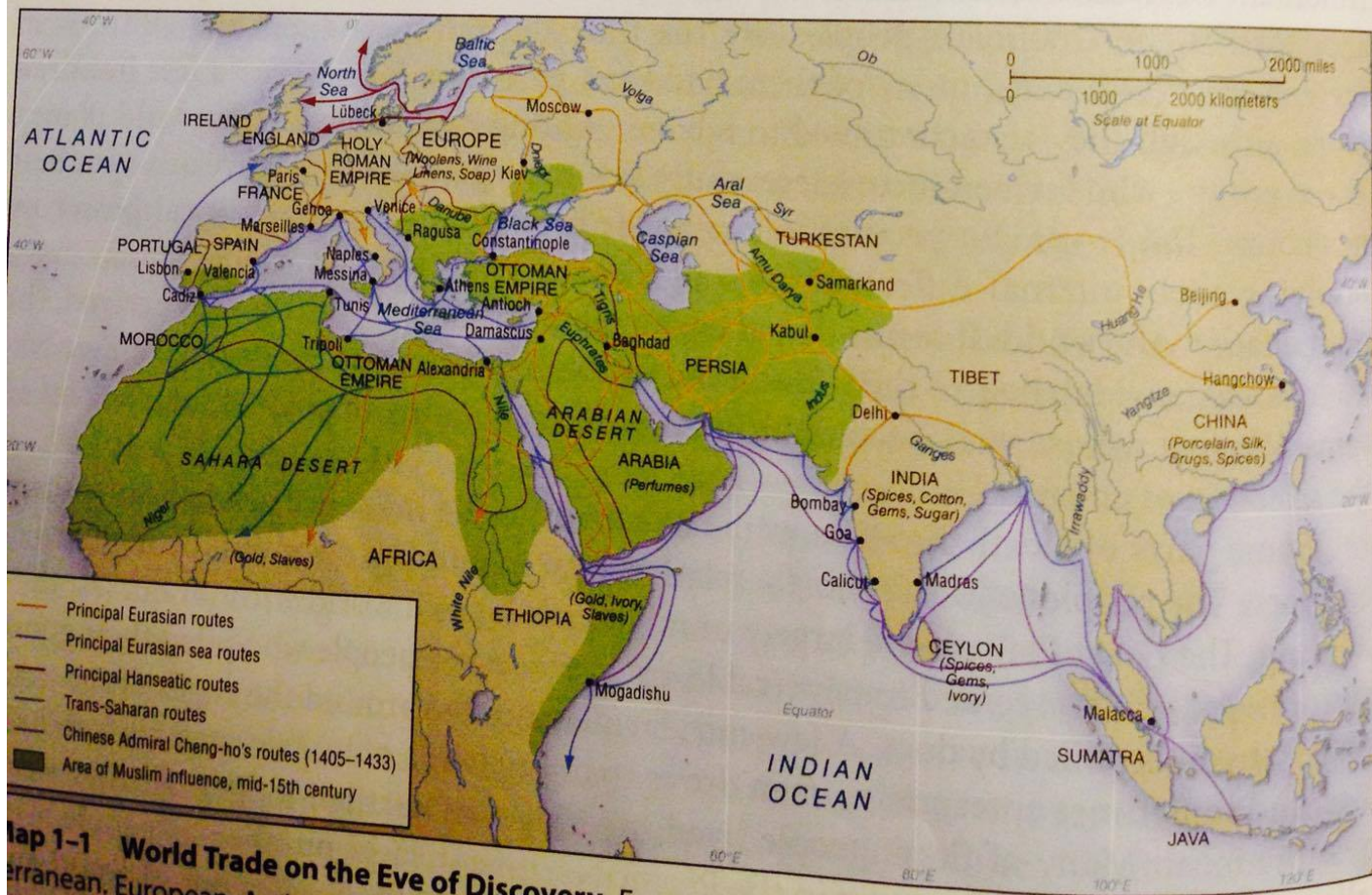


The Worlds of Christopher Columbus

In the world into which Christopher Columbus was born, Europe was peripheral. Great overland trade caravans and the sea routes of the Indian Ocean connected the known world. The Middle Eastern merchants at the center formed the hub (see Map 1-1). The goods of China were in greatest demand. Europeans constituted the least powerful element of the world's trade system. Princes and merchants there longed to be able to compete with other players on the world stage, and some desperately sought ways of doing so.

The Reconquista

Middle Eastern economic power had spurred the spread of the Islamic faith after its inception in the seventh century. By the year 711, most of the Iberian Peninsula (today's Spain and Portugal) had fallen to Muslim conquerors of Arab and Berber descent (called "Moors" by Christians). The new authorities were generally tolerant of those they had vanquished and allowed Christian and Jewish subjects to coexist peacefully alongside Muslims. Toward the end of the eleventh century, however, dissatisfied descendants of the ousted ruling families began a concerted effort toward reconquest, or *reconquista*. In 1085, Alfonso VI of Castile retook Toledo. "Inspired by God's grace," he wrote triumphantly, "I moved an army against this city, where my ancestors once reigned in power



For a thousand years, world trade centered on the Mediterranean. European, Arab, and Asian traders crisscrossed much of the Eastern Hemisphere, trading in spices, silks, and cottons from Asia; linens, woollens, and other goods from Europe.