultimately called **Ottomans**, had converted to Islam in their Central Asian homeland, and they brought considerable religious fervor as well as a taste for political expansion into this new domain.

Several small Christian states also emerged in the Balkans, in Southeastern Europe, as Byzantium declined, headed by the kingdom of Serbia. But in 1382 the Ottoman Turks crossed the Straits of the Dardanelles and entered the Balkans themselves, defeating the Serbs in a hard-fought battle and converting the kingdom into a dependent state before taking it over entirely in the fifteenth century. Ottoman entry to the Balkans

Ottomans
A dynasty established beginning in the thirteenth century by Turkic peoples from Central Asia. Though most of their empire's early territory was in Asia Minor, the Ottomans eventually captured Constantinople and made it the capital of an empire that spanned three continents and lasted over 600 years.

Figure 6.2

Dazzling mosaics from the early period of the Byzantine Empire illustrate some of the highest achievements of Byzantine religious art. This mosaic features a rather militant Christ the Redeemer.

B. O'Kane/Alamy Stock Photo

would include some conversions to Islam, though Christianity persisted amid a largely tolerant Turkish state. Ultimately, in 1453, the Turks would conquer Constantinople directly, effectively putting an end to the Byzantine Empire entirely and setting up a new political and religious configuration for the whole region (Map 6.1).

6.2 Eastern Europe under Mongol Attack

What was the impact of the Mongols on Eastern Europe?

Byzantine decline had also affected Russia and other parts of Central Europe, again even before 1200. This was a region that had strongly depended on trade exchanges with Constantinople, and new economic difficulties were almost inevitable. The Russian king was increasingly embroiled in quarrels with rival princes, meaning that a kingdom that had already been rather loosely ruled became less effective. Loss of Byzantine leadership also affected intellectual life, though Russian Christianity was firmly established, and traditions of religious art persisted strongly.

Then between 1237 and 1242 two successive Mongol invasions easily subdued the major Russian cities. Called Tatars by the Russians and feared and disliked—"the accursed raw-eating Tatars," as one chronicle put it—the Mongols established their own capital. Local Russian rulers were not displaced, but they had to spend some time at the Mongol court and pay various forms of tribute. Trade lapsed in Western Russia, though some furs were still sold in Constantinople before the Byzantine collapse. Russia was only lightly influenced by Mongol culture, though some Russian nobles adopted Mongol-style dress and may have picked up some new ideas about authoritarian rule. Christianity persisted, for the Mongols were religiously tolerant, as did the production of Byzantine-style icons, or saints' portraits, which became something of a Russian specialty.

Many Russian peasants either tried to flee from Mongol attacks or sought the protection of more powerful landowners—effectively becoming their serfs. The rise of Russian serfdom would be a major feature of rural life for many centuries.

Some Russian towns, however, clearly benefited from Mongol rule, taking advantage of new trading opportunities, particularly with Central Asia. Here too, in forging new links with Central Asia, was an innovation in Russian history that would have lasting consequences. Further, the city of Moscow benefited directly from Mongol rule through the collection of tribute for the Mongol rulers. The city itself was rebuilt and began to take control of the surrounding region. By the end of the fourteenth century the princes of Moscow assumed leadership of efforts to free Russia from Mongol control, winning several major battles and soon beginning to push Mongol forces back toward Central Asia. Clearly, Mongol impact on Russia—though remembered as a low point in the nation's history—had mixed results, creating new opportunities for some though also increasing the separation of Russia from the rest of Europe.

Mongol invaders had also poured into the kingdoms just west of Russia, notably Poland and Hungary. Here the Mongols did not actually set up a state, as they were called back to Central Asia to deal with political issues in their homeland. But their

invasions had devastated the region, and the kingdoms would take some time to recover.

By the late fourteenth century, however, several more positive developments took shape. In Poland Catholic religious activity resumed, backed by major monastic groups, and a number of new cities were formed. Increasing Jewish migration was encouraged, as Poland emerged as the most tolerant state in Europe, ultimately hosting up to three-quarters of the total Jewish population on the continent. Another important state emerged in Lithuania. Eastern Europe—west of Russia, north of the Balkans—increasingly settled into a pattern of regional kingdoms, often with extensive powers wielded by the aristocracy. Agriculture, centered on grain growing, expanded in the period as well.

In Russia itself regional rulers, headed by the dukes of Moscow, began to expand their authority against Mongol control, from the 1380s onward, winning several important military victories. By the mid-fifteenth century the territory around Moscow had effectively become independent, and a new period of Russian expansion and political development was on the horizon.

Map 6.1 EASTERN EUROPE AROUND 1400

The period from 1200 to 1450 was certainly not a high point in Eastern European history, with decline and invasion taking a considerable toll. In much of the region, Mongol impact was both direct and damaging. But the rise or recovery of new states in Russia and East-Central Europe was an important development by the end of the period, while the consolidation of a new Ottoman Empire ushered in new patterns in the Balkans and the Northern Middle East as well.

6.3 Western Europe

What were some of the key changes in Western European politics and culture during the later Middle Ages (1200–1450)? Did the region have a distinctive political and cultural style?

Patterns from the Germanic regions westward were quite different, in a region now free from major invasion from the outside. Mongol conquests not only did not reach Western Europe directly, but many Europeans were able to take advantage of Mongol rule to establish new and fruitful contacts with Asia. These contacts were one important element in a set of new gains for the region.

After the fall of the great Roman Empire, Western Europe entered a period usually called the Middle Ages—centuries characterized, among other things, by the spread and impact of Catholic Christianity. Medieval Europe was long subject to invasion and suffered from frequent disorder and limited urban life. Well before 1200, however, the region began to experience a number of innovations, some of which persisted into the fifteenth century.

