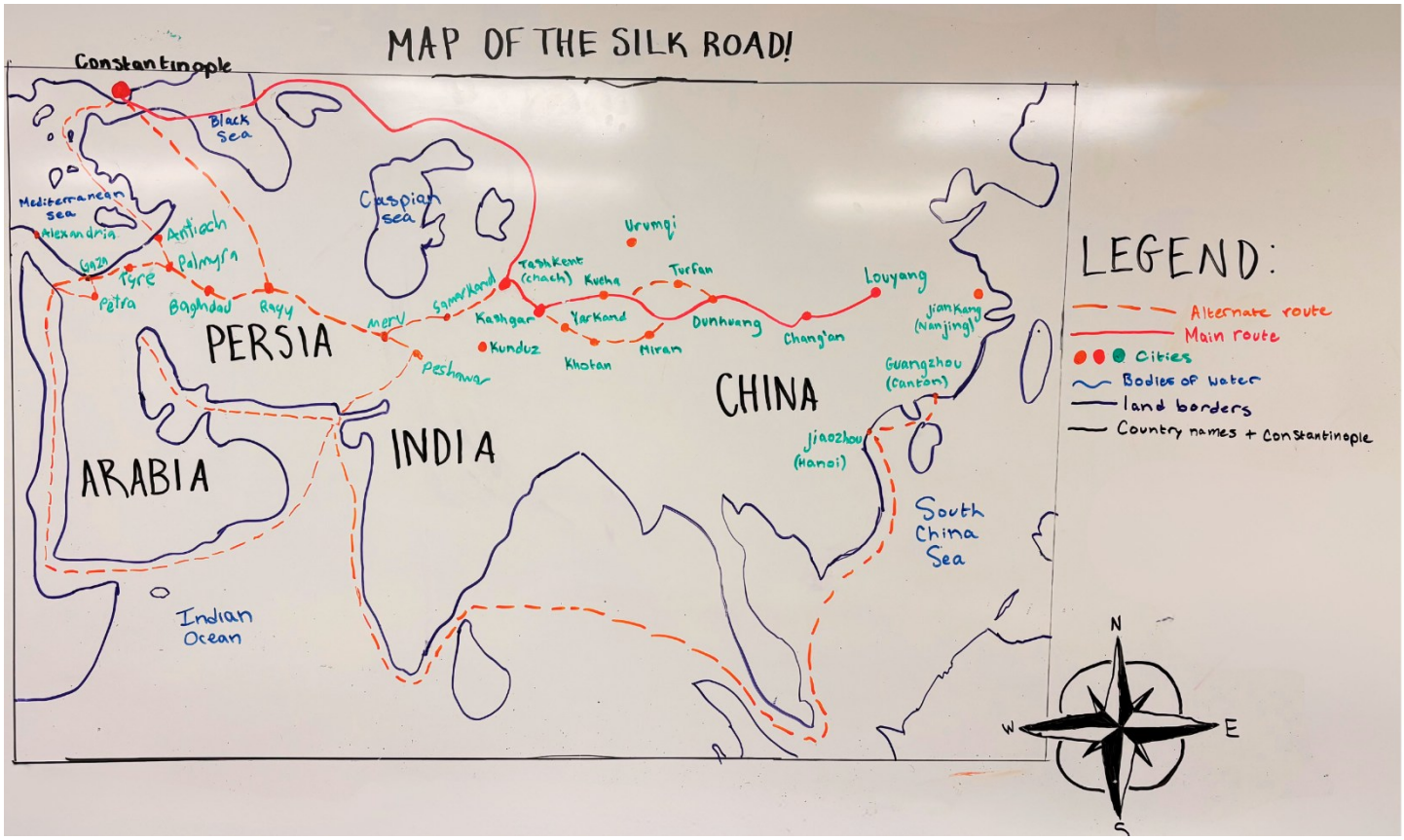
An incomplete snapshot of the 15th century

- It is very important to remember that civilizations do not operate in isolation - in ancient times Greeks interacted with Romans and Egyptians. Delegations from China were entertained in Rome, and traders connected vast African civilizations with India and beyond. **Avoid the temptation to compartmentalize, and therefore isolate, communities.**

