

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**ROBERT W.  
STRAYER:**

Chapter 12, a trip around the world in the 15th century. Does the past predict the future? It is, in fact, just about the only guide we have to the possible shape of things to come. And yet, it is often a quite unreliable guide.

So let's ask what a knowledgeable global traveler during that century could reasonably predict about the future? Our traveler might notice, for example, the continuing expansion of agricultural civilizations and then predict, accurately as things turned out, the eventual disappearance of gathering and hunting societies and the fading of pastoral people at the hands of their more powerful farming neighbors.

But what would our traveler have guessed about the massive Chinese voyages in the Indian Ocean during the early 15th century? It might well have seemed that a huge Chinese empire within the Indian Ocean basin was within reach. Unless, of course, our traveler knew that the Chinese abruptly stopped those voyages in 1433. And what would that traveler have predicted based on the Muslim Turkish conquest of Christian Constantinople in 1453 and its siege of Vienna in 1529? Perhaps all of Europe was about to be overrun by Muslims.

And how would our traveler understand the voyages of Columbus' three small ships in 1492? Could he or she have ever imagined the Atlantic slave trade, the colonization of the Americas, and the growing global prominence of Europeans? And was there anything on the horizon at all that might have predicted the scientific and industrial revolutions that lay ahead?

This kind of exercise reminds us of the unexpectedness of the historical process and suggests that the only certainty about the future is that we will be surprised.