Amid significant changes, Western Europe continued to lag behind Asia in a number of important respects. Political units remained largely decentralized. Trade and production advanced, but the region continued to depend on a somewhat inferior technology overall; a key reason that new contacts with Asia were so important as was the access they provided to inventions such as printing. Cities had gained some population, but they were smaller than the major centers in Asia, and the region continued to depend primarily on locally focused agriculture. Western Europe was also deeply affected by the new series of plagues in the fourteenth century—the fearsome **Black Death** (bubonic plague) that originated in China and spread to the Middle East and then the European continent, carrying off a third or more of the population. European cultural life also faltered in some respects, amid diverse trends.

Black Death
Plague that struck Europe in fourteenth century; significantly reduced Europe's population; affected social structure.

The Mongol period helped frame an important chapter in European development, and the contrast with the obvious difficulties in Eastern Europe was clear as well. But basic trends were decidedly mixed, with significant innovations balanced against new challenges. As one result, the region became measurably less tolerant. The centuries after 1200 saw a number of new attacks on the Jewish minority (and in Spain, on the Muslim minority as well), new laws directed against homosexuality, and new military attacks on dissident Christian groups.

6.3.1 Political Patterns

By 1200, important monarchies had developed in France and Britain, and Spain would soon join their ranks. Kings had developed complex relationships with leading noble families, many of whom kept their own armies. Small bureaucracies served the kings directly, along with a modest professional military force, though the kingdoms remained very decentralized and often depended on the nobles for support. In France, for example, King Philip II Augustus (1180–1223) used several methods to improve his position as ruler. He expanded the territory under his control in a series of military campaigns. He paid middle-class officials in his administration, regarding them as more loyal and more talented than regional nobles. He was able to send some central officials into outlying areas, to bolster royal control. And he used growing tax revenues to hire mercenary soldiers under his direct authority. Here, clearly, was the nucleus of a more effective central government. But it had serious limits, as regional nobles had considerable independence, and even the king had to be sure to select aristocrats as military generals. Monarchy remained a balancing act in Western Europe.

Stronger governments brought some other changes. Headed by France, several of the monarchies sought to rein in the power of the pope, who was often regarded more as a political rival than as a religious leader. As Christian victories against Muslims in Spain mounted—a Christian victory in 1212 reduced Spanish Islam to scattered local holdings, particularly around the city of Granada—new governments were established on the peninsula. Then in 1375 two regional units, Castile and Aragon, effectively united, creating a more powerful Spanish monarchy (Map 6.2). In turn, this government, along with the monarchy established in Portugal, began actively sponsoring new voyages of exploration along the Atlantic coast of Africa—a major initiative.

However, the major monarchies were also marked, from the thirteenth century onward, by important new limitations on royal power. In 1215 powerful nobles in Britain, resenting the efforts of an unpopular king to try to raise revenues, forced the ruler to

sign the **Magna Carta**. This document carefully limited royal power by requiring permission from the nobles to raise tax levels and agreement from the church in the appointment of religious officials. The Magna Carta even called for creation of a council of nobles to serve as a check on the royal government.

Later in the thirteenth century these principles were more clearly translated into action, through the creation of **parliaments**. The first British parliament met in 1265, with a House of Lords representing the nobility and church leaders, and a House of Commons drawn from wealthy townspeople. The British parliament insisted that kings receive parliamentary permission before instituting any new taxes; and through this power, they could also advise the monarch on other issues. Similar parliaments developed in France and in several French regions, and also in Spain and key states in Germany, during the same period.

The rise of parliaments was an important development in European political history, marking a clear belief that the growing power of kings should be controlled. Developments were still somewhat tentative: Parliaments met, for example, only when kings called them, which limited their effectiveness. And of course these were in no sense democratic bodies, for they represented only a small upper slice of the population. The dance between kings and parliaments would remain complex for many centuries.

Map 6.2 WESTERN EUROPE TOWARD THE END OF THE MIDDLE AGES, C. 1360

Near the end of the postclassical period, strong monarchies had consolidated their holdings, and boundaries between states were coming into sharper focus.

In addition to working to expand their powers, and also usually to ensure relatively peaceful transmission of authority from one monarch to the next through inheritance, European kings continued to regard war as an important mission. French and British forces clashed recurrently, for example, over British claims over some territories in France. In the fourteenth century a long though intermittent war resulted – the **Hundred Years' War**, though in fact it lasted longer than this – in which, ultimately, the French proved victorious.

Other parts of Western Europe were not for the most part organized into even partially successful central political structures. Germany was in principle ruled by an emperor, but in fact the region was a network of decentralized states controlled directly by some bishops, or local nobles, or even cities. Regional nobles also effectively controlled the Low Countries, though city administrations gained increasing voice. Italy was also a patchwork of regional monarchies and city-states—with territories directly controlled by the pope adding to the diversity. Key Italian city-states began to gain significant new authority from the thirteenth century onward, sometimes governed by councils of wealthy merchants, sometimes by a self-appointed ruling family closely connected to the merchant class. Several of these states, benefiting from growing trade revenues, began

Magna Carta

Great Charter issued by King John of England in 1215; confirmed feudal rights against monarchical claims; represented principle of mutual limits and obligations between rulers and feudal aristocracy.

parliaments

Bodies representing privileged groups; institutionalized feudal principle that rulers should consult with their vassals; found in England, Spain, Germany, and France.

Hundred Years' War

Conflict between England and France from 1337 to 1453; fought over lands England possessed in France and feudal rights versus the emerging claims of national states.

to establish additional government functions, such as patronizing the arts, conducting censuses and other inquiries, and even appointing official diplomats to represent the city to other powers. At the same time many of the Italian city-states frequently engaged in bitter regional warfare.