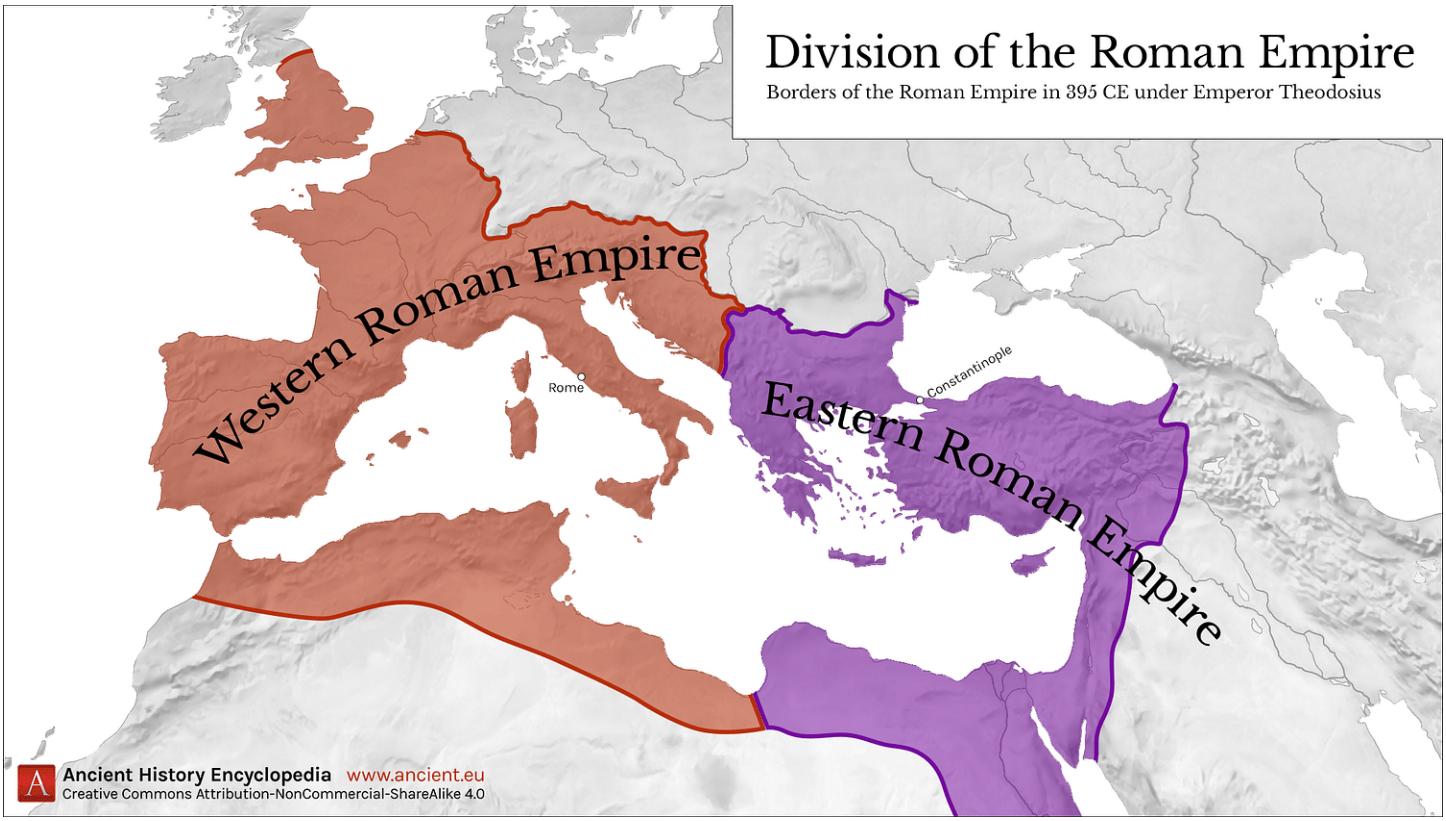


Eliot Cameron and Leah McVicar's map of the Silk Roads, September 2026.

- Between 1000 and 1500 CE (Common Era), the peoples of the eastern hemisphere (Africa, Asia and Europe) traveled, traded, communicated, and interacted more regularly and intensively than ever before.

- For centuries the Silk Road (a series of transportation routes) connected the three continents, allowing for the flow of knowledge, faith, technology and trade. This was also the way in which things like the Bubonic Plaque traveled from Asia into Europe.

    - This transportation route disintegrated in 1453 with **the Fall of Constantinople** (renamed Istanbul in 1930) to the Ottoman Empire.



