Reviewed by Nayan Chanda

AT A TIME WHEN obituary notices for globalization have been falling thick like autumn leaves, Yale historian Valerie Hansen’s book offers a reassuring message: it has been around for a millennium and is not going anywhere. As she notes: “The blazing of global pathways caused fertilization and infection, intellectual enrichment and cultural fragmentation, the spread of new technologies and the extinction of traditional crafts.” It has not changed. The only difference is that we now have history from which to draw lessons.

Scholars will quibble over the bold claim on the cover that globalization began in the year 1000. The answer to the question of when it did begin depends first and foremost on how globalization is defined — is it an outcome or a process? Some argue that it came in the early 19th century, when growing trade and migration brought price convergence in the Atlantic world. Others have found Columbus’s discovery of the New World, or the invention of the steam engine, as the starting point. This reviewer has argued that globalization is a historical process that began with the first movement of people out of Africa to other parts of the world. The dispersed human community began connecting with each other for trade, to promote religion, to explore the world and for conquest. This process has steadily accelerated and grown in volume. The result is today’s interconnected and interdependent globalized world.

Hansen defines globalization as a state of interconnectedness in which “what happened in one place profoundly affected the residents of other distant regions.” This state was achieved in the year 1000 “when trade routes took shape all around the world that allowed goods, technologies, religions, and people to leave home and go somewhere new.”

The author has chosen the year 1000 to mark the beginning of globalization because, as her research shows, it was most probably that year when a group of Viking explorers from Scandinavia led by Leif Erikson stumbled onto Newfoundland, at the tip of the North American continent. Although they returned home after a few years, the event symbolically connected pre-existing trade routes across the Americas with those of Europe, Asia and Africa. As Hansen describes: “The new pathways these traders and voyagers pioneered allowed multiple kingdoms and empires to brush up against each other, causing goods, people, microbes, and ideas to move into new regions. The different parts of the world came into contact with each other for the first time, and today’s globalization was the ultimate result.”

Hansen combines her impressive research in multiple languages and across many continents with her flair for storytelling to weave a fascinating narrative. Her narrative moves from the icebound Newfoundland to Mayan towns in Yucatan peninsula, from the Volga River to the Bosporus and Constantinople, from East Africa’s slave trading markets to Samarkand. From the majestic Buddhist shrine of Borobudur on Java, to the buried hoards of silver coins in the Gotland island of Sweden to the sunken treasures on a scuttled ship near the harbor in Guangzhou, Hansen takes the reader to a world that is as familiar as it is mysterious.

In each continent of this connected world, she finds stories of greed and generosity, cruelty and deceit, ugliness and beauty that are all too familiar to us. “As foreign merchants increasingly benefited at the expense of local businessmen, the world’s first anti-globalization riots and attacks on the newly wealthy broke out in cities such as Cairo, Constantinople, and Guangzhou.” In 879, the Huang Chao rebels massacred foreign merchants living in Guangzhou; in 996, Cairo residents rioted against the expat merchants from Italy, and Italian merchants met a similar fate in 1181 at the hands of the residents of Constantinople.

The origins of slavery and of the racism we are now witnessing on America’s streets actually go back hundreds of years before the Atlantic slave trade forced millions of Africans to the Americas. In the pre-industrial world, warm bodies able to perform labor on command were in continual demand, and trading in humans was practiced almost everywhere. At the beginning of the second millennium, no group was perhaps as involved in slave trade as the wanderers from Scandinavia known as Rus (who gave us the name Russia) who made a fortune by selling slaves to the Byzantine empire, Abbasid Caliphe and Muslim consumers in Central Asia. Archaeologists have unearthed hoards of silver dirham coins that were earned by selling hundreds of thousands of slaves, some to serve in the army. In the 15th century, the source of the slave trade turned south as the Portuguese found ways to reach deeper into Africa.

Other major items of trade were silk, cotton, ceramic, spices and aromatic wood. The increase in Chinese demand for aromatic wood harvested from Southeast Asian forests changed the life of indigenous groups from hunter-gatherers to quasi-industrial labor. As trade picked up between India and Southeast Asia, it produced not the Maritime Silk Route but rather the Cotton Route. Southeast Asian trade connections provided the major pathway for exporting Chinese porcelain to Iran and the Middle East. As archaeologists discovered from a sunken Chinese vessel, in order to entice Islamic clients Chinese potters even painted Arabic-looking squiggles on the ceramic ware.

The most surprising journeys around the year 1000 took place between the Malay Peninsula and Madagascar on the east coast of Africa some 4,000 miles away. This migration brought Malay language, flora and fauna to the East African coast.

Traders and explorers, of course, brought disease too. The world in the grip of Covid-19 might get cold comfort from the fact that many such pandemics have devasted the world. After the arrival of the Europeans, the indigenous peoples of the Americas without immunity to the unknown pathogens such as smallpox, the flu and even the common cold fell victim to devastating epidemics. Of tens of millions of indigenous people in the Americas, only some 2 million survived the massive outbreaks of disease. As Hansen dryly observes, “These mass deaths paved the way for European colonists.”

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