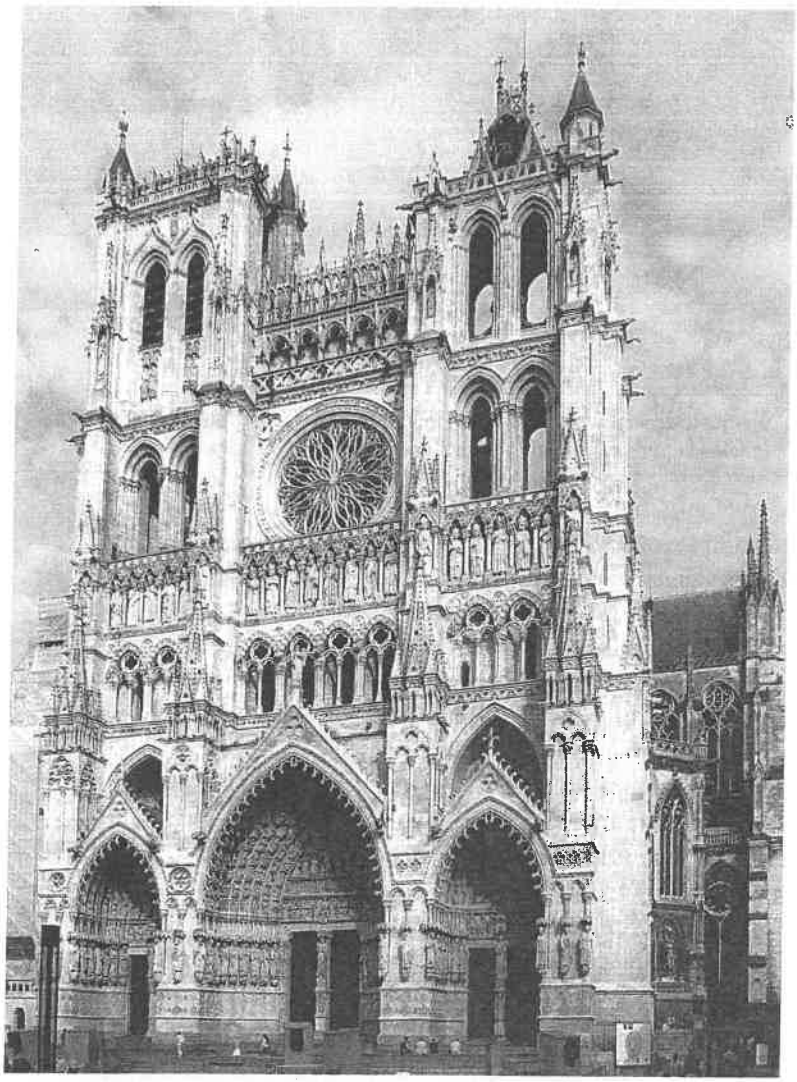
Overall, the period from 1200 to 1450 in Western Europe saw a rather complex mix of political developments, in what remained a very divided subcontinent. Government powers and functions grew in several cases, but amid some new checks and distractions. No European government at this point matched the structure or range of activities of some of the leading Asian regimes.

Thomas Aquinas
[Thomas ah-KWY-nuhs] (1225–1274) Creator of one of the great syntheses of medieval learning; taught at University of Paris; author of several *Summas;* believed that through reason it was possible to know much about natural order, moral law, and the nature of God.

6.3.2 Cultural Patterns

Key cultural trends in the thirteenth century capped a momentum that had begun somewhat earlier. Improved resources facilitated significant new church building, much of it in the Gothic style that served as an architectural hallmark of this period in European history. In France, for example, 80 new cathedrals were built between 1180 and 1270 (Figure 6.3).

Figure 6.3



The cathedral of Notre-Dame (Our Lady) at Amiens, France, is a grand example of Gothic architecture, which flourished during the later Middle Ages in Western Europe. The cathedral, which dwarfs the surrounding buildings, was built between 1220 and 1402 and was the tallest building in Europe at the time of its completion.

Ian Dagnall/Alamy Stock Photo

Creativity showed also in the continuing effort to integrate classical philosophy and Christian theology; debates over the respective roles of faith and reason mirrored earlier discussions in the Islamic Middle East, partly through the translation of some of the key Middle Eastern texts. The theologian **Thomas Aquinas,** an Italian monk working in Paris, sought to sum up all relevant knowledge in a massive series of books—called *Summas,* or compendia, of all important knowledge. Aquinas made it clear that faith always must come first, but he greatly expanded the scope for human reason – including the human capacity to understand the natural order. Aquinas also sought to show how reason could supplement faith in providing clear ethical guidelines, not only for personal behavior but in economic life as well.

An expanded scope for rational philosophy also helped promote some new work in science, again from the thirteenth century onward. To be sure, many university faculty members rather mindlessly promoted memorization of the great Greek scientific and mathematical works. But some practical research emerged as well. For example, around Oxford University, in England, clergymen such as Roger Bacon worked on optics, expanding previous findings by Muslim scholars. One important product of this work was the invention of eyeglasses. Research in chemistry and astronomy also advanced. This was not, as yet, a huge outpouring, and it was overshadowed by the continued emphasis on religious faith, but it did set a basis for later work.

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, however, formal philosophy became increasingly narrow. No one clearly maintained the kind of

vision Aquinas had represented, and indeed many religious authorities now criticized Aquinas for giving too much play to human reason. A movement called **scholasticism**, so named because of its base in the schools and universities, began to feature endless and rather sterile debates over questions such as how many angels could dance on the head of a pin.

scholasticism
Dominant medieval philosophical approach; so called because of its base in the schools or universities; based on use of logic to resolve theological problems.

