Original Article
ISSN (Online): 2350-0530
ISSN (Print): 2394-3629

International Journal of Research - GRANTHAALAYAH
January 2025 13(1), 180–187

THE FORMATION OF WORLD HISTORY THROUGH THE EYES AND EXPERIENCES OF EXPLORERS

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Received 07 November 2024
Accepted 08 December 2024
Published 31 January 2025

DOI
10.29121/granthaalayah.v13.i1.2025.6384

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

ABSTRACT

The assertion that there were surprising similarities between the West and more advanced regions of Asia during the period of 1800–1830, and that the Industrial Revolution was the key transformation that distinguished Europe from Asia, is a core argument among multicultural historians like Kenneth Pomeranz, Bin Wong, Jack Goldstone, John Hobson, and Peer Vries. These scholars approach the rise of the West, primarily by examining the emergence of mechanized industry, the utilization of inorganic energy sources, and the ability to surpass Malthusian constraints on growth. However, a central point of my book, The Uniqueness of Western Civilization, is that the divergence of the West cannot be separated from its developmental history, which includes the Greek and Roman assemblies of citizens, the parliaments, municipal communes, universities, and estates of the medieval period, as well as the reading societies, representative institutions, journals, and newspapers that emerged during the Enlightenment. The establishment of liberal democratic institutions is a key aspect of what makes the West unique and contributes to its rise to prominence. Additionally, our argument emphasizes that it is not any specific renaissance, revolution, or liberal institution that defines the West, but rather its significantly higher levels of achievement across various intellectual and artistic fields.

Keywords: Western Civilization, Renaissance, Revolution, Explorer, Industrial Revolution, History

1. INTRODUCTION

It has been argued that a single standard of excellence cannot be uniformly applied to the various artistic traditions around the world. To address this, he compiles separate lists for the notable figures in the arts of the Arab world, China, India, Japan, and Europe. In contrast, he creates a combined global list for the prominent figures in the natural sciences, as scientists worldwide have generally adopted similar methods and categories. The most striking aspect of his list of leading scientists in fields such as astronomy, physics, biology, medicine, chemistry, earth sciences, and mathematics is that they are predominantly Western, with only one exception from Japan. 97 percent of accomplishment in the scientific inventories occurred in Europe and North America from 800 BC to 1950. While one might debate the ranking of the top twenty scientists, Murray contends that these lists effectively highlight the most significant individuals and events. The preeminence of Europe remains apparent when examining the arts, especially after 1400. Although

Murray compiles separate lists without directly comparing achievements, he observes that the number of significant figures in the arts is greater in the West than in other civilizations combined. For literature, the West boasts 835 significant figures, while the total for India, the Arab world, China, and Japan together is only 293. In the visual arts, the West has 479 notable figures compared to 192 from China and Japan combined, with no significant figures cited for India or the Arab world. Regarding music, the absence of a tradition of named composers in non-Western civilizations means that the Western total of 522 significant figures has no real competition.

2. FAUSTIAN CULTURE OF THE WEST

It has been noted that when Mahatma Gandhi was asked for his opinion on Western civilization, he responded, “I think it would be a good idea.” Modern scholars interpret this response to suggest that the actual historical actions of the West, such as the Crusades, the colonization of the Americas, and the British Empire, contradict its lofty ideals and notable literature. In this essay, I challenge the simplistic divide between an idealized and a realistic view of the West, drawing on Oswald Spengler’s portrayal of the West as a dynamic culture fueled by a personality characterized by expansive, disruptive, and creative impulses. Spengler referred to the West as a Faustian culture, whose prime symbol was pure and limitless space. This type of soul first emerged in medieval Europe, evident in Romanesque art and especially in the spaciousness of Gothic cathedrals. It can be seen in the legends of the Grail and the sagas of Arthur and Siegfried, as well as in the Crusades, which included the Hohenstaufen in Sicily, the Hanseatic League in the Baltic, the Teutonic Knights in the Slavic East, and later the Spanish in the Americas and the Portuguese in the East Indies. Spengler uses terms like “fighting,” “progressing,” and “overcoming resistances” to characterize this spirit, describing it as a “proud beast of prey,” akin to an “eagle, lion, or tiger.”

