Reading Questions for Oct. 29-Nov. 5

Tues. 10/29: Europe and the East
Read: Boorstin, 82-143 (chapters 10-19). Read pp. 82-113 quickly; focus your attention on the later chapters.

1. On p. 86, Boorstin claims, “The great obstacle to discovering the shape of the earth, the continents, and the ocean was not ignorance but the illusion of knowledge.” What does this mean?

2. Why is it important for Boorstin to argue that medieval Europeans believed that the earth was flat (chapter 14)? Reminder: this is a historical myth, as I pointed out in lecture. If you would like to read more about the myth, see the fine little book by Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Inventing the Flat Earth*.

3. How did religious belief serve to motivate European and Muslim travelers in the Middle Ages? Where did pilgrims travel, and why? How did pilgrimage differ from missionary activity?

4. Why were the Mongol conquests of the thirteenth century important for expanding Europeans’ knowledge of the rest of the world?

5. What were the most important sources for European knowledge of Asia in the thirteenth century? How much European knowledge of Asia was recorded in books, and why? How much knowledge remained in the heads of merchants and emissaries?

Thurs. 10/31: Europe’s ocean-borne expansion
Read: Boorstin, 146-178, 217-223, 244-278 (chapters 20-23, 29, 33-36). If you are not familiar with the story of Columbus’s “discovery” of America, also read pp. 224-244.

1. What contributions did Ptolemy’s *Geography* make to late medieval Europeans’ understanding of the world? How did Ptolemy hinder a correct understanding of geography?

2. Why were the Portuguese instrumental in exploring the Atlantic? What were Prince Henry’s goals in supporting exploration along the African coast? Why did the pace of exploration pick up after the Portuguese started trading in slaves, gold, and other African items?

3. How was the European view of geography changed by Bartolomeu Dias’s doubling of the Cape of Good Hope and Vasco da Gama’s voyage to India?

4. What advantages did the magnetic compass bring to navigators? Why was it more useful in the Mediterranean than the Baltic, the North Sea, and the Indian Ocean?

5. Why is America (or more properly, the Americas) called America? Was Martin Waldseemüller justified in naming it after Amerigo Vespucci?

6. Why did sea charts often remain the secret property of governments? How did the printing press (invented in the 1440s) spread geographical misinformation as well as information? How did educated Europeans’ view of the world change as a result of printed atlases?
**Tues. 11/5: Science in the Islamic world**

Read: Boorstin, 178-201 (chapters 24-26); McClellan/Dorn, 99-115 (chapter 5).

1. Why were Muslim navigators content to remain in the Indian Ocean instead of trying to round Africa into the Atlantic? What does the answer suggest about the relative mercantile wealth of the Portuguese and the peoples of the Indian Ocean?

2. How did the Byzantine Empire (the Eastern Roman Empire) and Sassanid Persia preserve and transmit Hellenistic scientific achievements? What role did the translation center of Jundishapur play in the transmission of ancient scientific ideas to the modern world?

3. McClellan and Dorn write, “A moment’s thought . . . shows how ahistorical it is to evaluate the history of Islamic science only or even largely as a link to European science, or even to subsume Islamic science into the ‘Western tradition’” (105). Why do they make these claims? Are their arguments convincing?

4. Why did Al-Ma’mun and other Muslim rulers establish centers for translation and study? Why were (and are) astronomy and geography important for Muslim religious life?

5. In addition to madrasas (legal colleges), what institutions existed to support the pursuit of the sciences in the Islamic world? How did the legal status of these institutions differ from that of medieval European universities?

6. How is the position of scientific inquiry in the Islamic world similar to its status in China, the ancient Near East, and Hellenistic Greece? What did political and social leaders hope to get by supporting science? Was there much opportunity for independent investigation of scientific problems that interested the researcher but offered few practical benefits?