Partly because of this seeming dead end, and the declining intellectual vitality of many of the universities, creative emphasis shifted to some new directions. In both France and England, a growing number of writers began to explore themes in their own vernacular languages, rather than relying on Church Latin. Geoffrey Chaucer (d. 1400) would become known as the effective father of English literature, writing a series of lively stories about popular behavior and mixing Christian piety with a delight in earthy themes. Chaucer's famous *Canterbury Tales* poked fun at the hypocrisy of many Christians while also capturing some of the small tragedies of human existence. The French poet Francois Villon, writing around 1450, wrote about some of his criminal encounters with the police and other worldly topics in a lyrical French style. He also conveyed, in largely secular terms, some of the terror and poignancy of death. Clearly, the thematic range and the linguistic variety of European literature were expanding in important ways.

Various European authors also began to develop poems and stories emphasizing courtly love—the great passion that could draw men and women together, though appropriately restrained by manners and morality. For example, Christine de Pisan—an Italian woman working in France—wrote a series of ballads dedicated to leading female aristocrats and members of the royal family, including love themes but also fanciful renderings of older Greek stories recast to praise the French monarchy.

Work in the visual arts—including, of course, the great churches—continued to emphasize religious scenes in Northern Europe. Some historians have argued that, by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, some of this religious art was becoming less creative, more crowded and mechanical, possibly sharing some of the same kinds of cultural fatigue that was showing up in philosophy.

In the Italian city-states, however, a newer kind of artistic movement was taking shape, reflecting a revival of interest in classical styles and themes and a reduction—though not an elimination—of religious focus. Growing trade wealth and the secular interests of the city-state rulers, eager to demonstrate their success by patronizing great works of art, contributed to the cultural momentum. Thus Italian architects began to revive classical styles for both churches and public buildings, instead of the **Gothic** style that remained dominant to the north. In painting, Giotto (d. 1337) introduced a new understanding of perspective, far different from the stylized religious figures that had previously predominated, though still focused on religious themes. Later Italian artists would extend these findings and also deal with secular subjects from the classical past as well as Christian scenes.

Gothic
An architectural style that developed during the Middle Ages in Western Europe; featured pointed arches and flying buttresses as external supports on main walls.

In literature writers such as Dante (d. 1321) expressed themselves in Italian, though some use of Latin persisted. Dante wrote eloquently about religious subjects, as in his *Divine Comedy*, but also about more secular issues such as the depth and restraint of courtly love. Later in the fourteenth century **Francesco Petrarch** would work more specifically on classical materials, as in his rediscovery of the letters of the Roman politician Cicero, but he also authored lyric love poetry and spent a considerable amount of time touting his own individual achievements. Only at the end of his life would he wonder if he had strayed too far from religion—an obvious tension as Italian work in literature and philosophy broadened out.

Francesco Petrarch
[PEE-trahrk] (1304–1374) One of the major literary figures of the Western Renaissance; an Italian author and humanist.

These cultural developments—the revival of classical styles and themes, the focus on this-worldly subjects, the pride in sheer literary and artistic skill and innovation—added up to the first phase of what would ultimately be called the **Renaissance**, offering a very different set of emphases from those that had characterized European culture

Renaissance
[REHN-uh-sahns] Cultural and political movement in Western Europe; began in Italy c. 1400; rested on urban vitality and expanding commerce; featured literature and art with distinctly more secular priorities than those of the Middle Ages.

Figure 6.4

On the night of March 20, 1212, the Count of Sasso-Rosso's 18-year-old daughter, Clare, stole away from her father's house to dedicate herself to a life of poverty and holiness. She resisted all attempts by her father to bring her home and by the church to persuade her to accept some income as a guarantee against starvation for her order, which depended entirely on the begging of local friars for its daily bread. Clare was named abbess of a convent just three years later, and she never again left its grounds. Her sisters, her mother, and an aunt followed her into the order. She was canonized Saint Clare of Assisi in 1255.

Chronicle/Alamy Stock Photo

since the rise of Christianity. The impact of these developments would echo more widely in Europe after 1450, as the Renaissance continued and expanded.

Popular culture in Europe was not fully captured by the more formal intellectual and artistic developments, though writers like Chaucer and Villon did try to express the experience of ordinary people. The expansion of city life was accompanied by significant new forms of popular piety from the late eleventh century onward. Particularly interesting was the growing enthusiasm for the veneration of Mary, the mother of Jesus, seen as an important source of religious healing and a merciful intermediary between ordinary people and God. Growing interest in the worship of several of the saints showed a similar interest in more accessible symbols of piety and holiness (Figure 6.4). Participation in religious pilgrimages to regional holy sites—described so vividly by Chaucer—mixed popular religious commitment with more earthly entertainments. Popular Christianity also maintained a strong belief in magic and magical rituals—to deal with problems like infertility, for example—which Christian leaders disapproved of but largely held back from attacking.

Popular piety suggested one other potential tension in the broader context of Western European culture and politics by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The Catholic Church at this point featured many officials whose secular interests were at least as great as their religious commitments. This was not an unprecedented tension—earlier movements had worked to reemphasize religious goals—but it was gaining renewed notice. Many leading churchmen, often personally wealthy, spent a great deal of their time in the political sphere. At the top, the papacy was increasingly involved in tensions with some of the leading monarchs and also firmly planted in the context of the Italian city-states, participating actively in regional wars and political alignments. Many popes also were drawn to the enticing culture of the Renaissance, actively patronizing the new artistic styles. It was not hard to see some gap between these interests and the concerns of more ordinary Christians.

A few regional leaders began to highlight this tension. In England John Wycliffe, a religious scholar, attacked the privileges of the Catholic clergy and urged more attention to ordinary religious interests. He pioneered in translating parts of the Bible into English to make the New Testament more directly accessible. His followers attacked other aspects of the Church, including the position of pope itself.