Similar to Hegel’s master, who engages in life-and-death struggles for prestige, this being prioritizes action and achievement over mere existence. Spengler thus posits a morphological relationship that connects the expressions of all cultural branches, Rococo art, differential calculus, the Crusades, and the colonization of the Americas are all manifestations of the same restless spirit. There is no contradiction between the West's great ideas and its historical realities of conflict, antagonism, and pride. The history of European exploration serves as an excellent lens for understanding and teaching Western civilization. Most historical explorers were European, with the Concise Encyclopedia of Explorations listing 274 explorers, of whom only 15 are non-European, and none after the mid-fifteenth century. In their quest to discover the unknown and claim new territories, we can clearly see the prime symbol of Western restlessness: the longing for limitless space, along with its derivatives: "Will," "Force," and "Supreme Deed." Moreover, this exploration reflects the Western desire, echoing Hegel's language, to expand its understanding of the world and “subdue the outer world to its ends with an energy that has secured its mastery.” By the 1700s, the urge to explore evolved beyond mere conquest or economic gain, transforming into an intrinsic desire to explore for exploration's sake, driven by an intense psychological need to reach specific goals or to be the first to set foot there. This kind of exploration, motivated by a yearning that surpasses military, economic, or religious interests, allows us to discern the distinct psyche of the West more clearly.

3. THE GREEKS AND THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORLD

The field of geography was initiated by the Greeks, influenced significantly by the distinct and often contentious personalities emerging from a culture deeply engaged in colonization and exploration between 800 and 500 BC. Hecataeus (550–476 BC), who authored the first geographical text, Journey Round the World, drew upon his own travels throughout the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, along with information gathered from generations of Greek colonizers. By the first millennium BC, the Phoenicians were already establishing colonies along the western Mediterranean coasts, reaching places like Sardinia and Cádiz, totaling around thirty colonies by the sixth or fifth century BC. In contrast, numerous Greek city-states established multiple colonies, with Miletus alone founding about ninety. Greek settlements spread across the Mediterranean, the Black Sea, Anatolia, southern France, Italy, Sicily, and the northern coast of Africa, in addition to the many islands of the Aegean Sea. A common explanation for this wave of colonization is the population growth and resource scarcity at home.

However, evidence suggests that these colonial efforts were often small-scale rather than massive migrations of impoverished farmers. Population levels were manageable, and while commercial interests and the quest for new agricultural land certainly played roles, the folklore of the time, epic tales like the Odyssey, and legends of the Argonauts and Heracles, also contributed to the adventurous spirit that characterized the Greeks. We may consider aligning with A.G. Woodhead's view on the "general spirit of adventure" that defined the early classical era in Greece. Hecataeus imagined the world as a disc surrounded by ocean, with various peoples positioned around its edges. Soon, however, another figure emerged: Herodotus, born in 484 BC and author of Histories, who provided a wealth of geographical and ethnographic insights based on his own travels through Egypt, Syria, Babylon, Susa, and northern regions inhabited by the Scythians and Thracians, including Italy. This desire for individual distinction was evident in Greek culture, manifesting in the competitive nature of the Olympic Games, the ongoing conflicts between city-states, the pursuit of political power, and the contests among orators for civic admiration.

In Athenian theater festivals, poets competed for accolades amid civic and religious celebrations, with new works of drama, philosophy, and music presented in an adversarial format. During the Hellenistic period, explorers ventured into the Caspian, Aral, and Red Seas, establishing trading posts in areas like modern Eritrea and Somalia. One notable Hellenistic explorer was Pytheas (380–306 BC), who originated from the Greek colony of Massalia (Marseilles) and undertook a remarkable journey through the Atlantic and into the North Sea, providing crucial insights into the shape of Europe. His now-lost work, On the Ocean, known from fragments, described his travels to Brittany, across the Channel into Cornwall, through the Irish Sea, the Baltic Sea, along Norway's coast, and even to Iceland ("Thule") around 320/300 BC, as later documented by Strabo. These explorations spurred advancements in astronomical and geographical scholarship, culminating in Eratosthenes' (276–185 BC) groundbreaking calculations of the Earth's size, which he estimated within 5 percent of its actual size, emphasizing that the Mediterranean was merely a small part of the globe. This inquisitive spirit continued into the second century AD, particularly in Alexandria, where Ptolemy wrote his System of Astronomy and Geography, detailing the principles of mapmaking and producing the first world map that included regions like India, China, Southeast Asia, the British Isles, Denmark, and East Africa. In contrast, there was significantly less