- Constantinople's collapse signaled the end of the **Eastern Roman Empire** (Byzantine Empire), as well as **a severing of a majority artery of the Silk Road linking the Asian, African and European continents**.

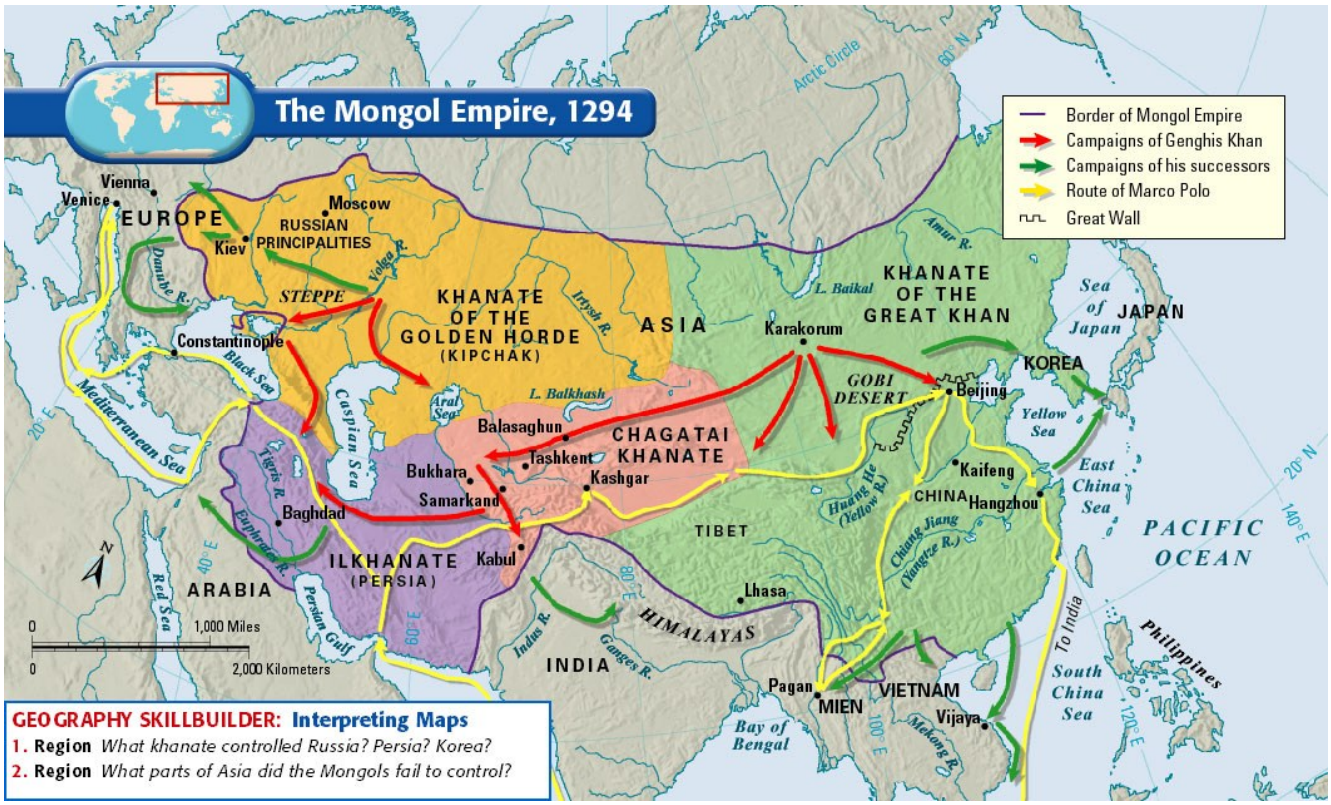
- Once Constantinople fell, the Ottomans would expand their rule over Armenia, Cyprus, Greece, Albania, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and parts of Ukraine.

- Cross-cultural interactions were too numerous to list them all but highlight that there were all kinds of exchanges going on.

    - Many large cities had quarters filled with foreign traders: Khanbaliq (modern-day Beijing), Baghdad[1] (which included Viking traders), Venice, Timbuktu, and Cairo (to name a few).

[1] Baghdad was the world's largest city during the Islamic Golden Age (specifically around the 9th and 10th centuries), with a population surpassing 1 million.

- The city of Melaka (modern-day Malaysia) was founded in 1390, and by the end of the 15th century was reported to have over 80 languages being spoken on its streets.