Wycliffe's work strongly influenced a Czech priest, Jan Hus (d. 1415), who similarly denounced the moral failings of the clergy and the political preoccupations of the pope. His ideas spread widely in the region, where resentment of the Church hierarchy ran high.

None of this as yet added up to a major religious crisis. The pope moved actively against Hus, who was ultimately burned at the stake for heresy. But many followers remained unrepentant, and concerns about Church doctrines and policies would bubble up again after 1500, this time far more seriously.

The centuries between 1200 and 1450 constituted an important cultural moment for Western Europe, in part because major developments did not neatly cohere. Catholic Christianity continued to shape cultural activities in many ways. But the declining hold of Latin, the rise of new kinds of artistic styles and literary themes, the surge of popular piety, even the declining vitality of university-based philosophy, all suggested considerable cultural turmoil, which in turn would continue to shape—and shake—European culture for many decades after 1450.

Thinking Historically

Western Civilization

IN RECENT YEARS, HISTORIANS HAVE BEEN critically examining the term "Western civilization," which is sometimes (wrongly) taken as self-evident.

The concept of "the West" or "Western civilization" was actively used in the twentieth-century Cold War with the Soviet Union, yet it is hard to define. We have seen that the classical Mediterranean world did not directly identify a "Western" civilization, and this classical heritage was used most selectively by postclassical Western Europe. Classical Mediterranean civilization would strongly influence Eastern Europe and also the Arab world; it was not a distinctively "Western" preserve, though Western intellectuals and artists would often refer to classical values. Further, the consistent absence of political unity in Western Europe complicates any definition of common structures.

Western Europeans could not have identified Western civilization in the postclassical period, but they would have recognized the concept of Christendom, along with some difference between their version of this religion and that of Eastern Europe. The first definition of this civilization was primarily religious, although artistic forms associated with religion also figured in this definition. Regional cultures varied, of course, and there was no linguistic unity, but cultural developments in one area—for example, the creation of universities, which started in Italy—surfaced elsewhere fairly quickly. Supplementing culture were some reasonably common social structures—like manors and guilds—and trade patterns that increasingly joined Northern and much of Southern Europe. The resulting civilization was by no means as coherent as Chinese civilization; many of its members detested each other, like the English and French, who were often in conflict and sometimes engaged in name-calling (the English were "les goddams," because they swore so much, and the French were "frogs" because of what they ate). Until very recently, Europeans thought in terms of distinctive national histories, not European ones. But it is possible to define some common features that differentiated Europeans from those of neighboring civilizations. Even as the civilization began to change, late in the postclassical period, it preserved some common directions. Debate continues about the balance between the Western and more purely national features.

Defining Western civilization is also complicated...because Western leaders copied so much from other societies.

Defining Western civilization is also complicated in the postclassical period because Western leaders copied so much from other societies. They eagerly learned of new technologies from Asia. They benefited from Arab mathematics and philosophy, and they imitated Muslim commercial law on how to treat tradespeople from outside the locality. But even in imitating, most Europeans were keenly conscious of their distinctiveness as Christians. They sometimes resented the societies they copied from. Toward the end of the Middle Ages, as Europeans began to seek a new role in the world at large, the openness to imitation also began to decline, as part of the further definition of a Western or European identity.

Review Questions:

1. Was there a Western civilization before the postclassical period? What were the defining features of Western civilization by the end of the postclassical period?
2. How does the definition of Western civilization today compare to that of the postclassical period?

6.4 Economy and Society

What were the main challenges and limitations in Western Europe's social and economic structure between 1200 and 1450?

As in philosophy, strong economic and social trends had taken hold in Western Europe well before 1200 and would continue to define the major developments of the thirteenth century. Population growth continued, as did the growth of cities. Agricultural production advanced as well. Though many European peasants remained serfs, tied to service and dues on their lords' estates, internal trade grew, and a variety of merchants—from France, but particularly from the port cities of Italy—reached out dynamically into the Mediterranean and beyond, benefiting from new knowledge of the compass and ship design gained from contact with Islamic merchants. Banking institutions expanded, and the Catholic Church began to modify some of its earlier hostility to bankers and merchants

Figure 6.5

This fourteenth-century miniature shows views of a banking house. People might keep money in banks, seek loans, or arrange transactions with merchants in faraway centers of trade.

Album/Alamy Stock Photo

(Figure 6.5). European economic levels remained inferior to those of Asia. The smaller size and lesser amenities of the cities reflected the difference. But there was no question that many Europeans were benefiting from some positive trends.

Significant trade levels carried into the fourteenth century. Italian city-states like Venice and Genoa benefited from the decline of Byzantium to extend their activities not only in the Mediterranean but in the Black Sea, where, among other things, they traded for Russian furs. Italian ships crisscrossed the Mediterranean, often carrying Muslims from places like North Africa on the pilgrimage to Mecca.

The growth of trade and banking by the fourteenth century served as the origins of capitalism in Western Europe. The greater Italian and German bankers and long-distance merchants were clearly embraced **capitalism** in their willingness to invest in trading ventures with the expectation of profit. Given the dangers of trade by land and sea, the risks in these investments were substantial, but profits of 100 percent or more were possible. In many cities, such as London, groups of powerful merchants banded together to invest in international trade, each buying shares in the venture and profiting or losing accordingly.