interest in exploring geography among non-Western societies. While the Han dynasty expanded into Vietnam, Korea, and the Tarim Basin in the first century BC, the Chinese exhibited little curiosity beyond their borders.

Maps from the Chu Ssu-Pen in 1311 and 1320 AD were notably insular compared to earlier works by Ptolemy. Although Chinese geographers demonstrated the ability to create grids for mapping local positions and distances, even Zheng He's sixteenth-century sailing maps lacked appropriate scales and proportions for the Earth's major landmasses. Conversely, Milesian philosophers like Thales, Anaximander, and Hecataeus recognized the Earth as a sphere and are credited with creating some of the first globes. Philolaus (470–385 BC), a Pythagorean, asserted that the Earth was spherical and in motion, not around the sun, but around a central fire. Aristarchus of Samos (c. 310–230 BC) proposed the revolutionary idea that all planets, including Earth, revolve around the sun, and that the Earth rotates on its axis every twenty-four hours. While many adhered to Aristotle's geocentric view, Cullen rightly notes that the West engaged in a dialogical and contested discourse regarding these ideas. In contrast, civilizations such as the Egyptians, Maya, and Chinese were relatively confined to their own regions. Although the Chinese briefly explored the Indian Ocean, even after European ships reached Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian harbors, "no Indian or Chinese ship was ever seen in Seville, Amsterdam, or London." Indian civilization also displayed minimal curiosity about global geography, producing symbolic maps that were disconnected from actual locations. Similarly, maritime activities in isolated American cultures were limited to fishing, with no contact between the Aztecs and Incas, despite the extensive network of Inca roads that went uncharted. Polynesians successfully navigated vast areas of the Pacific, yet did not develop a formal body of geographical knowledge. The Phoenicians, too, left no records of their colonization efforts.

4. AGE OF THE VIKINGS

Spengler noted that the Vikings discovered in their gray dawn the art of sailing the seas which emancipated them. By the late eighth century, Viking bands were raiding the coastlines of Northern Europe without hindrance, eventually venturing around Spain to engage in battles across the Mediterranean, Italy, North Africa, and Arabia. Some Vikings even transported their longships overland from the Baltic, navigating the vast Russian rivers all the way to the Black Sea. Throughout the ninth and tenth centuries, the Vikings, more accurately referred to as Norsemen, shifted their focus from plundering to seeking new lands for settlement. Their journeys deep into the North Atlantic represented "independent undertakings" during a 300-year era of maritime expansion that led to the settlement of Scandinavian peoples in regions such as Shetland, Orkney, the Hebrides, parts of Scotland and Ireland, the Faroe Islands, Iceland, Greenland, and Vinland (present-day Newfoundland). They began colonizing Iceland around 870 AD, Greenland from 980 AD, and Vinland by 1000 AD. The Norse settlers arrived with robust ships known as hafskip, designed for carrying goods, tools, and livestock over long sea journeys, and capable of higher speeds in strong winds compared to earlier coastal vessels like the Gotstad.

The hafskip is the "Knarr" celebrated in Norse saga literature. The shipbuilding skills of the Norse were likely unmatched at the time. The Landnamabok, a twelfth-century account of Norse settlements in the Atlantic, details techniques for navigating by maintaining a relatively consistent latitude until reaching a destination. Icelandic geographers from the Middle Ages demonstrated significant knowledge of the Arctic regions, ranging from Russia to Greenland, as well as the eastern coast of North America. This expertise is confirmed in an Icelandic