- The massive Mongol Empire (visited by the famous Venetian Marco Polo via the Silk Road in 1271 - he also visited, with his family, Sumatra, India and Arabia) covered vast tracks of Asia and the Middle East - it even included modern-day Moscow and Ukraine.[2]

- There was much communication between the Mongol Court and the Western European Kingdoms who considered a military alliance against their common Muslim enemies.

    - Roman Catholic Pope Innocent IV (1243-1254) dispatched a series of envoys who invited the Mongol khans to convert to Christianity and join Europeans in a crusade against the Muslims. The khans declined the invitation, proposing instead that the pope and European Christians submit to Mongol rule or be destroyed.

[2] The invasion by the Mongol Empire is critical to understanding the formation of modern Russia and Ukraine.

- Mongol traders spread gunpowder technologies west from China. Gunpowder reached Europe by way of Mongol-controlled Russia by the mid-thirteenth century. Canons emerged the next century from China to Europe.

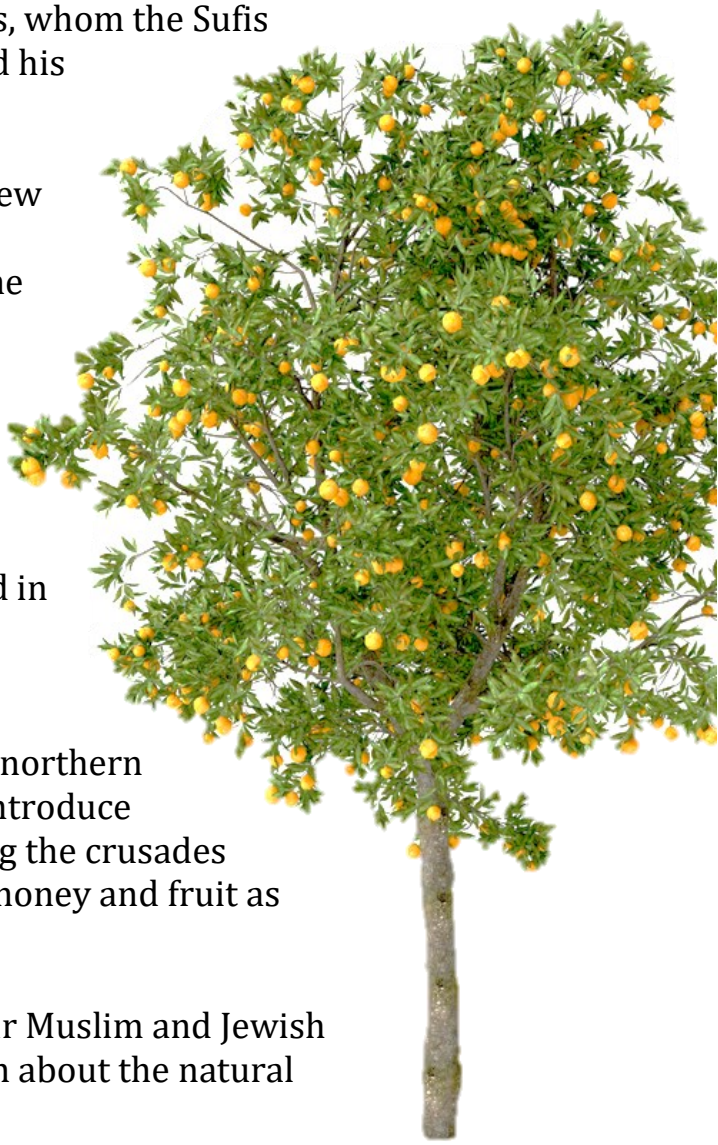
- DYK: The magnetic compass was invented in China and spread through the Indian Ocean basin (Europeans began using it during the 12th century). China is also credited with giving the world the "sternpost rudder."

- Mongol rule in China was replaced by the Ming Dynasty under the Hongwu Emperor (1368-1398) - the first emperor moved to centralize authority more tightly than ever before in Chinese history. Ming emperors ruled directly at the head of a strong central government.
    - The Ming dynasty sought to expand its rule out into the world and sponsored a series of oceanic explorations from 1405-1433.
        - At the head of these explorations was the Muslim enuch admiral Zheng He. His first voyage comprised of 317 vessels accompanied by nearly 28,000 troops. Zheng He visited southeast Asia, India, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), the Persian Gulf, Arabia, and East Africa (Kenya). He even brought a zebra and giraffe back to show the emperor. In Ceylon, Zheng He built a monument honouring Buddha, Allah (PBUH), and Vishnu.