Individual merchants could amass—and lose—great fortunes. Jacques Coeur (JAHK KUR) (c. 1395–1456), one of Europe's most extraordinary merchants, demonstrated the opportunities and risks of new forms of trade. The son of a furrier, he married the daughter of a royal official and served as a tax official until he was caught minting coins with less valuable metals. He then founded a trading company that competed with Italians and Spaniards in dealing with the Middle East. He visited Damascus to buy spices, setting up a regular trade in rugs, Chinese silk, and Indonesian spices and sugar. He also became financial advisor and supplier to the French king and was ennobled. With the largest fleet ever owned by a French subject, Coeur surrounded himself with splendor, even arranging with the pope for his 16-year-old son to become an archbishop. But he had enemies, many of them nobles in debt to him, and they turned the king against him. Tortured, he admitted to various crimes, including supplying weapons to Muslims. His property was confiscated, and—adventurer to the last—he died on a Greek island while serving in a papal fleet against the Turks.

capitalism
Economic system based on profit-seeking, private ownership, and investment.

By world standards this was not a totally unprecedented merchant spirit. European traders were still less venturesome and less wealthy than some of their Muslim counterparts. Nor was Western society as tolerant of merchants as Muslim or Indian societies were. Yet Western commercial endeavors clearly were growing. Because Western governments were weak, with few economic functions, merchants had a freer hand than in many other civilizations. Many of the growing cities were ruled by commercial leagues. Monarchs liked to encourage the cities as a counterbalance to the power of the landed aristocracy, and in the later Middle Ages and beyond, traders and kings typically were allied. However, aside from taxing merchants and using them as sources of loans, royal governments did not interfere much with trading activities. Merchants even developed their own codes of commercial law, administered by city courts. Thus, the rising merchant class was staking out an unusually powerful and independent role in European society.

Capitalism was not yet typical of the Western economy, even aside from the moral qualms fostered by the Christian tradition. Most peasants and landlords had not become enmeshed in the market system. In the cities, the dominant economic ethic stressed group protection, not profit making. The characteristic institution was not the international trading firm but the merchant or artisan guild. **Guilds** grouped people in the same business or trade in a single city, sometimes with loose links to similar guilds in other cities. These organizations were new in Western Europe, although they resembled guilds in various parts of Asia but with greater independence from the state. They stressed security and mutual control. Merchant guilds thus attempted to give all members a share in any endeavor. If a ship pulled in loaded with wool, the clothiers' guild of the city insisted that all members participate in the purchase so that no one member would monopolize the profits.

guilds
Sworn associations of people in the same business or craft in a single city; stressed security and mutual control; limited membership, regulated apprenticeship, guaranteed good workmanship; often established franchise within cities.

Artisan guilds were made up of the people in the cities who actually made cloth, bread, jewelry, or furniture. These guilds tried to limit their membership so that all members would have work. They regulated apprenticeships to guarantee good training but also to ensure that no member would employ too many apprentices and so gain undue wealth. They discouraged new methods because security and a rough equality, not maximum individual profit, were the goals; here was their alternative to the capitalistic approach. Guilds also tried to guarantee quality so that consumers would not have to worry about shoddy quality on the part of some unscrupulous profit-seeker. Guilds played an important political and social role in the cities, giving their members recognized status and often a voice in city government. Their statutes were in turn upheld by municipal law and often backed by the royal government as well.

Despite the traditionalism of the guilds, manufacturing and commercial methods improved in medieval Europe, although the region still lagged well behind Asia in ironmaking and textile manufacture. In a few areas, such as clockmaking—which involved both sophisticated technology and a concern for precise time initially linked to the schedule of church services—European artisans led the world. Furthermore, some manufacturing spilled beyond the bounds of guild control. Particularly in the Low Countries and parts of Italy, groups of manufacturing workers were employed by capitalists to produce for a wide market. Their techniques were simple, and they worked in their own homes, often alternating manufacturing labor with agriculture. Their work was guided not by the motives of the guilds but by the inducements of merchant capitalists, who provided them with raw materials and then paid them for their production.

Thus, by the later Middle Ages, Western Europe's economy and society embraced many contradictory groups and principles. Commercial and capitalist elements jostled against the slower pace of economic life in the countryside and even against the dominant group protectionism of most urban guilds. Most people remained peasants, but a minority had escaped to the cities, where they found more excitement, along with increased danger and higher rates of disease. Medieval tradition held that a serf who managed to live in the city for a year and a day became a free person. A few prosperous capitalists flourished, but most people operated according to very different economic values, directed toward group welfare rather than individual profit. This was neither a static society nor an early model of a modern commercial society. It had its own flavor and its own tensions—the fruit of several centuries of economic and social change.

6.4.1 Limited Sphere for Women

The increasing complexity of medieval social and economic life may have had one final effect, which is familiar from patterns in other agricultural societies: new limits on the conditions of women. Women's work remained vital in most families. The Christian emphasis on the equality of all souls and the practical importance of women's monastic groups in providing an alternative to marriage continued to have distinctive effects on women's lives in Western society. The veneration of Mary and other female religious

figures gave women real cultural prestige, counterbalancing the biblical emphasis on Eve as the source of human sin. In some respects, women in the West had higher status than their sisters under Islam: They were less segregated in religious services (although they could not lead them) and were less confined to the household. Still, women's voice in the family may have declined in the Middle Ages.

Urban women often played important roles in local commerce and even operated some craft guilds, but they found themselves increasingly hemmed in by male-dominated organizations. In contrast to Islam, women were not assured of property rights. By the late Middle Ages, a literature arose that stressed women's roles as the assistants and comforters to men, listing supplemental household tasks and docile virtues as women's distinctive sphere. Patriarchal structures seemed to be taking deeper root.

6.4.2 A Social and Economic Crisis

Western Europe's social and economic structure was deeply shaken in the middle of the fourteenth century by the arrival of bubonic plague, spread through trading contacts with the Middle East. Beginning in 1347 and extending for many decades, the Black Death would kill up to a third of the total European population—and some recent estimates are even higher—reversing the previous growth trends and causing massive shock and dislocation. Cities and villages alike had to construct pits to contain the masses of dead bodies. Scholars are still debating what caused the plague—rats were once blamed, but now the focus is more on lice spread by unclean human beings—but the main point is the rapidity and severity of the plague's impact (Figure 6.6).