Geographical Treatise preserved in a manuscript from around 1300 AD, which may be based on earlier twelfth-century sources. Whitfield suggests that "some conscious impulse towards exploration and conquest" must have motivated these voyages, driven in part by harsh living conditions at home. The most credible account may come from Jesse Byock's work on Viking Age Iceland, which posits that the settlement of Iceland was led by sailor-farmers looking to escape population pressures in Scandinavia. This settlement wave extended to Greenland as Icelanders sought refuge from Malthusian pressures; by 930 AD, Iceland's population was already around 30,000. Byock also reveals a cultural world through his analysis of various sagas related to Viking voyages and colonial life, such as Njál's Saga, Greenlanders' Saga, and Eirik's Saga, filled with tales of chieftains, free farmers, heroic deeds, conquests, and a mix of aristocratic and democratic governance, emphasizing individual honor, family ethics, and the epic ideal of sacrifice to one's lord.

Additionally, Marco Polo (1254–1324) undertook extensive travels across what is now Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, China, Singapore, Indonesia, and India, which were depicted in the Catalan Atlas of 1375. Although this map reflected the medieval geographers' belief in topographical myths and their unfamiliarity with Ptolemy's work, it also introduced innovative elements, including compass lines and accurate representations of Mediterranean coastlines. Ibn Battuta (1304–1374), regarded as the greatest Muslim traveler, visited numerous Muslim nations and neighboring areas. However, unlike Polo, who sought to explore lands previously unvisited by Europeans and learn about the diverse tribes of Asia, Battuta's "overmastering impulse" was to visit "illustrious sanctuaries." The Islamic world, bolstered by Ptolemy's influence, developed a rich tradition of geography supported by extensive travels and dominions. The notable Islamic cartographer Al-Idrisi produced a significant planispheric silver relief map in 1154, noteworthy for not depicting the Indian Ocean as landlocked and for providing more precise details about China's eastern coastline. Yet, Islamic geography did not advance further from this point.

5. THE CHINESE AGAINST THE PORTUGUESE

The Spaniards and Portuguese were driven by a strong desire for adventure and the allure of the unknown. By the early 1400s, key navigational tools such as the compass, portolan charts, and new shipping techniques were in place, including the adoption of the pintle-and-gudgeon rudder, the mizzen mast, and significant increases in ship size by the late 1300s. Led by Henry the Navigator and inspired by Genoese sailors' Atlantic explorations, the Portuguese embarked on ambitious journeys in the 15th century, rounding the southern tip of Africa and making their way through the Indian Ocean to Japan by the 1540s. Initially, they relied on medieval maps, including Ptolemy's Geography, which had been translated in 1418. These maps mistakenly suggested that southern Africa was connected to unknown lands. However, the Portuguese quickly began creating accurate maps of West Africa, extending as far as Sierra Leone, and utilized Fra Mauro's maps, including one from 1457 that provided exceptional accuracy for navigating around Africa's southern tip. Just two years after Diaz's voyage around the Cape, Henricus Martellus produced a World Map in 1490 that detailed the entire African coastline and documented Portuguese exploration progress.

A key question arises: what motivated Portuguese expeditions? Conversely, why did China halt the maritime explorations initiated by Zheng He? This leads us to consider the insights of Felipe Fernández-Armesto in his award-winning book,

Pathfinders: A Global History of Exploration. Fernández-Armesto's analysis can be summarized in four main points. First, he describes Zheng He's voyages as demonstrations of China's potential for establishing a seaborne empire, showcasing its shipbuilding capacity and ability to launch powerful expeditions. These voyages aimed to impress foreign ports with Chinese strength and to awe the emperor's subjects with exotic tributes. However, these expeditions were short-lived and less impactful because China prioritized domestic governance over expensive overseas ventures, especially in light of threats from northern barbarians. Second, China was ruled by scholars who were generally opposed to maritime adventures. Despite this, Fernández-Armesto admires the peaceful nature of Chinese exploration, highlighting their contributions to local economies. Yet one must question whether Zheng He truly explored new territories or merely navigated familiar Indian Ocean routes. Third, Fernández-Armesto argues that the Chinese, not the Europeans, were the true explorers, asserting that Zheng He's journeys were far more challenging than European voyages across the Atlantic.