The significant difference in size between the Chinese vessels and their European contemporaries.

- These expeditions ended abruptly after imperial officials destroyed much of the nautical charts Zheng He had prepared. The expeditions were seen as too expensive, and resources were needed to repel a renewed invasion by the Mongols and further develop China's agricultural endeavours.

- Islam was spreading across India, southeast Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa, thanks to Sufi mystics (Sufi's did not insist on a strict, concrete understanding of Islam - they even tolerated reverence of traditional deities, whom the Sufis treated as manifestations of Allah (PBUH) and his powers.



    - The troubadours of Western Europe drew on the poetry, music and love songs of Muslim performers when developing the literature of courtly love.

    - Muslim traders introduced new foods (citrus fruits and Asian strains of rice) to sub-Saharan Africa. They also introduced cotton to the region, and by 1500 was the principal textile produced in sub-Saharan Africa.

        - Muslim traders also introduced sugarcane to southwest Asia and northern Africa. It was these traders that introduce refined sugar to Europeans during the crusades (Europeans had previously used honey and fruit as sweetners).

    - European scientists consulted with their Muslim and Jewish counterparts in Sicily and Spain to learn about the natural world.

- By 1500, India's population had reached 105,000,000. The sub-continent was filled with various regions ruled by powerful maharaja's, sultans and local families. The caste system served as one of the most powerful organizing features in Indian society.

    - The Vijayanagara (vi-jah-yun-ah-guhr) Empire was the most powerful state in South India, thriving as a center of political, economic, and cultural influence. Founded in 1336, it reached its peak under rulers like Devaraya I and II, who expanded its territory and strengthened its military. The capital, Hampi, was a wealthy trade hub, attracting merchants from Persia, Arabia, and Southeast Asia. The empire promoted Hindu temple architecture, literature, and art, resisting Islamic invasions from the Delhi Sultanate and Deccan Sultanates. Vijayanagara

remained dominant throughout the century, laying the foundation for its golden age under Krishna Deva Raya (early 16th century).

  - By 1500 India's Muslim population numbered 25,000,000 people.

- In the 15th century, the Kingdom of Kongo emerged as a centralized and powerful state in Central Africa ruled by the Manikongo (king), who oversaw a complex political system with provincial governors. In 1483, Portuguese explorers arrived, initiating trade and cultural exchanges. By the late 15th century, King Nzinga a Nkuwu converted to Christianity, adopting the name João I. This marked the beginning of deep ties with Portugal, leading to economic growth.

- In the 15th century, Great Zimbabwe was in decline after centuries of prosperity as a major trade and political center in Southern Africa. It had been the capital of the Kingdom of Zimbabwe, controlling trade routes that connected the interior to the Swahili coast, exchanging gold, ivory, and copper with merchants from Arabia, India, and China.

