

Unravelling the Origins of Globalisation: A Historical Perspective

Review of the book *The Year 1000: When Explorers Connected the World — and Globalization Began* by Valerie Hansen¹

Globalisation began in the year 1000 AD. At least, that's what the esteemed Yale historian Valerie Hansen claims in her well-researched book. Why was this year chosen as a particularly important one? How does she define globalisation? By answering these two key questions, we will get to the core of the author's argument. Let us consider these questions in turn.

Hansen is clear that the relentless movement of goods, people, and religions reached a tipping point in the year 1000 AD, ushering in unprecedented levels of integration. This integration meant that changes in one location could have a profound impact on people living in other distant regions of the world. The author makes a compelling case that this is the defining marker of globalisation.

To illustrate, consider the Mongol Empire. At its zenith, it spanned the Eurasian grasslands from modern Hungary to China, constituting the largest contiguous land empire in history. This has resulted in a multitude of hitherto unimaginable scenarios. Iranian and Chinese astronomers have collaborated closely, and one Iranian historian wrote a history of the world that covered the Islamic world as well as China at greater length. The unfortunate consequence of this early interconnectedness was the rapid spread of the Black Death, or bubonic plague, which originated in western Central Asia and spread as far as the Middle East and Europe.

At that time, Africa also became part of the globalised world. For instance, approximately two-thirds of the gold in Europe and Asia before 1492 originated from West Africa. What is more, the number of slaves who left Africa for the Islamic world between 800 and 1800 was so great that it rivalled the total number of slaves shipped across the Atlantic.

Would you like to know “the most globalised place on Earth” in the year 1000 AD? It was China, particularly its port Guangzhou, which served as

¹ Hansen, V. (2020). *The year 1000: When Explorers Connected The World — and Globalization Began*. Simon and Schuster.

the primary nexus of trade at that time. Ships departing from that port glided across the seas to India's west coast and the Persian Gulf ports of Siraf, in modern Iran, and Basra, in modern Iraq. Some vessels continued their voyages to East Africa, what is now Djibouti. Over time, China's long-time trading partners began to include Korea, Japan, and Vietnam as well as much more distant locations such as Sicily, Somalia, and Tanzania. China mostly exported to other countries its shiny and easy-to-clean ceramics. Countries in Africa, the Middle East, India, and Southeast Asia held China's exquisite ceramics in high regard. In return, China obtained a variety of aromatic substances. In those times, these aromatic substances fulfilled not only an aesthetic role but also a medicinal one.

These and various other vivid examples provide substantial evidence to support the author's assertion that by the year 1000 AD, globalisation had established pivotal connections between Africa, Europe, and Asia.

The greatest strength of the given book comes from its accessible language as the author uses familiar terms and minimizes foreign words and names to make the content accessible to a broad audience. Travelling around the world in the Middle Ages has never been that exciting.

Another virtue of the book consists of the detailed research that went into writing it. Hansen's work is based on extensive research, drawing from archaeological findings, library archives, and museum collections. The section of the book titled "Photographs" is simply delightful.

However, *caveat viator*. While the author's definition of globalisation is fine, the time frame is problematic. The book uses the year 1000 AD as a broad reference point, but certain pivotal processes and/or events took place years or even centuries before or after that year. Readers of this book should understand that the year 1000 AD is symbolic and not to be taken too literally.

In any case, Valerie Hansen presented a valuable and comprehensive account of global connections and exchanges around the year 1000 AD. This book will be particularly suitable for first-year undergraduate students in history, international relations, sociology, and anthropology.

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