He claims that the end of Zheng He's expeditions was not due to technological deficiencies but rather a calculated choice, as the risks of venturing into unknown waters outweighed potential rewards. The Chinese had everything they needed and were not motivated by the same desperation that characterized European explorers. Fourth, he notes that Europeans had strong motivations for exploration, often coming from marginalized backgrounds seeking opportunities. However, there are issues with Fernández-Armesto's argument, particularly his overestimation of Zheng He's ships. Earlier claims about the dimensions of these vessels have been revised, suggesting they were much smaller than previously believed. Another flaw in his analysis is the assumption that Chinese expeditions were genuine explorations while the Portuguese were solely motivated by economic interests. In reality, the Indian Ocean had long been navigated, whereas the Portuguese faced significant challenges in the Atlantic. Portuguese explorers were motivated by a blend of chivalric ambition and the pursuit of wealth, amidst the harsh realities of their journeys.

To further this discussion, we may compare Fernández-Armesto's views with those of Joseph Needham, who recognized that Chinese voyages aimed to project China's power and knowledge. Needham highlighted that the expeditions were primarily governmental endeavors with trade as a secondary aim. He also noted that the Chinese bureaucracy was skeptical of the expenses incurred for these voyages, particularly as threats from the north demanded attention. In contrast, Portuguese explorations were motivated by a desire to establish trade routes with Indian Ocean producers and disrupt existing Arab trade networks, alongside a mission-driven mindset. Unlike the peaceful Chinese approach, the Portuguese expeditions were often aggressive and aimed at personal gain. Needham's analysis, written in a different academic climate, offers a clearer perspective on the differences between the two powers. He observed that while Chinese technology remained largely unchanged, the Portuguese continued to innovate and adapt. Overall, despite the contrasting narratives, the historical record reveals that the Portuguese undertook significant explorations, whereas the Chinese did not engage in comparable maritime ventures.

6. CONCLUSION

This study briefly explored the development of geographic knowledge and exploration from ancient Greece to the Age of Discovery, emphasizing how cultural and technological factors influenced these journeys. The Greeks laid the

groundwork for geography, motivated by a spirit of adventure and exploration during a time of colonization (800-500 BC). Figures like Hecataeus and later Herodotus expanded knowledge through exploration, compiling information from travels around the Mediterranean and beyond. By the 8th century, Vikings emerged as formidable explorers, venturing across Europe and into the North Atlantic. Initially driven by raiding, their focus shifted to settling new lands, establishing colonies in places like Iceland and Greenland. Their advanced shipbuilding and navigation techniques, exemplified by the hafskip, allowed them to undertake extensive voyages. In the 13th century, Marco Polo's travels opened new vistas of knowledge about Asia, while the great Muslim traveler Ibn Battuta journeyed extensively throughout the Islamic world. The innovations of Islamic cartographers, such as Al-Idrisi, further advanced geographical understanding.

The Spaniards and Portuguese, motivated by a quest for adventure and new resources, capitalized on advancements in navigation technology by the early 1400s. Under figures like Henry the Navigator, Portugal explored Africa's coasts and eventually reached Asia. Early maps improved geographical accuracy, highlighting the growing European interest in overseas expansion. We contrasted European exploration with that of China, particularly the expeditions of Zheng He in the 15th century. While Zheng He displayed China’s naval capabilities, his voyages were less impactful due to a Confucian focus on domestic governance and skepticism towards foreign ventures. The motivations behind Portuguese expeditions were primarily economic and imperialistic, driven by desires for trade and conquest. In contrast, China's maritime endeavors were rooted in diplomacy and commerce, lacking the aggressive expansionist spirit seen in European explorers.

Our study critiques Felipe Fernández-Armesto’s views on exploration, arguing that while Chinese voyages showcased impressive logistics, they did not venture into unknown territories like the Portuguese did. It emphasizes that Portuguese expeditions led to significant discoveries, despite their initial poverty and lack of resources. The exploration narratives of Portugal and China illustrate differing philosophies and outcomes in maritime expansion. The Portuguese voyages initiated a new era of global trade and cultural exchange, whereas Chinese expeditions reflected a more insular approach. The legacies of these explorations reveal the importance of motivation and choice in shaping historical trajectories.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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