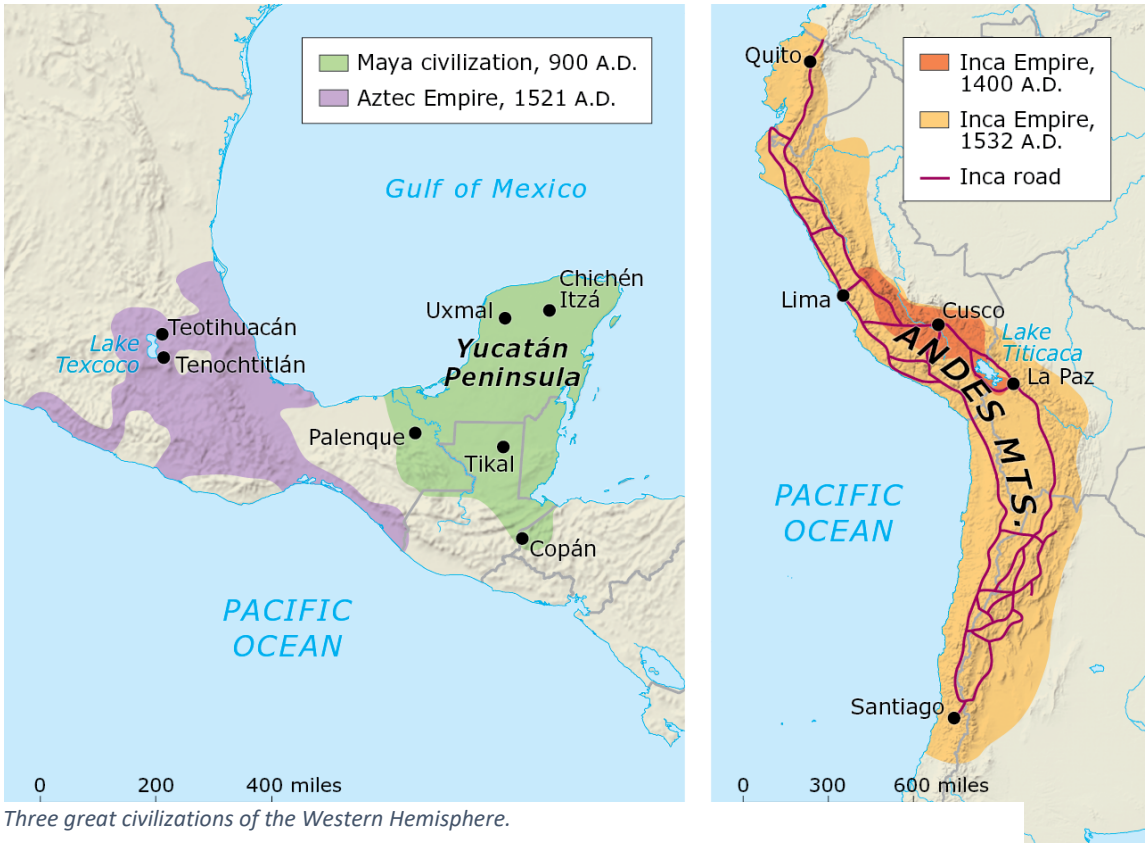
The intricate stone walls of an enclosure of Great Zimbabwe.

- Great Zimbabwean cities were known for massive stone walls and complex architecture, built without mortar. However, by the late 15th century, factors such as resource depletion, political instability, and shifting trade routes led to its abandonment, with power shifting to the Kingdom of Mutapa.

- In North America various Indigenous civilizations thrived. The arrival of the Peacemaker united the nations along the southern shore of Lake Ontario (Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida and Mohawk) into the Haudenosaunee Confederacy (meaning People of the long house). The website of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy states: *The confederacy, made up of the Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas, and Senecas was intended as a way to unite the nations and create a peaceful means of decision making. Through the confederacy, each of the nations of the Haudenosaunee are united by a common goal to live in harmony. Each nation maintains its own*

council with Chiefs chosen by the Clan Mother and deals with its own internal affairs but allows the Grand Council to deal with issues affecting the nations within the confederacy.

- The Haudenosaunee Confederacy is often considered the oldest participatory democracy in the world (the Confederacy's constitution is believed to be a model for the American and Canadian constitutions).



Three great civilizations of the Western Hemisphere.

- Europe was a fragmented continent, comprised of a series of regional states rather than a centralized Empire. The bubonic plague had devastated the region in a series of waves.

    - Powerful monarchies began emerging in the 15th century through the emergence of new taxes on their subjects to supplement rulers' incomes & the maintenance of standing armies.

- The process of state building was most dramatic in Spain where the marriage in 1469 of Fernando of Aragon and Isabel of Castile united the two wealthiest and important Iberian realms. With a massive standing army, a united Kingdom of Spain was created which initiated (what they called) the *Reconquista* by conquering the Muslim kingdom of Granada and absorbing it into their realm in **1492**.

- A new concept of the "modern state" was developing at this time in Europe which began to see the concept of the "state" as being a distinct political creation with its own systems (government, military, and other "organs) that can enforce its sovereignty over a particular people and/or territory.

- Czech religious reformer and theologian Jan Hus (c. 1369–1415) challenged the Catholic Church's corruption and advocated for church reform. Influenced by England's John Wycliffe, Hus criticized the sale of indulgences and emphasized the authority of the Bible over the Pope. His teachings sparked the Hussite movement and laid the foundation for later Protestant reforms.

  Hus was excommunicated and condemned as a heretic. He was burned at the stake in 1415, becoming a martyr for religious freedom. His ideas significantly influenced the Protestant Reformation, particularly Martin Luther, and shaped Czech national identity and the broader struggle for church reform.