Many people sought to flee the cities, where the contagion was most obvious. For some, the scourge prompted new religious fervor, in hopes of God's protection and forgiveness. Hostility to Jews, gypsies, and other minorities increased, as some held them responsible for an otherwise inexplicable disaster.

Labor supplies were disrupted. With workers in short supply, many sought to improve wages or working conditions to compensate for the shortage of workers. At the same time, some landlords and other employers were trying to impose new burdens. In France, problems were compounded by the costs and disruptions of the early stages of the Hundred Years' War.

Figure 6.6

This painting shows survivors at Tournai placing plague victims in coffins before mass burial became the only way to keep up with the deaths. The Black Death, which killed up to a third of the population of Europe, devastated medieval society.

Photo 12/Archives Snark/Alamy Stock Photo

Massive rural protests broke out in several regions, as in France in 1358 and Britain in 1381. Peasants sought to reduce the burdens of serfdom and gain fuller access to the land. Many urban workers sought higher wages. A strong egalitarian streak ran through some of the protests. English rioters proclaimed that, when humanity began in the days of Adam and Eve, there was no noble class—and thus there should be none now. Most of the riots were put down, sometimes with great brutality, but—like the plague—they would sometimes recur in later decades.

In the long run, the plague and associated tensions probably had two or three structural results. First, for some (though not all) peasants, serfdom was loosened. Many peasants were able to convert their annual payments and work service obligations to a money rent, which might still be resented but was often a bit easier to handle. A looser system of serfdom might motivate peasants to increase their agricultural production, and it also made it easier for people to move around seeking work. These developments were gradual and uneven, but they did alter some features of the labor market.

Some historians believe, further, that labor costs in Europe began to rise above levels in some other societies, as for a time economic activity grew more rapidly than population did. It is vital to note that great poverty remained—this was not, overall, a wealthy society. But some shifts may have begun that would affect economic decisions later on.

Finally, and more certainly, family patterns began to change in distinctive ways. Probably in order to protect property holdings against the burden of too many children, most ordinary Western Europeans began to marry later—in their late twenties. The result increased the importance of the nuclear family—parents and their children—for the simple reason that, when children were born to parents near or past 30 years of age, their grandparents were likely to be quite old or even already deceased. Large, extended families—common in many other societies—could not be sustained in these conditions. This new "European-style family" was certainly distinctive. It depended on fairly strict controls over the sexual behavior of young adults, asked now to delay marriage until well after puberty. It might promote more cooperation between husbands and wives in the family itself, since they had few adult relatives to depend on. Here was another component in the changing European social environment by 1450.

Global Connections and Central Themes

Europe and the World

European patterns during the period from 1200 to 1450 were strongly affected by the rise (and then decline) of the Mongols, though obviously they were not fully determined by this crucial development. Mongol invasions and occupation had a deep impact on much of Eastern Europe, along with the fading of the Byzantine Empire and the influx of the Ottoman Turks. Russia's position changed considerably, as ties to other parts of Europe waned while interactions with Central Asia intensified.

Mongol impact on Western Europe was less profound, since the region did not experience direct invasion. Developments in this part of the continent reflected a number of factors, from new reactions to royal initiatives in politics to the emergence of a variety of new cultural interests. But the rise of the Mongols did have decisive importance for Western Europe's contacts with the wider world, particularly in expanding opportunities for interaction with Asia. Travel to and from China, along with steady growth in exchanges with the Middle East, stoked appetites for wider trade and also increased European exposure to more advanced technologies and political systems.

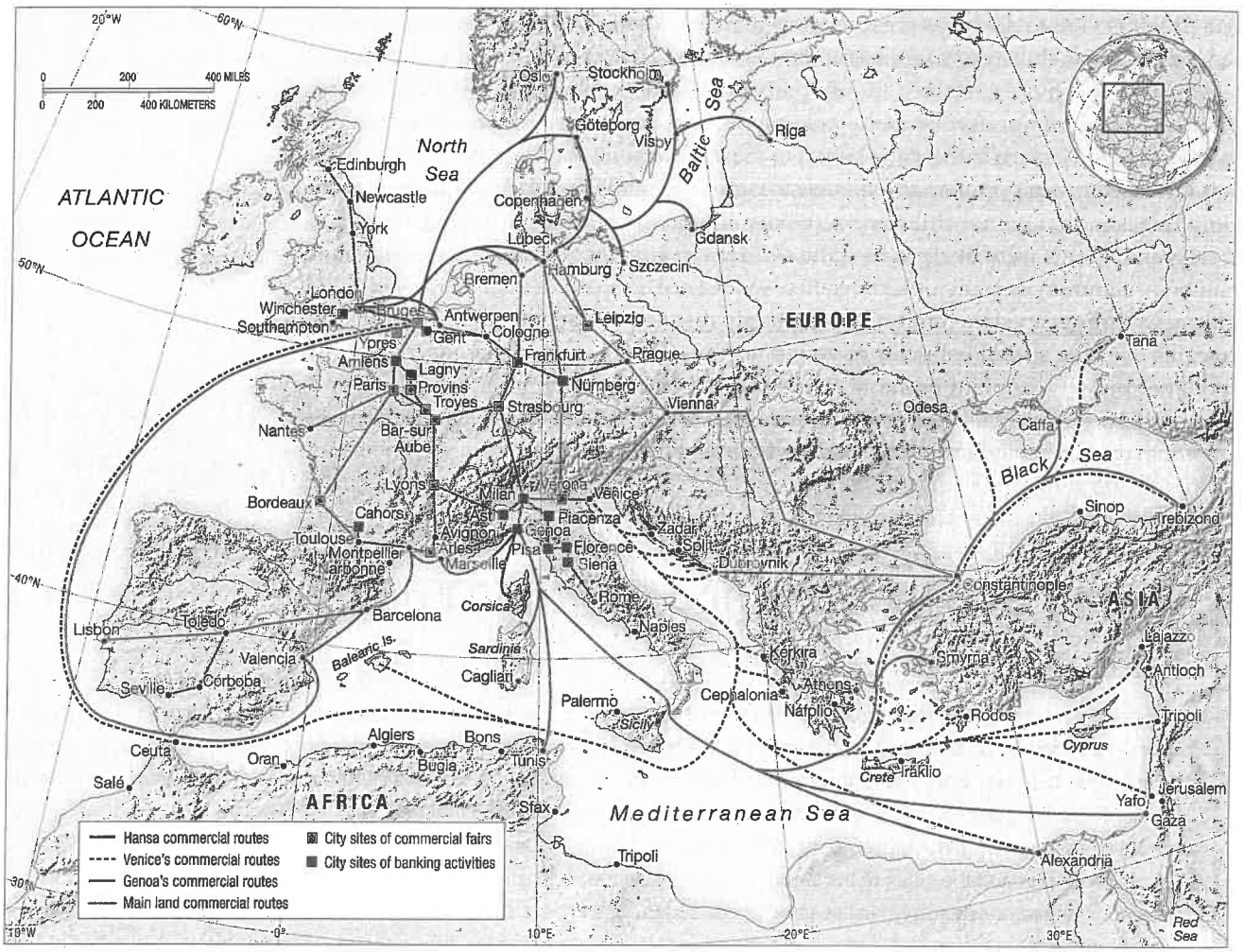
By 1200, thanks in part to the earlier crusades to the Holy Land, some Europeans became increasingly aware of the products available through greater trade with the Middle East. Spices—including sugar, a highly valued sweetener for upper-class occasions, and an expensive one at that—gained new attention, along with some manufactured products such as metal wares. These contacts had also provided Europeans with knowledge of new technologies such as the compass and improved sailing ships (Map 6.3). Europeans had also imported elements of Arab science and mathematics, plus artistic styles and even the idea of a special commercial law. It was also from the Arabs that Europeans learned how to manufacture paper, setting up the region's first factory, in Sicily, at the end of the thirteenth century. Knowledge of the superior numbering system (which the Arabs had borrowed from India, but which Europeans knew as "Arabic" numerals), spread—though gradually—as well.

Then came the establishment of the interlocking Mongol states, which greatly facilitated overland travel from the Middle East all the way to the Pacific Ocean. A number of Europeans quickly took advantage of the opportunity to enter the Mongol realm, usually from Persia, often obtaining letters assuring safe conduct all the way to China. Popes sent Christian missionaries, who had little luck converting the Chinese but who did learn a lot about Chinese achievements. Several European Jewish merchants traveled frequently back and forth. And other European merchants did the same. Most famous among them was the Venetian Marco Polo, whose uncles had done the trip before and who set out himself in 1273, reaching China two years later. Polo dutifully noted that the Chinese were "idolators"—that is, not Christian—but otherwise he found much to admire, particularly the urban standards of living and the sophisticated political structure.

And, of course, Polo wrote up his achievements in the travel book that circulated extensively and helped inspire an even wider literature, some of it fanciful but all directed at stirring wider curiosity about other parts of the world.

More concretely, the contacts with China brought European knowledge of an array of new technologies, as well as further taste for spices and manufactured goods that could not, at least at this point, be found in Europe proper. Chinese innovations in printing yielded a number of European experiments by the first half of the

Map 6.3 LEADING TRADE ROUTES WITHIN WESTERN AND CENTRAL EUROPE AND TO THE MEDITERRANEAN



fifteenth century, which by 1450 resulted in a superior system of typesetting. Even earlier, in the fourteenth century, Europeans learned of explosive powder—either from the Mongols, who used it in their invasions of Eastern Europe, or possibly from the Arabs, who had their own contacts with China. By the late 1300s Europeans were employing cannons to besiege aristocratic castles (and were also using them in the French–English conflicts in the Hundred Years' War), and by the end of the century had also introduced handheld weapons—guns—as well. Contact and imitation were beginning to reshape European patterns not only in trade, but in warfare and intellectual life as well.

Many of these developments would have far greater impact on European behavior after 1450 than before—printing, most obviously, was literally only beginning to become available. But the pattern of contacts experienced a final set of adjustments even earlier, which would have their own impact on European interests.

The decline of the Mongol Empire obviously disrupted opportunities for overland travel to China, forcing renewed attention on available sea routes. At the same time the decline of Byzantium—though ironically hastened by Western attacks—complicated familiar exchanges with the Middle East and South Asia. The rise of the Ottoman Turks—and the fact that as Muslims they were even more distrusted than Byzantine Christians—would soon be seen as a military threat to Europe north of the Balkans. Even before this, the Ottomans' new holdings were seen as jeopardizing merchant ventures.

By the fifteenth century, those Europeans concerned with wide-ranging trade, or invested in some of the attractive consumer products available from Asia, clearly faced something of a dilemma. How could Mongol decline and shifting power dynamics in the Middle East be addressed? Options were just beginning to emerge by 1450, but some were quite dramatic.

Further Readings

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Critical Thinking Questions

1. Did the Mongols create important new differences between Eastern and Western Europe?
2. Was Russian policy durably affected by the Mongol invasions?
3. Why did Western European leaders find it difficult to create large political units or regional empires?
4. What were the most important characteristics of Western European civilization by 1450?